

# 50,000 protest Confederate flag in South Carolina: political issues in the fight for democratic rights

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Nearly 50,000 people rallied in Columbia, South Carolina January 17—Martin Luther King Jr. Day—against the flying of the Confederate flag over the statehouse. The demonstrators chanted “Bring it down” and “Your heritage is my slavery,” demanding that the obnoxious symbol of slavery and segregation be removed.

The Confederate flag has been flying over the seat of the state government since 1962. The decision to resurrect it at that time was a gesture of hostility and resistance by the all-white legislature to the ongoing civil rights struggle. South Carolina is the only state that still flies the Confederate battle emblem not incorporated into a state flag. It is also the only state that does not officially recognize King's birthday as a mandatory holiday.

The issue in South Carolina has a largely symbolic significance. What happens or doesn't happen to the flag at the statehouse in Columbia is not likely to have much of an immediate material impact on the lives of people in the state or anywhere else.

This is not to say, however, that the issue is a trivial one. On the contrary, the size of the protest alone is an indication that this matter touches people quite deeply. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it is an indictment of American society that this symbol of reaction flies over the seat of a state government. It is entirely legitimate to demand its removal. How would the Jewish population be expected to react if the swastika were flown over a public building?

Nonetheless, the anti-flag movement does not address the broader social questions: poverty, homelessness, social inequality. Indeed it is this symbolic quality that is so appealing to the leadership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the other civil rights organizations spearheading the campaign. The last thing these thoroughly conservative groups want to do is raise issues that bring into question the existing political and social system.

Indicative of the sort of political campaign the NAACP has in mind, the organization launched a boycott January 1 of the tourism industry in South Carolina, urging organizations and individuals to cancel or move activities planned for the state.

According to the NAACP, some 82 meetings and conventions have been canceled since that time.

It seems clear that the demonstrators a week ago Monday were not merely responding to the placement of a flag. The anger and anxiety of the crowd suggest an awareness of a growing threat to democratic rights and the extraordinary influence of the extreme right in American political life. Racist and anti-Semitic assaults and killings, bombings of abortion clinics, the activities of the Militia and neo-Nazi groups—including the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City, the virtual takeover of the Republican Party by the Christian fundamentalist right—all of these developments are legitimately preying on many people's minds.

Most recently, people in South Carolina witnessed the spectacle January 8 of a rally organized in defense of the Confederate flag by the South Carolina Southern Heritage Coalition, a collection of right-wing outfits, including the League of the South, Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Southern Party. The latter group is seeking to field candidates for local and statewide office on a program of Southern secession.

The January 8 demonstrators marched “under a sea of red Confederate flags,” led by a group of ministers carrying a banner that read “No King but Jesus.” At the rally that followed the march speakers denounced the NAACP and its supporters as outsiders and agitators. State Sen. Arthur Ravenel, a Republican and former congressman, told the cheering crowd that South Carolina legislators should not bow to “that organization known as the National Association for Retarded People.”

Despite the pro-flag demonstrators' claim that they speak for Southerners, polls indicate that a majority of the population in South Carolina supports the removal of the flag. One newspaper poll indicated that only 25 percent wanted the flag to stay where it was. Another survey found that 57 percent of the 600 people asked wanted the flag down, with two-thirds favoring its removal to a memorial on the state capitol grounds.

While the majority of people in South Carolina do not hold right-wing and anti-democratic views, the latter are

increasingly prevalent within the political elite. The appearance of Republican state legislators at the pro-Confederate flag rally did not even raise an eyebrow. After all, the links of Senate majority leader Trent Lott and Georgia congressman Bob Barr to a white supremacist group in Mississippi were revealed last year and the extensive ties of Republican officials to Militia-type organizations are well known. And the Southern Party is not alone in championing “states rights,” the slogan behind which reaction has organized much of its dirty work in US history. The right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court, which is knocking down one federal measure against discrimination after another, has taken that task upon itself.

Indeed one of the driving forces of the January 17 protest, although perhaps not consciously grasped by those participating, is the harsh reality that none of the democratic rights gained in the US in the past 135 years, including the rights of blacks in the South, are safe. While it might seem logical that the powers that be will in the end take down the flag—the governor, business interests, local media all favor its removal—this is by no means guaranteed. The influence of the fanatical right-wing in the political upper echelons, in both big business parties, is so great, nothing can be taken for granted.

The organizers of the rally wrapped themselves in the mantle of Martin Luther King Jr. The slain civil rights leader was no social revolutionary; indeed the limitations of his reformist conception that equality and justice could be achieved within the framework of capitalism once discriminatory practices were outlawed are glaringly evident 32 years after his murder. Poverty, lack of health care, unemployment or lack of decent employment still affect the vast majority of black workers, and the entire working class.

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It must be said, however, that the present leaders of the civil rights groups have entirely abandoned what was positive and progressive in King’s work. They have gone far to the political right. By the time of his death King had reached the conclusion that it was impossible to attain political equality without addressing social inequality, the exploitation of working people and the role of US imperialism. Hence his support for the Memphis sanitation workers, his “Poor People’s March” and his participation in the protests against the Vietnam War.

Such policies are inconceivable to the present-day petty-bourgeois black elite. The other major campaign that the NAACP is currently undertaking, for example, is a lobbying effort with the television networks to ensure that a greater number of black performers be given leading roles on prime-time shows. For individuals such as NAACP President Kweisi Mfume and Urban League President Hugh Price, staunch members of the establishment, the January 17 protest was meant to be a Democratic Party campaign rally. They were surprised and perhaps alarmed by the size of the march, and immediately entered into negotiations on a means of defusing

the situation.

The Confederate flag issue has entered into the national political debate. None of the Republican presidential hopefuls has called for the flag’s removal. George W. Bush, to an enthusiastic response from his supporters in Columbia, declared piously that it was a matter for the people of South Carolina to decide. John McCain and Steve Forbes have taken the same position. Pat Buchanan, who is seeking the Reform Party nomination, has openly defended the flying of the Confederate flag.

Vice President Al Gore called for the flag’s removal, criticizing the “GOP White House hopefuls” for being “so scared of the extreme right wing.” A columnist in the right-wing *Washington Times* noted, however, that during Bill Clinton’s tenure as governor of Arkansas, he took no steps to disavow Confederate heritage. Clinton signed a bill in 1987 that designates a star in the Arkansas flag as symbolic of the Confederacy; he also issued a proclamation designating a birthday memorial for Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy; and he made no attempt to overturn the law that sets aside the Saturday before Easter as Confederate Flag Day.

There is no element within the political establishment that can be relied upon to defend or extend democratic rights. The Republican, Democratic and Reform candidates represent the world of wealth and power. They will respond to the emergence of any genuine mass movement of social protest with universal hostility.

If many residents, particularly black residents, of South Carolina feel that the not insubstantial changes that took place as a result of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s are fragile, they are quite right. That movement never became a mass movement against the source of the problem—the profit system—and never posed socialist solutions to all the great social issues. Hence the particular tenuousness of its gains.

Another event took place in South Carolina last that gives some indication of the depth of the conflicts simmering beneath the surface of “never-had-it-so-good” America, as well as the social forces that will soon face one another in far larger confrontations: the pitched battle between police and dock workers over the use of nonunion labor on the Charleston docks. The objective conditions are emerging for a break with the Democratic and Republican parties and the building of a mass, politically independent and unified movement of working people against American capitalism.



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