“From the streets to the suites”: NAACP holds annual convention in Detroit

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The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) held its 98th annual convention in Detroit July 7 to 12.

The location and timing are significant, as 2007 marks the fortieth anniversary of the social explosions in Detroit, Newark and other cities in America that expressed the anger and frustration of blacks in the inner cities, one of the most exploited sections of the working class. Detroit is now the second-most impoverished city in the nation—behind only Hurricane Katrina-devastated New Orleans.

The motto of this year’s NAACP convention, “Power Beyond Measure,” speaks to the aspirations of the privileged social layer for which the organization speaks. While well-heeled attendees rubbed shoulders with prominent black politicians, union bureaucrats and CEOs, Detroit-area workers—black and white—face levels of industrial devastation and social inequality that were unimaginable forty years ago. This grim reality escaped both the convention delegates and the commentators in the mainstream press.

A more fitting name for the organization would be National Association for the Advancement of Complacent People, given this organization’s lack of responsiveness in the face of growing attacks on democratic rights by the Bush administration and the economic deprivation that is developing in the working class.

The severity of Detroit’s social distress, now compounded by home foreclosures, homelessness and high unemployment, was highlighted by a report issued last week that found that a shockingly low proportion of entering students—24.9 percent—graduate from Detroit public high schools.

However, Detroit, like many of the major cities in the US, is presided over by a privileged black social elite, epitomized by 37-year-old Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. It is to this elite, not the broad mass of black workers and youth, that the NAACP is oriented.

The conference took place in the aftermath of a major 5-4 US Supreme Court ruling opposing the efforts of two US school districts to maintain integrated schools, undermining a policy that was a mainstay of the American civil rights movement for half a century. (See “US Supreme Court rules school districts cannot consider race in integration plans”)

The reaction of the NAACP to the ruling was remarkably muted, given the fact that the organization provided legal counsel in the landmark Supreme Court civil rights case in 1954, *Brown v Board of Education*, that compelled US schools to integrate.

The attack on integration was only addressed in passing by the Chairman of the National Board of Directors of the NAACP, Julian Bond, who gave the conference’s opening report. Asked about the high court’s ruling by a WSWS reporter at a press conference July 7, Bond merely commented that Justice Anthony Kennedy’s controlling opinion, which distanced itself from the legal theory advanced by the four most reactionary judges, represented an “opportunity” and that the NAACP would continue to protest the appointment of right-wing justices to the Supreme Court.

How can one explain this remarkable response? The decision in *Brown v Board* is by all accounts the NAACP’s crowning achievement. One might expect that the organization would respond to last week’s reactionary ruling with emergency meetings, press conferences and calls to action.

One not-insignificant reason is that two of the five justices responsible for the recent ruling, John Roberts and Samuel Alito, were appointed with the complicity of the Democratic Party, into which the NAACP is thoroughly integrated. (See “With the help of the Democrats, Alito to be confirmed as US Supreme Court Justice”)

There is, however, a deeper albeit connected reason, which lies in the extraordinary increase in social inequality that has taken place over the past half century, not least of all within America’s black population itself. While many blacks suffer in terrible poverty, a small social layer, embodied by the NAACP hierarchy, has done very well for itself.

In his opening remarks, instead of addressing the recent Supreme Court ruling, Bond chose to use the tragic experience of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the poorest areas of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, to insist that race, not class, was at the center of social problems.

“Media images during the Katrina coverage made it obvious that the dying and suffering were predominantly black and poor,” Bond declared. “Though some wanted to engage in a ‘race or class’ debate, even President Bush acknowledged that they are intertwined.”

“The truth is race trumps class,” said Bond. “As [Georgetown University Professor] Michael Dyson has written, ‘[c]oncentrated poverty doesn’t victimize poor whites in the same way it does poor blacks.’ That is why ‘[c]omparisons between poor whites and poor blacks in New Orleans ... clearly showed that poor whites were much better off overall.’ It is why ‘[t]he public school system served poor whites better that poor blacks; poor white children were less likely to attend schools in areas of concentrated poverty.’ It is why three times as many poor blacks as poor whites lacked access to a vehicle.”

While the New Orleans flood devastated the most vulnerable sections of the working class, overwhelmingly poor blacks in the

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Ninth Ward, Bond forgets to mention that the mayor presiding over the calamity was Ray Nagin, a black millionaire ex-CEO who also shared in the responsibility for the city's lack of preparation and relied on the police to protect the wealthy parts of New Orleans.

