

Letters on the Gates arrest

1 August 2009

On “The Gates arrest and the ‘national conversation on race’”

One of the most revealing aspects about the Gates arrest and the resulting furor was the enormous disparity between the attention given to this incident, compared to the near-total silence on the countless examples of racial profiling, discrimination and inequality that are the facts of everyday life for the working class. When Obama first used the term “stupid” in relation to the arrest, his meaning was clear. As far as he is concerned, the police need to make the necessary distinctions between black workers, youth and the unemployed—who are in some way deserving of suspicion—and someone like Gates, the prominent star of the Harvard faculty and a friend of the president himself.

Gates was treated differently than if he had been white, but the suggestion on his part that his experience has opened his eyes to the scope of racial profiling in the US is almost laughable. As one of the few columnists who had something perceptive to say pointed out, where has he been for his whole adult life? The answer, of course, is that he has lived a very privileged existence as part of the small layer of the upper middle class that was cultivated in the wake of the mass civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s.

Decades after the end of Jim Crow, racism persists. As long as there is capitalism and the inequality it breeds there will be racism and other forms of bigotry and social backwardness designed to confuse and divide working people.

The strategy of the ruling elite, in the wake of the ghetto riots of the 1960s, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, the mass antiwar movement and the strike offensive of the working class during these years, shifted accordingly. The aim was to find new ways to use race to divide the working class. The Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow were outmoded, but

the Republicans adopted the “Southern strategy,” using code words and transforming the states of the old Confederacy into a new base of support for reaction.

The Democrats, meanwhile, adopted versions of identity politics. A division of labor between the two parties of big business produced the current obsession with race, the sanctimonious bipartisan invocations of King’s “dream” alongside the policies that guarantee growing inequality, growing racial tensions, and such national scandals as the virtual targeting by the police of millions of minority youth and the growth of the prison population to 2.3 million. This has been a crucial factor in the attacks on the entire working class during these past decades.

Obama and Gates cannot be separated from this whole past period of growing inequality. They represent the small layer that has benefited. While invoking civil rights, Obama presides over the continued erosion of all of the gains of earlier struggles. Is the nation’s first black president waging a campaign in defense of voting rights and other civil rights gains which have been under merciless attack for the past two decades? Of course not. Nor is he going to do anything about the law and order hysteria and police repression that rob millions of young people of any hope for the future. He is no more capable of or interested in challenging these conditions than he is in defending education and providing decent health care for the vast majority. His policies are determined by the class he represents, not the color of his skin.

When Obama convenes his fraudulent photo op at the White House this week, his aim will be to obscure the most essential lesson of this whole affair: The fundamental issue is the division of society into classes and the growing crisis and desperation of the capitalist ruling elite. The only way to fight racism is through the methods of the class struggle, appealing to all workers—white and black, young and old, employed and unemployed—in a common struggle against capitalist

inequality and all forms of racism and racial politics.

Peter D

New York, USA

30 July 2009

Obama declared, "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." Instead of 40 acres and a mule, the young black man must create himself a white mother with a PhD in anthropology who gets up at 5:00 a.m. to teach him that the conventions that regulate all societies are of equal worth so that he is as comfortable in the company of racist totalitarians as that of "liberals," if not more so. The former, after all, possess the totemic power that provides societal cohesion while the latter are impotent chatterers and chanters who subsist on the fumes from their pipe dreams. The failure of the black youth to create such a productive maternal environment is his own fault.

Michael G

California, USA

28 July 2009

Tom Eley has delivered another gem! This was a great article. It's been impossible to avoid the Gates incident over the last week, and I remember thinking that the media was completely missing the point. This article is by far the best I've seen anywhere!

Mary C

28 July 2009

Thank you for this article on the Gates arrest. I read most of your articles each day and thereby keep informed. One complaint: We have been "done" to death by the race (black) issue. But how about the (red) issue?

Today, July 28, Leonard Peltier is being allowed his rare hearing, the first in 15 years for a murder he was jailed for some 33 years go. He has declared his innocence for all of these years.

You must know of the horrible situation of our Indian population-treaties broken, installed in camps, money owed that has not been paid. Yes, I feel for the black race, but my first sympathy goes to the red race. Justice denied and delayed is no justice. Viva Leonard Peltier!

Millie

New Mexico, USA

28 July 2009

Mr. Eley: You are the only one who got this right. Thanks.

VGS

29 July 2009

As you noted regarding Gates' reaction to his harassment and arrest, "Doubtless Gates' rage stemmed from the fact that, in spite of his considerable wealth and prestige, he was subjected to the sort of treatment that African American workers and youth in particular face on a daily basis."

Indeed, this is exactly what happened. While you are certainly correct that ruling-class oppression of the working class is the central fact of life under capitalism, and that people of color such as Barack Obama, who are part of the ruling class, participate in the oppression of the working class as well as attempts to obscure this process from public view, the details of the Gates affair strikingly illustrate that race is, after all, a separate form of oppression that can victimize any person of color, no matter how wealthy and privileged they may be.

Of course, racial and class oppression are highly correlated and poor people of color are far more oppressed than wealthy people of color, but that doesn't mean that racism is not an independent form of oppression (as are sexism, homophobia, speciesism, etc.).

Jeff M

29 July 2009



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