

Fifty years since school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas

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September 25th marked the 50th anniversary of the racial integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, after President Dwight D. Eisenhower called out troops of the Army's 101st Airborne Division to escort nine black students into the school.

Little Rock has gone down in history as the city that focused worldwide attention on the bitter struggle against the hated system of Jim Crow school segregation in the American South.

More than three years earlier, in May 1954, the US Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* announced its unanimous ruling holding that segregated public schools were unconstitutional. Since then, however, there had been virtually no progress in integrating the separate and unequal schools throughout the states of the former Confederacy. The Civil War had ended more than 90 years earlier, but Jim Crow had replaced slavery and was still going strong.

The three-week constitutional and political crisis in Little Rock began when plans were announced for nine black schoolchildren to enter the previously all-white Central High. This plan was sharply scaled down from an earlier one that called for integrating two new high schools, to be followed by junior high and then elementary schools in the city.

Even the prospect of nine black students in Central High enraged the racists. The Democratic governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, making a demagogic appeal to the segregationists, mobilized the state's National Guard. On September 4, the Guard prevented the black students from entering the school.

In the days leading up to the opening of the school year, violent mobs had surrounded the Little Rock home of the local president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Daisy Bates, burning a cross on her front lawn and throwing rocks through her window, one with a note declaring, "Stone this time. Dynamite next."

When 16-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, was turned away on September 4 and walked back to her bus stop, she was surrounded by a mob shouting, "Lynch her! Lynch her." The only response of the local authorities was to use the violence and threats to announce that integration would not be allowed.

The threats were not idle ones. Emmett Till, a Chicago teenager visiting relatives in Mississippi, had been murdered two years earlier for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Lynchings had been fairly common only a few decades earlier. In the next decade of civil rights struggle there were dozens of martyrs, white and black alike, including Medgar Evers, Viola Liuzzo, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman.

The NAACP went into federal court to overturn the governor's action. The District Court upheld the integration plan, but the governor defied the order. Then the court issued an injunction forbidding the use of the Guard to prevent integration. This time the order was obeyed, but a racist mob was mobilized. It was only then that Eisenhower reluctantly announced the deployment of federal troops in Little Rock.

The officially accepted version of the Little Rock events portrays the federal government as courageously upholding the Constitution and

guaranteeing racial justice, ensuring that the US would live up to its promise of fairness and equality. Former Arkansas governor and US president Bill Clinton set this tone in his own remarks at a commemorative ceremony at Central High School last month. "I am grateful that we had a Supreme Court that saw 'separate and equal' and 'states' rights' as the shams they were ... and I am grateful more than I can say that we had a president who was determined to enforce the order of the court," said Clinton.

This description ignores the real history of the civil rights struggle and is fundamentally false. The gains of this struggle were won only through mass action which mobilized millions in opposition not only to the direct political descendants of the Southern slavocracy, but to the entire US ruling elite and political establishment. Even Thurgood Marshall, then NAACP counsel and later Supreme Court justice, wrote that Little Rock was "a black mark" on Eisenhower.

The 1954 school integration decision of the Supreme Court did not take place in a political and social vacuum. The context included the mass migration of black workers from the rural South to the urban centers of the country, where millions joined the industrial workforce and demanded their full legal rights. Internationally, American capitalism faced immense challenges as it took on the responsibility of policing the world in the Cold War and defending its own imperialist interests in the face of the struggles of the international working class, both in the advanced capitalist countries as well as the colonial and semi-colonial world.

The US ruling class, which had for generations rested on Jim Crow segregation as a means of dividing and weakening the working class, was eventually forced, although reluctantly, to adjust its forms of rule.

Eisenhower's behavior during the Little Rock crisis reflected this extreme reluctance and fear of the social forces that would be unleashed by even moderate social reforms. First he did nothing. Then, on September 14, ten days after the opening of the school semester, while ignoring appeals for consultation from the NAACP, the president had a private session with Faubus at Eisenhower's vacation home in Newport, Rhode Island.

When he finally called out the troops, the president made no attempt to hide the real motives for his action. He spoke about "respect for law," not social and political equality. He told his television audience that his actions were necessary in order to defend the interests of American capitalism:

"At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights," said Eisenhower, "it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety, of our nation and the world ..."

Eisenhower's action only resolved the crisis temporarily. The black students endured a year of vicious harassment and provocations from racist elements inside the school. One, Minniejean Brown, was thrown out on trumped up charges after an altercation with a racist.

After the 1957-58 school year, the Little Rock School Board went to court asking that desegregation be stopped, allegedly because of the threat of violence. The case went to the US Supreme Court, which in September 1958 reaffirmed its 1954 decision. Faubus, then in the midst of a successful reelection campaign, called a citywide referendum that led to the shutting down of the public schools for the entire year, alongside establishing segregated private schools. Integration did not arrive for good until 1959.

The Democrats in Congress, closely tied to their segregationist Southern wing, were also reluctant to challenge Jim Crow. Texas senator and later president Lyndon Johnson issued a statement opposing the deployment of troops. When the matter came before the Supreme Court in 1958, Arkansas senator J. William Fulbright, later to achieve fame as an opponent of the Vietnam War, filed a brief supporting the call to delay desegregation.

