

Obama's speech to the NAACP

Tom Eley
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The main thrust of president Barack Obama's speech before the centenary meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Thursday was to blame working class African-Americans for the social crisis engulfing them.

Obama alluded to the dimensions of the social misery confronting black workers. African-Americans are "out of work more than just about anybody else" and are "more likely to suffer from a host of diseases but less likely to own health insurance," the president said. Obama also made reference to the disproportionately large number of African-Americans incarcerated in the nation's massive prison system and affected by AIDS.

This truncated list—Obama might have mentioned the foreclosure crisis, homelessness, the collapse of public education in the cities, etc.—offers only a glimpse of the dire conditions confronting African-American workers, though by no means only black workers.

But what is the cause of this misery? And how does Obama propose to alleviate it?

Here Obama adopted all the right-wing nostrums about "personal responsibility" that have been used to justify the gutting of social programs, exacerbating the crisis confronting broad sections of the working class.

"Government programs alone won't get our children to the Promised Land," Obama declared. In other words, black workers can expect no significant social assistance from the Obama administration. Instead, Obama claimed that what is needed is "a new mind set, a new set of attitudes."

According to Obama, "[O]ne of the most durable and destructive legacies of discrimination is the way we've internalized a sense of limitation; how so many in our community have come to expect so little from the world and from themselves."

Obama is doubtless aware that this is a recapitulation of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's widely discredited

"culture of poverty" theory. In 1965, the sociologist (later a Democratic senator) authored a study asserting that poverty among blacks was essentially a social pathology perpetuated within "the Negro family." These conceptions featured prominently in the drive to gut the welfare system.

Obama made clear that dire social conditions are no justification for government assistance to black youth. While there may be economic problems, he declared, "That's not a reason to get bad grades, that's not a reason to cut class, that's not a reason to drop out of school."

"We've got to say to our children ...Your destiny is in your hands ... No excuses ... all those hardships will just make you stronger, better able to compete." To Obama, not only are hunger, homelessness, and police harassment, not "excuses." These "hardships" are actually a good, making black youth "stronger, better able to compete."

The president even offered some parenting tips. "To parents ...You can't just contract out parenting," he counseled. "That means putting away the Xbox, putting our kids to bed at a reasonable hour."

Had a white politician made similar statements, there can be little doubt he or she would have been attacked as racist. But because of the color of his skin, Obama's words are hailed as "tough love." Obama recently made a very similar speech in Africa, in which he argued that the continent most ravaged by imperialism is at fault for its own plight. (See "Obama's neocolonial mission in Africa")

Obama's lecture to African-American workers closely resembles the position of Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), a black educator who argued that the only way that blacks could counter brutality and poverty in the segregated Jim Crow South was by improving their position through "self-help"—not through political action.

Ironically, it was his bitter opposition to Booker T. Washington that led W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) to found the NAACP in 1909. Obama claimed that the NAACP “was not founded in search of a handout.” Perhaps not. But it was founded, whatever its limitations, in order to politically combat the repression of the black population.

Obama disclosed the essential content of his perspective when he declared: “Because Jim Crow laws were overturned, black CEOs today run Fortune 500 companies. (Applause). Because civil rights laws were passed, black mayors, black governors, and members of Congress served in places where they might once have been able [sic] not just to vote but even take a sip of water. And because ordinary people did such extraordinary things ... that has led me to be here tonight as the 44th President of the United States of America. (Applause).”

From his largely well-heeled audience, this passage received an enthusiastic response. For this social layer, the essence of the civil rights movement was to create a layer of “black CEOs” and politicians. For the needs of black workers, they have only contempt.

The progressive content of the civil rights movement was based on the struggle for equality. However, as social conflicts intensified in the 1960s—including the ghetto uprisings of 1967-68—a section of the political establishment sought to cultivate a layer of the black middle class, through various affirmative action policies, and integrate it into the capitalist establishment. Over the past four decades, social inequality within the black population has increased enormously.

Obama is the outcome of this process. There is nothing in Obama’s personal or political history that has anything to do with the struggles of African-American workers. He was very early on picked up by powerful political and financial interests that ultimately shepherded him to the White House. Because of his particular ethnic background, he was seen as someone who could better sell right-wing policies.

Far from advancing the interests of the majority of the black population, identity politics has become the vehicle for a sharp attack on African-American workers and the working class as a whole. While his administration has handed over upwards of \$12 trillion to the big finance houses, Obama has manipulated the

bankruptcy of the auto industry in order to drive down the wages and living standards of the working class. He has proposed health care reform that would result in a system of compulsory insurance and rationed treatment. On education—which in his speech he held up as the basic necessity for advancement—Obama is supporting the shutdown of public schools, the expansion of charter schools and an attack on teachers.

Obama’s speech, and the entire content of the policy of his administration, only proves that the fundamental division in society is class, not race.

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