Rosa Parks and the lessons of the civil rights movement

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Nearly 50 years ago, Rosa Parks became a symbol of the mass movement against racism that eventually forced the dismantling of the system of official segregation in the American South. Her arrest on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, triggered a year-long bus boycott, an event that is generally seen as the beginning of a decade-long battle against segregation that mobilized millions and won the support of workers all over the world.

After her death two weeks ago, however, Mrs. Parks was eulogized hypocritically by the very forces that opposed the struggle for civil rights and today remain the bitterest enemies of every struggle for equality and social progress.

George W. Bush issued a statement from the White House. His Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke at services for Mrs. Parks in Alabama. The Republican-led Congress voted to allow her body to lie under the Capitol Rotunda, the first time this honor has ever been bestowed upon a woman.

Who are they to mourn Rosa Parks? They are, after all, the political heirs of everything she fought against. The modern Republican Party is the product of 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater's opposition to civil rights and 1968 and 1972 election victor Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy," winning a solid base of support among right-wing and racist forces in the formerly solid Democratic South. The elder President Bush, father of the present occupant of the White House, ran unsuccessfully for the Senate in Texas in 1964 on a platform of opposition to the civil rights legislation that was then before Congress.

Moreover, this party today holds office largely through the disenfranchisement of black voters. It presides over the most wretched social conditions—in many respects worse than those of a half century ago—with the misery concentrated especially among blacks and other minorities, as exposed before the entire world only two months ago in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The fact that Bush and the entire political establishment are allowed to "celebrate" the life of Rosa Parks under these conditions highlights the vast degeneration that has taken place in the official civil rights movement, and the need for a sober examination of the history of this movement and its decay.

Notwithstanding the courage and sacrifices of its participants, the limited character of the achievements of the civil rights movement is more apparent with every passing day. Legal segregation, the Jim Crow system in the South, was ended, but equality was not attained. De facto segregation remains and has even grown in many parts of the country. And legal protections have not led to economic progress and security for the vast majority.

Between the launching of the Montgomery bus boycott and the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, millions challenged the status quo. Today, what remains of the civil rights establishment, including Jesse Jackson and various black Democrats in Congress, represents a privileged upper-middle-class layer that joins hands to celebrate the status quo, not to challenge it.

The virtual canonization of Rosa Parks is part of this celebration. There was something crude and fraudulent about the two weeks of orchestrated pomp and ceremonial tributes, seeking to elevate Parks to a kind of semi-official sainthood, stripped of all political and historical content.

Rosa Parks was a courageous woman, an activist who played an important symbolic role in the early years of the civil rights movement. She was not a political leader, strategist or thinker, and her active role ended many years ago. To say this is not to disparage her contributions. The purpose of the trite official tributes is to discourage any serious examination of the experiences of Rosa Parks, and to turn her instead into a harmless icon, to be used to lull masses of workers and youth with the myth instead of the reality of the unfinished struggle for social equality.

Rosa Parks was 42 when she was arrested and became famous almost overnight, but her whole life up to that point had prepared her for this role. Millions could identify with her precisely because her life was in many respects typical. She was born Rosa Louise McCauley in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1913, and grew up in a world in which lynchings of blacks were still a regular occurrence. In the century after the Civil War, the black population, though freed from Southern slavery, remained on the lowest rungs of the super-exploited working class and the rural poor. In the South, this was reinforced by legal segregation and brutal terror.

Discrimination against African Americans in public transportation was part and parcel of the system of segregation and second-class citizenship. In Montgomery, although they made up the vast majority of bus riders, black passengers were not allowed to sit in the first four rows of city buses. They could sit in the middle rows, but only until white passengers sought those seats, after which blacks were forced to sit in the rear, or stand or leave the bus. Parks herself had been thrown off a bus in 1943 for challenging this discriminatory treatment.

When she defied the driver's demand to give up her seat on that fateful December day in 1955, Parks had not been planning to become the spokeswoman of a mass movement. She acted because she was "fed up," as one longtime friend later said. "She was in her 40s. She was not a child. There comes a point where you say, 'No, I'm a full citizen, too. This is not the way I should be treated.'"

Rosa Parks's struggle did not begin in 1955, or even in 1943. She and her husband became active in the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP in the 1930s. Among her activities during this period was raising funds for the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, the nine black teenagers framed for rape in 1931, whose persecution sparked an international defense campaign.

Some months before her arrest, Mrs. Parks had attended a leadership conference at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, an interracial organization that was redbaited during this period as run by "Communist sympathizers." Rosa Parks later said that at Highlander she "gained strength to persevere in my work for freedom, not just for blacks but for

all oppressed peoples."

Mrs. Parks had worked closely with E.D. Nixon, a black trade unionist in Montgomery, the head of the local branch of the sleeping car porters' union and a longtime fighter for voting rights and other issues. When Nixon heard that she had been arrested, he came to bail her out of jail and urged her to fight back publicly in order to challenge the whole system of discrimination on the city's buses.

A boycott of the buses was planned for Monday, December 5. Most black commuters, who numbered 40,000 at that time, walked to work that day, and the success of the action led to the decision at a mass rally that night to continue the action until demands for equal and courteous treatment were met.

The boycott, which soon came under the leadership of the 26-year-old Martin Luther King, lasted 381 days, until November 14, 1956, after the Supreme Court handed down a ruling outlawing segregation in public transport. During this period, the homes of civil rights activists were firebombed and telephoned death threats were a regular occurrence. Tens of thousands of working people walked up to 20 miles daily in order to fight for their human dignity and basic democratic rights.