These were the days of the Solid South, when the Democratic Party rested on the supporters of segregation and racism. The political heirs of the Dixiecrats continue to exercise inordinate influence within the political establishment today, although they have since shifted their allegiance to the Republicans.

Fifty years after Little Rock, there is little to celebrate in the schools of that city or elsewhere throughout the US. Even the official commemoration ceremony was forced to take note of the fact, as Little Rock Mayor Martin Stodola noted, that 35 percent of the black population of the city lives below the poverty line.

Jim Crow is no longer the rule, but the trend toward increased de facto school segregation, fueled by housing patterns and poverty, has been growing for the past 20 years. A recent study found that the country's largest school districts, in the North and South alike, were overwhelmingly segregated. Almost half of black and Hispanic schoolchildren attend schools where less than 10 percent of the student body is white.

School desegregation and the rest of the civil rights reforms of the postwar era undeniably made a significant difference in the lives of millions of people. The end to the system of legally sanctioned discrimination also meant a change in the pervasive and endemic brutality and humiliation to which African-Americans were subject.

At the same time, however, the most important aims of those who fought for civil rights were not achieved. The end of legal racial separation revealed all the more clearly the problems facing the working class as a whole—the unresolved issues of exploitation and inequality.

In the end, the gains won during this period turned out to be limited and fragile. They amounted to the last gasp of social reform on the part of American capitalism. Legal equality enabled a small layer of the black middle class to achieve political and economic gains, while the working class majority was left behind.

The gains also proved limited because the American working class was unprepared with an alternative to capitalism that was urgently raised by the great social struggles of this period. The AFL-CIO unions had merged only two years before Little Rock, and were at the peak of their numerical strength and strategic position within basic industry.

The trade union bureaucracy, however, true to its historic role as the slavish supporter of capitalist property relations, did nothing more than pay lip service, at best, to the struggle against Jim Crow. Large sections of the trade unions even excluded black workers during this period.

In the face of the crisis in Little Rock, AFL-CIO chief George Meany issued a statement echoing Eisenhower, coupling a call to “defend the Union against treasonous assault from within” with a warning against the “Communists abroad who would use the incident to besmirch [America’s] reputation.”

The unions refused to mobilize the independent strength of the American working class. The struggle against segregation was left in the

hands of the NAACP and Martin Luther King, Jr. King, though critical of the NAACP’s hostility to mass action, kept the struggle within the framework of reformism and religious pacifism.

The experience of Little Rock is important for another reason—it sheds light on the fight for Marxist principles in the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class. In 1955, two years before the integration crisis, the Socialist Workers Party, the pioneer party of American Trotskyism, repudiated its earlier understanding of the role of the capitalist state, advancing the demand for the federal government to mobilize troops for the purpose of protecting blacks against racist oppression.

When racist mobs rioted in Detroit and elsewhere during World War II, the SWP had warned, “certainly no trust or reliance can be placed in the federal authorities, the army, state or municipal police ...” By the time the issue of troops was raised by the NAACP and others in Little Rock, however, the SWP had already embraced this opportunist approach. Instead of exposing the role of the state and the trade union bureaucracy, and fighting for the political independence of the working class, it tailed along behind the liberals and reformists.

As history has shown, Eisenhower’s action could not win the just demands of any section of the working class. Over the next decade, the consequences of fostering illusions in the government were shown when federal troops were sent to put down spontaneous uprisings in Northern ghettos, while the FBI infiltrated and organized provocations against militant black activists.

Little Rock was a turning point for the SWP, part of its abandonment of a revolutionary perspective based upon the American and international working class, an abandonment which would lead some years later to its open repudiation of Trotsky’s struggle and legacy.

This is the historical framework within which the re-segregation of the public schools is accelerating today. It is taking place today alongside of and for the same reasons as a host of other processes which amount to a vast social regression in the United States.

American capitalism has entered into a period of deep crisis and decline. Behind the growth of globalization and the glitter of technology and immense wealth for a tiny handful, living standards have been falling for more than a generation, while the prison population has grown spectacularly and the astronomical buildup of debt has laid the basis for an economic and social catastrophe without parallel in modern history. Capitalism simply cannot afford to maintain the reforms it granted in the past, and in order to roll them back it must turn to the most reactionary social and class forces.

This anti-social offensive is a byproduct of the crisis of the profit system, but is also the result of a conscious policy implemented by the parties and institutions of big business and the capitalist state. Witness the Supreme Court decision of last June banning the use of voluntary desegregation plans in Seattle, Washington and Louisville, Kentucky, based on a perverse and Orwellian reinterpretation of the 1954 Supreme Court decision itself.

The other main legal achievement of the civil rights era, the expansion of voting rights, is also under relentless attack, with many states now mandating photo identification requirements for voting that will have the effect of disenfranchising poor and minority voters at a time when voter participation in the US is already in most cases well below 50 percent.

The limited legacy of Little Rock and the Civil Rights era as a whole is not the fault of the millions who fought for political and social equality. They were not armed with a leadership and perspective for victory. The crucial issue remains that of breaking from the Democratic Party and the entire framework of capitalist politics, advancing in its place a mass party of the working class based on a socialist program to achieve the goals of equality and genuine democracy for which so many millions have fought for so long.



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