

The fundamental social division is class, not race or gender

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The introduction of Sonia Sotomayor as President Obama's first selection for the US Supreme Court took place at a White House media event of a completely choreographed and stereotyped character. Such ceremonies have become an essential part of how America is governed. The less the political system is capable of actually responding to the needs and aspirations of working people, the more it must put on the pretense of concern, using biography as a substitute for policy.

As always on such occasions, the nomination's "roll-out" was an unrestrained exercise in public tear-jerking. Led by President Obama, who based his own campaign on the marketing of a compelling personal "narrative," Sotomayor's elevation was presented as a triumph over all manner of adversity. There were tributes to the humble origins of the future Supreme Court justice, noting her hard-working immigrant parents, her poverty-stricken childhood in a South Bronx housing project, the death of her father when she was nine years old, and even her struggle with juvenile diabetes.

No doubt, it has not been an easy personal journey for Judge Sotomayor, and there can be little doubt that she is as tough as nails. However, amidst all the tributes to Judge Sotomayor's triumph, one cannot help but think about the conditions that confront the hundreds of thousands of South Bronx residents whom she left behind.

There is another element of Sotomayor's nomination that deserves analysis. Media coverage of the nomination, and the bulk of the political commentary, liberal and conservative, approving and hostile, focused on the fact that she would become the first Hispanic and third woman to take a seat on the highest US court. The premise of both supporters and detractors was that

Sotomayor's gender and ethnic origins were of decisive importance in evaluating her nomination and determining her likely course on the court.

Totally obliterated in this flood of commentary is the most fundamental social category in American society: class. Sotomayor will go to the Supreme Court, not as the representative or advocate of Hispanics, women or the socially disadvantaged more generally, but as the representative of a definite social class at the top of American society—the financial aristocracy whose interests she and every other federal judge, and the entire capitalist state machine, loyally serve and defend.

Only one "mainstream" bourgeois publication focused on this critical question. That was the *Wall Street Journal*, whose editorial page serves as a major voice of the ultra-right—denouncing the Sotomayor nomination in strident tones—but whose news pages explored her record as a well-paid commercial litigator and federal judge, on issues of direct interest to big business, including contract law, employment and property rights.

The newspaper quoted several Wall Street lawyers describing Sotomayor as a safe choice for corporate America. "There is no reason for the business community to be concerned," said one attorney. Barry Ostrager, a partner at Simpson Thacher LLP who defended a unit of J.P. Morgan Chase in a lawsuit over fraudulent pricing of initial public offerings, cited Sotomayor's role in an appeals court ruling barring the class-action suit. "That ruling demonstrated that in securities litigation, she is in the judicial mainstream," he told the *Journal*.

The American ruling class has gone further than any other in the world to suppress any public discussion of class. From the late 1940s on, the anti-communist witch-hunting associated with Senator Joseph McCarthy

spearheaded a drive to effectively outlaw any public discussion of socialism, Marxism or the class divisions in American society.

In response to the social eruptions of the 1960s—the civil rights struggles and urban riots, the mass movement against the Vietnam War, and major struggles by the labor movement—the American bourgeoisie began to utilize identity politics to divide and confuse the mass opposition to its policies and block the emergence of the working class as an independent social force.

Black nationalism, “Chicano” nationalism, women’s liberation and gay liberation all emerged, to name only the most heavily promoted forms of identity politics. In each case, real social grievances of significant sections of the American population were divorced from their connection to the socio-economic foundation—the division of society between the relative handful of capitalist owners of the means of production, and the vast majority of the population who must sell their labor power to make a living.

The Democratic Party became the principal vehicle for peddling the politics of race and gender, recruiting a layer of black, female and Hispanic politicians who engage in populist demagoguery that uses race and gender to counterfeit an orientation to the interests of the oppressed masses of American society. But Republican administrations have learned how to engage in such posturing as well.

For the past 12 years for instance, under two Democratic presidents and one Republican, the post of US Secretary of State has been occupied by, in succession, a white woman, a black man, a black woman, and a white woman. This exercise in “diversity” has not the slightest progressive significance. It has not democratized American foreign policy or made it one iota more conciliatory to the interests of the oppressed, either internationally or within the United States. Madeline Albright, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton are all representatives, not of “blacks” or “women,” but of the most rapacious imperialist ruling class on the planet.

Barack Obama is the culmination of this process. Celebrated as the first African-American president, he has overseen the greatest handover of resources to the billionaires and Wall Street speculators in history. In the restructuring of the auto industry, with ever-

escalating demands for cuts in jobs, pay and benefits for auto workers, he has set the stage for the greatest assault on the working class since the Reagan administration smashed the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981 and gave the signal for a nationwide campaign of wage-cutting and union-busting. In this, Obama demonstrates that the class he serves, not the color of his skin or his social origins, is the decisive political factor.

The political development of the American working class requires, first and foremost, the direct and open discussion of the class realities of American society. No country in the world is as deeply and intractably divided along economic lines as the United States, where the top 1 percent of the population owns 40 percent of the wealth and monopolizes 20 percent of the income. Any analysis of the political issues facing working people that does not take these class divisions as the fundamental reality is an exercise in deception and political stultification.

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