

An exchange of letters on school integration and affirmative action

Barry Grey
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We are publishing here a letter from a reader responding to the article "US Supreme Court rules school districts cannot consider race in integration plans," posted June 29 on the World Socialist Web Site, and a reply by WSWs editorial board member Barry Grey.

Call me crazy, but doesn't your support of the compulsory integration of schools conflict with the SEP's non-support of affirmative action? Both programs are supposedly designed to help bring about social equality between the races. But the SEP does not support affirmative action because it divides workers along racial lines. By focusing upon race, does not compulsory integration do the same thing? How do these two positions accord with one another?

BJ

Dear BJ,

Your letter raises important historical and political questions. I would not accuse you of being crazy, but I would suggest that you have not thought through the issues with sufficient care.

There is no contradiction between the *World Socialist Web Site's* support for efforts by school boards and other authorities to integrate the public schools and our opposition to racial preferences implemented in the name of affirmative action.

The demand for racial equality and desegregation of public education has very different origins and a very different political content than the subsequent promotion of so-called affirmative action programs by the US government, and their embrace by civil rights organizations as the cornerstone of their political program.

The drive to put an end to legally sanctioned segregation of the public schools, which gained momentum in the aftermath of the Second World War, had a profound and genuine democratic content. It was directed against the system of racial apartheid in the US South that had held the black masses for more than half a century in a state of extreme economic, social and political oppression. The Jim Crow system, sanctioned by the reactionary doctrine of "separate but equal," proclaimed as the law of the land by the Supreme Court in its infamous 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was not only an attack on the democratic rights of black people, but a bulwark of social and political reaction affecting the entire society.

The legal support of racial discrimination by the US government was a major barrier to the unification of working people in the struggle for industrial democracy and a decent standard of living. All genuinely progressive and democratic thought, articulated most forcefully and consistently by the socialist movement, resolutely opposed segregation and supported measures to break down racial, ethnic and religious barriers. Those militants and socialists who pioneered the working class upsurge of the 1930s that gave birth to the mass industrial unions made opposition to racial discrimination and the demand for equality a critical part of their struggle.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education* repudiated *Plessy v. Ferguson* and declared the "separate but equal" doctrine inherently unequal. In ordering an end to legally sanctioned

segregation of the public schools, it struck a blow against political reaction and marked a definite democratic advance.

We, as socialists, were not then, and are not now, indifferent to the severe limitations in the reformist perspective underlying the 1954 ruling. The notion that racial inequality could be overcome within the framework of a system based on social and class inequality and exploitation was fundamentally untenable, and the fragility of the democratic gains achieved on such a basis has become increasingly obvious.

Nevertheless, *Brown v. the Board of Education* helped inspire a mass movement of blacks and others to achieve basic democratic and civil rights, which led a decade later to the passage of important civil rights legislation, including the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts of the 1960s.

These legal gains, however, rapidly came up against the social realities of capitalism. The imperialist war in Vietnam and the intractable reality of poverty and social inequality, reflected most brutally in the urban ghettos and large swaths of rural America, posed questions that could not be seriously addressed, let alone answered, on the basis of the reformist perspective of the civil rights leadership.

At the same time, the indifference, if not outright hostility, of the AFL-CIO and most of the official labor movement to the civil rights movement created a barrier to the unification of white and black workers and ceded the leadership of the struggle for racial equality to the reformist civil rights organizations. This was a product of the anti-socialist politics of the trade unions, which found political expression in their steadfast opposition to a political break by the working class from the two-party system, primarily through their alliance with the Democratic Party.

The underlying crisis of American capitalism, and the inadequacy of the program of the civil rights organizations, were expressed in the most explosive form in the urban riots of the 1960s. Although largely racial in form, these were essentially working class eruptions against conditions of poverty, unemployment and repression. They came together with a growing movement against the Vietnam War and a wave of militant wages struggles by unionized workers.

The response of the US ruling elite—after putting down the social eruptions by means of police-military repression—was to cultivate a thin, privileged layer within the black and other minority populations to help administer state and local governments and keep the working class masses in check. In short order, black politicians, overwhelmingly Democratic, were elevated to run major industrial cities such as Detroit and Newark, New Jersey.

Affirmative action became the watchword for this policy. In every respect, it represented a retreat from the democratic and universalist ideals that animated the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. While those struggles, conducted under the banner of freedom and equality, sought to elevate the social and cultural conditions of all people, black and white, affirmative action was about something quite different: the distribution of privileges among a small section of the black population.

It appealed to the more opportunist elements, ultimately producing the

likes of Condoleezza Rice and Clarence Thomas.

Those who defended the policy inevitably found themselves employing arguments that were fundamentally anti-democratic, and advancing demands that in the past had been associated with exclusion and discrimination. Proponents of affirmative action demanded the establishment of quotas for blacks in hiring, promotion, university admissions, etc. The term quota had, for good reason, been associated with the exclusion of blacks, Jews, Italians and other minorities from access to employment, education and social intercourse. A quota was something to be smashed down, not erected.

