

Martin Luther King and the fate of the civil rights movement

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On Monday, the new Martin Luther King Jr. memorial was unveiled in Washington DC. A week-long series of events in the capitol was to culminate on Sunday in a dedication featuring President Obama, before being postponed on Thursday night by Hurricane Irene. Hundreds of thousands had been expected.

The occasion has been utilized by the political and media establishment as an opportunity to allow contemporary US leaders to take advantage of an unearned and thoroughly undeserved association with King. No one has profited more from this juxtaposition, and deserves it less, than Obama himself.

The King Memorial consists of a gigantic statue of the civil rights leader, surrounded by walls on which are displayed quotations from many of his speeches and writings. It is worth recalling a few of his more radical declarations, which those who seek to sanitize the bloody struggles of the 1960s would prefer not to recall, let alone carve in stone.

At a meeting of his staff at the Southern Christian Leadership Council, King said that the reforms of the early 1960s were “limited mainly to the Negro middle class,” and that it was necessary to address the conditions of working people. “We are saying that something is wrong ... with capitalism,” he said. “There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism.”

In his courageous public denunciation of the war in Vietnam, King said, “We are criminals in that war” and “have committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world.” He also branded the United States

government “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”

King was a pacifist preacher, not a socialist or a revolutionary, and his radical brand of bourgeois politics never broke with the US two-party system. But it is impossible to imagine any contemporary Democratic politician making such a scathing denunciation of the crimes being committed by American capitalism, both at home and abroad.

Sunday’s ceremony comes at a time of worsening economic and social crisis, which have produced record levels of poverty and hunger, most severely among black and other minority workers. There is growing disillusionment among workers, including black workers and youth, as a consequence of the right-wing, pro-corporate policies of the Obama administration. The King Memorial is being cynically used to divert this socially justified anger and build support for Obama’s reelection.

The civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. had a major effect on American society. Millions of black workers and youth, with the support of tens of millions throughout the country, engaged in the mass struggles that shattered the Jim Crow structure in the South.

Because of the reactionary policies of the AFL-CIO and the pro-Democratic Party orientation in what passed for the American “left,” the leadership of this mass movement remained in the hands of a section of the black clergy. Ultimately it was diverted into politically safe channels, particularly in the period after King’s assassination in 1968.

Instead of becoming the starting point for a struggle against the capitalist system as a whole, the ending of the government-sanctioned racial oppression in the South became the occasion for a sordid deal between the American ruling class and a privileged layer of the black upper middle class.

The ideological tone for this agreement was set by President Richard Nixon, the originator of affirmative action, who called for the promotion of “black capitalism,” i.e., the cultivation of a small layer in the black population who would be allowed to enter at least the outer precincts of the ruling class.

This policy resulted in black mayors taking office in city after city, in the wake of the mass rioting of the 1960s, and the gradual inclusion of token numbers of African Americans in the corporate, military and government hierarchies. These structures remained intact, with only a little more “diversity.”

Thus President George W. Bush appointed first Colin Powell, then Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state. African-Americans served as the chief international representative of American imperialism for eight years, without making US wars any less bloody, or US foreign policy any less predatory and reactionary.

Meanwhile, the mass of black working people, and the working class as a whole, regardless of race, faced declining living standards and worse and worse conditions of life.

The co-opting of a section of the black middle class was itself part of a broader development in which the former middle-class anti-war protesters, academics and intellectuals were, on the basis of identity and life-style politics and various forms of anti-Marxist “left” ideologies, turned away from any even remote class orientation, ending up indifferent and ultimately hostile to the struggles and interests of the working class. The goal was to cultivate a new “left” constituency for American imperialism.

Obama is the apotheosis of this process: a right-wing, militarist, pro-Wall Street African-American president.

His elevation to the presidency is not the legacy of decades of civil rights progress, but rather an effort by wealthy corporate interests within the Democratic Party to use the candidate’s skin color to disguise their reactionary policies.

King was assassinated at the height of his public career, at the point where he was beginning to draw radical conclusions about the necessity to link the struggles of blacks in the South with those of the working class throughout the country, and to connect the fight for social justice at home with opposition to imperialist war abroad.

The limitations of King’s reformist perspective and the movement that he led have long since been demonstrated by events. It proved impossible to change American society fundamentally through moral appeals, no matter how sincere. A different perspective, based on the logic of the class struggle, is required.

American workers can respect and honor the democratic strivings of the civil rights movement in its heyday only by drawing the necessary political conclusions from its ultimate fate.

Working people must take up a political struggle against the capitalist system and for a socialist and internationalist perspective. The struggle to defend democratic rights must be connected to the fight for jobs, decent living standards and social services. None of these goals can be accomplished in a society ruled by a tiny handful of multimillionaires who monopolize both wealth and political power.

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