By successfully challenging the Jim Crow laws, the boycott sparked a growing movement, including the lunch counter sit-ins that began in February 1960 and swept through the South. Voter registration campaigns and other mass actions eventually compelled the political establishment in Washington to enact certain reforms.

A consensus developed within the ruling class in favor of dismantling the old Jim Crow system. This was in part a result of mass pressure from below, and in part because of the political needs of the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. The result was the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as well as the Johnson Administration's "War on Poverty." Legally sanctioned segregation became a thing of the past.

The great democratic questions posed by the civil rights struggle of that period, however, inseparably bound up with the struggle for decent jobs, housing, health care and education, without which the legal statutes proclaiming equality remained in stark contradiction to the realities of America's class society.

Half a century later, gains that were won in earlier struggles have been systematically demolished. Public education has become a public scandal, homelessness has grown and become a permanent feature of urban life, and health care and all essential services continue to deteriorate for the great majority.

The civil rights movement was undoubtedly inspired by the mass struggles of the American working class in the 1930s and the immediate post-World War II period to organize industrial unions and fight for improved wages and conditions. Millions of blacks migrated to the cities in both the North and South during this period, joining trade unions and demanding their basic rights. This movement had the potential of joining up with the struggles of every other section of the working class. Its degeneration was not inevitable, but it required a socialist working class perspective and leadership.

The growing civil rights struggles, however, coincided with the bureaucratization of the labor movement. Socialists and other left-wingers were purged from the unions as the witchhunt that would lead to McCarthyism got underway in the late 1940s. The CIO federation of industrial unions had expelled 10 of its affiliates for "communist" influence back in 1948. The AFL-CIO bureaucracy, formed out of the merger of the CIO and the old AFL in the same year the Montgomery bus boycott was launched, was indifferent if not openly hostile to the struggle against racism.

The Communist Party played its own destructive role in this period, discrediting the struggle for socialism and strengthening the anticommunist forces through its slavish support for the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR. This support for the nationalist Soviet bureaucracy found its clearest expression in the American Stalinists' efforts to keep the working class tied to the Democratic Party.

When the mass movement of black workers and youth gathered strength, therefore, the struggles of black and white workers were kept largely separate. King, while fighting against the more conservative elements in the NAACP and elsewhere, based himself on religious pacifism and an appeal for justice from the capitalist state. He took an ambivalent attitude toward the witchhunt, resisting it some of the time, but never seeking to mobilize and unite the working class against it. An orientation to the Democratic Party was the key element, as the civil rights movement adopted the same class-collaborationist and reformist perspective that guided the unions.

As the struggles deepened in the 1960s, exploding in the form of the ghetto riots, political divisions grew within the movement, with more militant sections rejecting the bourgeois pacifism of its leadership. Such forces as Malcolm X (before his assassination in 1965) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee were unable to put forward a working class alternative, however. The militancy was increasingly channeled into the blind alley of black nationalism and separatism. King, partly in response to the growing internal crisis, called for a refocused struggle against poverty and inequality, pointing toward the necessity of a program to unite the working class. He also courageously defied official pressure and the rest of the civil rights establishment in denouncing the US war in Vietnam, but was assassinated shortly afterward, in April 1968.

These were the political conditions in which the period of mass civil rights struggles was brought to an end. Even more fundamentally, the pressure of international events—the immense costs of the war in Vietnam and the onset of US capitalism's crisis and decline—precluded any sustained policy of reform.

The dismantling of segregation was used to cultivate a small section of the black middle class. The death of King was followed by increasing calls for "black capitalism"—most notably by Richard Nixon—and affirmative action, aimed at building up a black bourgeoisie and upper middle class, a layer of politicians, bureaucrats and professionals who were given a stake in the profit system.

Black mayors and other elected officials were given the job of presiding over the decay of the cities while maintaining social peace and, where that proved too difficult, deploying the forces of "law and order" against the working class. Political figures like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were called upon to "keep hope alive" through racial or populist demagogy, safely within the confines of the Democratic Party. Jackson represented the most opportunist elements within the civil rights movement, and was among the first to embrace the slogan of "black capitalism." Sharpton epitomizes the demagogues who have fashioned careers for themselves on the ruins of the movement.

As the end result of this socio-political process, a very small layer benefited handsomely, while reproducing the same fundamental class division that runs through society as a whole—between the working class majority on one side and the wealthy elite and upper-middle-class layers closest to it on the other.

One expression of this state of affairs was the identical statements by Condoleezza Rica and Oprah Winfrey in recent days. The black secretary of state and the multimillionaire talk show hostess and celebrity each declared that they would not be where they are if not for Rosa Parks.

They said perhaps more than they intended. They would not be rich and powerful without the struggle of Rosa Parks and millions of others. They had not conducted the struggle, but rather benefited from the sacrifices of others.

It is hard to believe that Rosa Parks wanted to be remembered for paving the way for the black spokeswoman for war crimes in Iraq and around the world or for making it possible for a handful of African

Americans to become fabulously rich, while poverty, hunger and every form of social misery grow.

In the final analysis, the transformation of the civil rights organizations into conservative defenders of privilege was a function of the subordination of the struggles of blacks against discrimination and segregation to the Democrats.

This struggle today, more than ever before, can be prosecuted only through a fight for the long-delayed political independence of the working class, breaking at last with the Democratic Party, the graveyard of every social struggle of the past century.

Only the socialist transformation of society can achieve the goals that animated millions in the struggles with which Rosa Parks' name will always be associated.