Behind the right-wing racial politics of Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton

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Protests spread throughout the US in the aftermath of the killing of 17-year old Trayvon Martin in February. The killing of Martin found a point of connection with broad popular anger over injustice, inequality, and the promotion of right-wing, vigilante laws. Martin's parents played a central role in raising awareness of their son's killing, and in demanding the arrest and trial of his killer.

The political establishment in the United States also mobilized in response to this anger, bringing forward certain individuals and organizations that make it their profession to manipulate and redirect popular anger. The aim always is to keep opposition within acceptable parameters, to try to ensure that it does not pose any threat to the capitalist system and its political representatives, Democrat and Republican.

The professional politicians of race, Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, played a particularly cynical role. Together with their supporters in the International Socialist Organization and other pseudo-left groups, Jackson and Sharpton used the Trayvon Martin killing as an opportunity to insist that race, not class, is the fundamental issue in American society. The more immediate aim is to prepare the ground for the reelection campaign of Barack Obama, who is now presiding over a massive assault on the working class of every race.

It is worth reviewing the political pedigree of Jackson and Sharpton, two individuals who personify the decay of the civil rights movement and the cultivation of a wealthy black elite that is fundamentally hostile to the social aspirations of workers, both black and white. In the course of their services to capitalist politics, both have become multi-millionaires, even as the conditions of life for the vast majority of black workers and youth have deteriorated. These are not, in any meaningful sense of the term, individuals on the "left."

Jackson's emergence coincided with the first stage of the breakdown of the civil rights movement. He has sought to portray himself as the heir to Martin Luther King, Jr., the leading figure in the struggle for black equality from the 1950s to his death in 1968. However, both King and the civil rights movement of the earlier period were of a very different character.

King, whose rise to prominence grew with the mass resistance of the black workers in the South, had come to believe by the late 1960s that the oppression of blacks was fundamentally a question of class. In one instance he noted that the gains achieved by the civil rights movement had been "limited mainly to the Negro middle class," and that to challenge the degradation of the majority of blacks would require an interracial movement of poor people. "We are saying that something is wrong … with capitalism," King said. "There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism."

King was not a revolutionary socialist but a reformist, and, ultimately, the demise of the mass civil rights movement stemmed from this fact, and under the leadership of reformist clergymen, it accepted the profit system that was the basis of racial and class oppression. Instead of providing an impetus for the struggle against American capitalism as a whole, King and others ushered the civil rights movement back into the Democratic Party, which, ironically, had ruled the South since the days of slavery.

Nonetheless, his acknowledgement of the class nature of the oppression of black workers would place King well to the left of traditional civil rights groups like the NAACP, to say nothing of today's money-grubbing racial hustlers. King's linking of US imperialism ("the greatest purveyor of violence in the world") to the oppression of the poor within the US made him an enemy of the American state, as FBI documents have made clear. It very likely led to his assassination in 1968, an event that has never been adequately explained.

In the wake of King's assassination the civil rights leadership, led by Jackson, moved sharply to the right. It abandoned talk of systemic change, muted its criticism of US imperialism, and, in line with the affirmative action policies promoted by the Johnson and Nixon administrations, began to dedicate itself to the cultivation of a privileged black elite.

This movement to the right was not due to the fading of militancy among black workers. On the contrary, the assassination of King was followed by a wave of urban eruptions, the growing influence of radical political tendencies among black workers, and the strike wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s in which black workers figured prominently.

Jackson was an anodyne to all of this, as was quickly noticed in ruling circles looking for a "new face" for the civil rights movement. As the *New York Times* wrote in 1972, Jackson is "good copy but safe copy; radical in style, not in action. The Jesse Jackson of today is not a threat to established institutions."

Jackson's most important political patron was not King, who according to aides viewed the younger man with suspicion, but the millionaire black entrepreneur, T.R.M. Howard. Howard, who occupied a right-wing position in the civil rights movement, hailed Booker T. Washington—the prominent 19th century black leader who called for political passivity in favor of individual self-improvement—as a "towering genius". Howard hated socialism. At one point he said he wished that "one bomb could be fashioned that would blow every Communist in America right back to Russia where they belong."

Howard's resources and influence were critical in founding Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) in 1971 as a vehicle for Jackson after he was suspended for "administrative improprieties" from Operation Breadbasket, which had been linked to King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. PUSH specialized in applying pressure to corporations and businesses to place blacks in positions of power.

There was nothing particularly oppositional in this. PUSH was simply acting to accelerate the implementation of affirmative action policies, whose main backer was the Republican president, Richard Nixon. In the aftermath of the ghetto uprisings of the 1960s, Nixon sought to cultivate people like Jackson, to give them "a piece of the action," as the president put it. Jackson was only too happy to oblige.

"By 1974, Jesse Jackson had created his own economic patronage machine," writes biographer and civil rights veteran Barbara Reynolds.

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“To black entrepreneurs, especially the big ones, Jesse Jackson is a benevolent godfather.”