Moreover, hundreds of thousands of white residents in Louisiana and Mississippi suffered enormously and continue to suffer, and Bond seems entirely indifferent to that. He doesn't ask: where does the ultimate responsibility for *all* the mass suffering lie?

Among other things, Bond attempts to mask the reality that the deep social tensions between rich and poor in the US and around the world are reflected within the black population as well. This is not surprising, since he is a representative of the privileged black elite.

Poverty is a growing scourge in America. According to a report issued by Penn State University, "Poverty in America, One Nation Pulling Apart," the percentage of the US population considered severely poor—individuals earning $5,250 a year or $10,222 for a family of four—increased 26 percent between 2000 to 2005. Even Bond admitted that 37 million Americans officially live in poverty, 13 percent of the population—the highest figure in the developed world, including twenty-five percent of blacks and 8.6 percent of whites.

The reality is that when it comes to poverty, as the Penn State report observes, "No demographic is immune to its reach."

The report continues, "The severely poor are more likely to be of working age than young or old, though a large share of the truly poor are children under seventeen. The largest number of abjectly poor are white (two times as many as blacks), but blacks and Hispanics are disproportionately likely to be most affected. Women, the prime target of welfare reform, on a proportionate basis are one third more likely to face deep poverty than men ... No region is untouched by this growth in the number of truly poor."

In contrast to the present policy of the NAACP, it is worthwhile to recall that Martin Luther King called for a "Poor Peoples" campaign against poverty shortly before he was assassinated, recognizing that poverty affected all layers of the working class, black as well as white. Not a single major liberal organization today calls for an open and all-out struggle against poverty, an expression of American liberalism's ongoing decline. Instead, many liberals have latched on to identity politics and the program of affirmative action—granting special consideration for blacks and women in university admissions and job hiring—a program that has largely benefited more privileged layers.

While the "Power Beyond Measure" conference was officially convened to establish policy for the coming year, a large part of the proceedings was devoted to influence-peddling and the promotion of the Democratic Party. Slated Democratic participants in the convention included former president Bill Clinton (who bowed out at the last minute without an explanation), Michigan Senator Carl Levin and Governor Jennifer Granholm. Other guests included UAW President Ron Gettelfinger, prominent black CEOs, the military brass and of course the top clergy of the black churches.

Underlining the thoroughly establishment nature of the convention, the featured guest speaker July 10 was US Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who made a statement to the *Chicago Tribune* the night before that he had a "gut feeling" there would be a terrorist attack during the summer. (See "US Homeland Security official has 'gut feeling' on terrorist attacks")

On the final day of the convention, July 12, the NAACP hosted a candidates' forum, to which both Republican and Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination were invited. Only one Republican candidate, US Rep. Tom Tancredo, agreed to participate, making the affair primarily a Democratic forum.

The "Power Beyond Measure" convention featured numerous gatherings, job fairs, religious services and retail expos. A glossy brochure for the convention featured major sponsors such as Wal-Mart, Exxon-Mobil, UPS, BMW, Coca-Cola and Miller Brewing Company, which the NAACP claims are "connected to the community." Another magazine, a special advertising section of *Fortune* magazine, printed in partnership with the NAACP, carried the headline "Moving Up the Ranks," featuring articles on "African-Americans and other people of color [who] ascend the corporate ladder."

The operating premise of these efforts is that whenever a black person gets rich or lands in a position of power, it is a victory for civil rights. The slogan "from the streets to the suites" was repeated at a number of meetings, as well as at the opening rally.

The NAACP, founded in 1909, is one of the oldest American civil rights institutions. At an earlier period in its history, it was associated with a number of popular social struggles, and famously won its case in *Brown vs Board* in 1954, which made school integration legally obligatory.

It has moved sharply to the right over a period of decades. Today the NAACP is merely one well-funded and politically-connected institution among many in America. In his opening remarks to the convention's first public mass meeting, Julian Bond boasted that the organization's Centennial fund in 2009 would contain more than one hundred million dollars.

The organization, however, has its share of difficulties. The NAACP was recently racked by internal controversy involving its former CEO Bruce Gordon, who resigned suddenly. When news of Gordon's departure reached the organization's corporate backers, multi-million dollar pledges were canceled, resulting in financial troubles that forced the organization to lay off more than 70 employees over the past few months.

A broad section of the US population, black and white, is moving to the left. It will draw its own conclusions about organizations like the NAACP, which speaks for a wealthy, complacent layer of the black population.

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