

# Obama, Martin Luther King and the Occupy Wall Street protests

**Barry Grey****18 October 2011**

One day after hundreds of thousands of people around the world demonstrated against inequality and the domination of society by the banks, President Barack Obama invoked the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. to preach the “common humanity” of the oppressor and the oppressed.

Speaking at the official dedication of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial on Washington’s National Mall, Obama, clearly though only indirectly alluding to the growing protests, said of King: “It was that insistence, that belief that God resides in each of us, from the high to the low, in the oppressor and the oppressed, that convinced him that people and systems could change. It fortified his belief in non-violence. It permitted him to place his faith in a government that had fallen short of its ideals.”

To reinforce the point, Obama suggested that King’s legacy was the recognition that “any social movement,” to “bring about true and lasting change,” had to embrace “the possibility of reconciliation.”

The president continued: “If he were alive today, I believe he would remind us that the unemployed worker can rightly challenge the excesses of Wall Street without demonizing all who work there...”

This crude attempt to use the figure of King to promote a spirit of submission and illusions in the possibility of reforming the existing system speaks to the fear within the American ruling class that the anti-Wall Street protests express the growth of anti-capitalist and potentially revolutionary sentiment. Particularly disturbing and dangerous, from the standpoint of Obama and the class of oppressors he represents, is the fact that issues of inequality and social class have dominated the demonstrations, not the various forms of identity and life-style politics based on race, gender and sexual orientation that have been used

for decades to block the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class.

The greatest fear of Obama and the US ruling elite is that the Occupy Wall Street movement portends the emergence of a far greater movement of the working class outside of the two-party system and all of its pro-capitalist agencies, such as the trade unions. They fear the reemergence of working-class struggle after decades in which it has been suppressed. This fear is entirely justified.

Hence Obama’s pretense of sympathy for the protests and his turn to pseudo-populist demagogic in recent weeks—always combined in one way or another with affirmations of support for the capitalist system.

In his speech at the King dedication, Obama made passing references to the economic crisis, unemployment and the growth of poverty today. He praised the courage of the civil rights militants who braved police batons, racist violence and prison during the anti-segregation struggles in the US South. He made no mention, however, of the hundreds of arrests of peaceful protesters carried out the day before by police across the country.

For Obama to posture as a partisan of the poor and oppressed is the height of hypocrisy. He has slavishly pursued the policies demanded by Wall Street since taking office, resulting in a more rapid decline in working-class incomes and a faster growth of poverty than under Bush, combined with bigger-than-ever profits and pay for the corporations.

There is something particularly obscene about Obama cloaking himself in the mantle of King, who, for all his political limitations, led a courageous mass struggle to achieve elementary democratic rights for African-Americans against the system of Jim Crow apartheid in the South. Barely two weeks before his King speech,

Obama became the first US president to order the assassination of an American citizen—Anwar al-Awlaki—and publicly boast of its having been carried out.

Obama seizes precisely on King's political weaknesses—his pacifism and rejection of socialist revolution—to try to prevent the emergence of a mass movement for equality and socialism today.

King courageously denounced the Vietnam War in 1967, breaking with the Democratic administration of Lyndon Johnson. He insisted that genuine freedom could not be achieved for blacks or anyone else in America so long as the United States was allowed to commit war crimes against people of other countries.

In his final years, he increasingly saw the fight for racial justice as part of a broader struggle for economic security and equality. His call for a “Poor People’s Campaign,” together with his opposition to the Vietnam War, made him a marked man, especially when he went to Memphis to support a bitter strike by sanitation workers. The FBI’s relentless campaign of spying and harassment of King ended only with his assassination in Memphis in April of 1968.

The hypocrisy of Obama—who has continued and expanded the wars of Bush and is threatening new wars against Iran and other countries—claiming the legacy of King is brazen.

By the time of King’s death, the limitations of his reformist perspective had already brought the civil rights movement to a crisis point. It must be added that the domination of the labor movement by a right-wing, pro-capitalist bureaucracy was a crucial factor in the movement of millions of African-American workers for democratic rights falling under the leadership of middle-class figures and preachers such as King.

Instead of the end of Jim Crow apartheid in the South becoming the starting point for a struggle against the capitalist system as a whole, it became the occasion for a sordid deal between the American ruling class and a privileged layer of the black upper middle class. President Nixon expanded the use of affirmative action policies to cultivate a small layer in the black population who were allowed to enter the political and economic establishment.

Meanwhile, the mass of African-American workers and the working class as a whole suffered a steady decline in living standards, which has been vastly

accelerated since the Wall Street crash of 2008.

Obama is the apotheosis of this process: a right-wing, militarist, pro-Wall Street African-American president. His elevation—like that of figures such as Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice under Bush—is not some consummation of the struggle of black people for civil rights, but rather the result of an attempt by corporate interests within the Democratic Party to use Obama’s skin color to obscure their reactionary policies.

Obama, in fact, did not come out of the civil rights movement, or any tradition of social struggle. Educated for the most part in private schools and given entry into Columbia University and Harvard Law School, he was groomed from an early age by wealthy interests in Chicago to serve American imperialism and US big business, which he has done unwaveringly, becoming a multimillionaire in the process.

Now he dispenses doses of religion and cheap moralizing to oppose the development of socialist consciousness in the emerging movement of the American and international working class. He preaches reconciliation and harmony while pursuing a ruthless policy of class war at home and abroad.

Leon Trotsky, in his brilliant essay *Their Morals and Ours*, published in 1938, opposed all such attempts to politically disarm the working class and prevent it from ruthlessly and consciously prosecuting the class struggle in defense of its interests. As he wrote: “A slave owner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning or violence breaks the chains—let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us that they are equals before a court of morality!”



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