From the 1970s on, PUSH focused on pressuring major corporations to hire black executives and to do business with black-owned firms, culminating with its ongoing Project Wall Street. Jackson summed up his Booker T. Washington-style political philosophy in a 2001 self-help book he co-authored with his son Jesse Jackson, Jr., entitled *It’s About the Money!: The Fourth Movement of the Freedom Symphony: How to Build Wealth, Get Access to Capital, and Achieve Your Financial Dreams*.

PUSH combined its overriding aim—lining the pockets of the black elite—with highly public political stunts relating to single-issue grievances of oppressed black workers in urban areas, such as welfare issues and police brutality cases. But these were always subordinated to the city administrations now run by black Democratic Party politicians and police chiefs—Chicago; Detroit; Gary, Indiana, etc.

Keeping workers subordinated to the Democratic Party was also Jackson’s central aim with his runs for the presidency in 1984 and 1988 and the formation of his Rainbow Coalition. Jackson’s campaigns, which occupied a “left” position in the nominating process, struck a chord with white workers as well as blacks suffering under the blows of deindustrialization and wage-cutting. He far exceeded expectations, finishing third in 1984 and second in 1988 to the eventual establishment nominees Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis, respectively, both of whom went down to lopsided defeats in the general elections. After 1988, Jackson folded the Rainbow Coalition back into PUSH.

If Jackson embodies the first stage of the decline of the civil rights movement, then Al Sharpton epitomizes its final degeneration into little more than a money-hustling operation. Sharpton, born in 1954, was a child preacher and then a Baptist minister, before signing up with Jackson’s Operation Breadbasket (predecessor to Operation PUSH) in 1969. He played no role in the civil rights struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and did promotional work for black-owned record labels and black performers.

Sharpton came to public attention through his involvement in a series of racially charged conflicts in New York, including the shootings by subway vigilante Bernard Goetz and attacks on black youth in Howard Beach and Bensonhurst, predominately white areas of Queens and Brooklyn.

He attained notoriety with his role as adviser to Tawana Brawley, a 15-year-old African American girl who claimed in 1987 to have been gang-raped a by white men in upstate New York. Without providing any evidence, Sharpton publicly and repeatedly accused a local assistant district attorney, Steven Pagones, of participating in the alleged rape. Brawley’s charges turned out to be a pack of lies, and a court ultimately forced Sharpton to pay $345,000 to Pagones for defamation.

It has been widely reported that Sharpton worked as an informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the 1980s. It is probable that his participation contributed to the arrest and imprisonment of boxing promoter Don King. Others have alleged that Sharpton sought to set up black radicals for arrest by the FBI.

Unfazed by the failure of the Brawley provocation, Sharpton has become increasingly influential and wealthy over the past 25 years, seizing the limelight whenever the opportunity presents itself in the form of police brutality, racially motivated shootings, or the countless other social tragedies that American capitalism produces in such abundance. “Reverend Al” swoops in, makes a few clichéd remarks, preens before the cameras, passes the hat, and moves on.

Naturally, these talents made him a success in capitalist politics as well. He has run repeatedly for office, including US senator from New York State, for mayor of New York City, and in 2004 for president of the United States, where he was accorded equal status with senators, governors and congressmen seeking the Democratic presidential nomination.

More recently Sharpton has taken on a lucrative position as host of “PoliticsNation” on the news network MSNBC. Journalist Wayne Barrett suggested that this was a reward for services rendered, as Sharpton played a role in clearing obstacles to the merger of media empires Comcast and NBC, a $30 billion deal inked in 2009. That same year Comcast gave $140,000 to Sharpton’s organization National Action Network (NAN). He subsequently sent a letter backing Comcast to the Federal Communications Commission, while it was reviewing the merger, and helped push a “comprehensive diversity agreement” on minority employment at the media behemoth. Sharpton also bestowed a top award on MSNBC President Phil Griffin at NAN’s 2011 conference.

Jackson and Sharpton are only the most prominent of a social layer, black Democratic Party politicians invariably labeled as “progressive” by the *Nation* magazine, the ISO, the Stalinists of the Communist Party USA, and other liberal and pseudo-left groups. This layer does not speak for the interests of black workers, but has its own, independent, purely selfish social interests—political positions, particularly in the major cities, lucrative contracts, high-profile media and corporate advisory roles.

Their preeminent role in such tragedies as the Trayvon Martin killing is to obscure the socio-economic and class issues and subordinate political thinking to an unchanging template of racial politics. Hence the mindless comparisons of Trayvon Martin to Emmett Till—as though nothing had been accomplished by the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s—and the attempts to once again put a fresh coat of paint on the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, presenting this reactionary party of Wall Street and American imperialism as though it was the vehicle of social progress.

The overriding effect of these efforts is not simply to channel workers back into the framework of fruitless appeals to the Democratic Party. The main concern is to conceal the class chasm that has developed within the black community itself. Black workers and youth have far more in common with their white, Hispanic, Asian and immigrant co-workers than with the thin layer of black multimillionaires like Jackson, Sharpton, or Obama.

The fundamental problems facing workers—declining living standards, attacks on democratic rights, and war—are confronted by workers of all colors and nationalities. Their resolution requires a unified struggle of the entire working class for socialism, and the exposure those who attempt to divide workers along racial, gender, or national lines.

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