The fundamental appeal of the civil rights movement, the undeniable justice of its cause, could not be denied. It resonated broadly among working people of all races, including in the South. The demand for affirmative action could never generate such support. It was impossible to convince white working class youth that they should accept being discriminated against for the supposed benefit of blacks or other minorities.

An aspect of the broad political radicalization that occurred in the 1960s was the demand for “open universities,” that is, an end to the socially stratified and hierarchical higher education system and its replacement by a system open to all young people who desired a college education. The politics of affirmative action cut across and rejected this broadly democratic demand.

For the US ruling elite, affirmative action had the advantage not only of creating a layer of conservative blacks to defend the capitalist status quo, but also of exacerbating divisions within the working class. Richard Nixon fully embraced affirmative action and identified it with the promotion of “black capitalism.”

The degeneration of the milieu of left intellectuals—black and white—and the rightward turn of the Democratic Party found expression in their adaptation to this essentially elitist perspective. More and more, the social policy of the US repudiated democratic concepts and came to resemble the machinations of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire in its efforts to pit various racial and ethnic groups against one another.

This corresponded with the decline in the world economic position of American capitalism and the collapse of any policy of social reform.

Increasingly, the official civil rights leadership, itself largely middle-class in social origin and life style, turned to affirmative action as a substitute for a struggle for genuine equality. The demand for integration was supplanted by the politics of black nationalism and separatism.

In social terms, the rightward turn by civil rights leaders such as Jesse Jackson to affirmative action was a response of more privileged black middle-class layers to the exposure of the deep-going and explosive class fissures in America that erupted in the urban riots. In practice, they rejected any struggle to transform American society in an egalitarian manner and instead adopted a perspective of getting a bigger “piece of the pie” for a small section of the black population.

The importance which the dominant factions of the US ruling elite attach to affirmative action as a means of maintaining the stability of American capitalism was highlighted in the Supreme Court’s 2003 ruling upholding racial preferences in admissions to the University of Michigan Law School. An array of retired military officers and corporate executives filed friend of the court briefs supporting the university’s program, arguing that affirmative action was essential for national security and maintaining the global competitiveness of US corporations.

One of the liberals on the court who supported the majority decision, Justice Stephen Breyer, defended affirmative action as a necessary policy to lend legitimacy to American “elites” by providing them with an aura of diversity. During oral arguments, he declared, “[W]e think from the point of view of business, the armed forces, law, etc., that this is an extraordinary need, to have diversity among elites throughout the country, that without it, the country will be much worse off.”

After nearly four decades in which affirmative action has been official policy in the US, the balance sheet of its results is clear. Social inequality has grown to unprecedented levels. Entire cities, whether presided over by black or white mayors, have been devastated by plant closures, mass layoffs and cuts in social programs.

The public schools, especially in the inner cities, have been starved of funding while the ruling elite has encouraged the growth of private schools and so-called “charter schools.” As a result, public education has been all but shattered in much of the country.

At the same time, de facto segregation of the schools has grown apace. The National Center for Education Statistics reported six years ago that the average white student attends a school that is 80 percent white, while 70 percent of black students attend schools where nearly two-thirds of students are black and Hispanic. Other data show that more than one in six black children attends a school that is 99 percent to 100 percent minority.

While the uppermost echelons of society have vastly increased their personal wealth, including a thin layer of privileged blacks, a large majority of workers have seen their living standards stagnate or decline, and poverty among black workers is as pervasive as ever.

The growth of social inequality has been accompanied by and fueled by a relentless swing to the right by the entire political establishment and both big business parties, whose policies are dedicated to the further enrichment of a financial aristocracy. Last week’s Supreme Court ruling repudiating *Brown v. the Board of Education* demonstrates that social and political reaction in the US is assuming ever-broader forms.

Significantly, the response of the civil rights establishment has been remarkably muted. Theodore M. Shaw, the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Education Fund—the organization that led the legal case against segregation in *Brown v. the Board of Education*—said, “In some ways, considering what we anticipated, it’s not as bad as it could have been...”

Juan Williams, a senior correspondent for National Public Radio and a political analyst for Fox News Channel, one of those who has personally benefited from the promotion of racial diversity in the establishment media, published a column Friday in the *New York Times* entitled “Don’t Mourn *Brown v. Board of Education*.”

There is a close connection between the ambivalence of the black establishment to school integration and the widening socio-economic gap between its members and the mass of working people—black and white—in America.

The socialist movement supports integration and all policies that break down racial, ethnic and religious divisions and encourage the closest possible unity of working people. We are for full legal, political and social equality and the defense and extension of democratic rights.

But these democratic aims cannot be achieved within the framework of a crisis-ridden system that denies tens of millions the essential perquisites of life: secure and good-paying jobs, quality education, health care and housing. In opposition to affirmative action, which promotes a struggle among working people for a declining pool of decent jobs and social benefits, we fight to unify workers on the basis of a socialist program that places the vast productive forces under the democratic control and collective ownership of society as a whole, rather than a financial oligarchy.

Barry Grey, for the WWSW editorial board



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