

At University of Michigan symposium Angela Davis offers political cover for Obama

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Angela Davis, a former leading member of the Communist Party USA and a prominent figure of the “new left” of the 1960s and 1970s, spoke before an audience of students, faculty and workers at a symposium held on the occasion of Martin Luther King Day at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Something of a radical icon in the 1970s, Davis made a smooth transition into a leading figure in “left” academia, securing a position at the University of California, Santa Cruz, from where she recently retired.

In recent years, Davis has been brought forward by sections of the political establishment as part of an effort to give an oppositional gloss to the Democratic Party. Her event at UM was heavily promoted and was attended by some 500 students, academics and residents. Her function is to disorient anyone who is looking for an oppositional perspective, directing them into the reactionary dead-end of racial politics.

Davis has joined with other academics, such as Michelle Alexander, author of the *New Jim Crow*, to promote the theory that blacks in America remain the victims of a caste system epitomized by the disproportionate number of African Americans in the US prison system. Their central premise is that it is race, not class, that is the fundamental division in American society. (See the WSWS review of Alexander’s book, “A brief for racial politics”)

When Davis was a leading figure with the Communist Party in the 1960s and 1970s, the party was a staunch supporter of the Democratic Party, as it is today. In speaking before the UM audience, Davis remained true to her roots, promoting the Democrats in general and Obama in particular as a vehicle for progressive change.

Davis noted the coincidence of the presidential inauguration and the Martin Luther King holiday,

conflating the mass popular movement for civil rights led by King with the election of an African American as leader of the American military and state apparatus. She described herself as a “very passionate supporter” of the Obama administration. Davis arrived on the UM campus after attending celebrations for Obama’s inauguration in Washington.

Davis used her talk to provide a political cover and justification for the Obama administration, which has deepened the reactionary and right-wing policies of its predecessor by expanding imperialist war, increasing the use of drones, authorizing state killings and tacitly endorsing torture. Advancing a perspective based on life-style and identity politics, she characterized the victory of Obama as defeat of the “white male agenda.” She went on to suggest that during his first term Obama was constrained by right-wing racist and political forces. Now that he has been re-elected the task of students was to, “build up the type of movements that we saw in the 1960s to engage the issues that have been previously ignored.” Davis made not a single reference to the social conditions facing the broad mass of the working class and young people in the United States. Speaking only a few miles from Detroit, the poorest big city in the United States, she said nothing about the attacks carried out on working people in the city by the Democratic administration of millionaire David Bing, who has presided over the dismantling of city services.

Instead, Davis and a section of pseudo-left have latched on to the massive growth of America’s prisons as a rationale for promoting racial politics to divert attention away from the more fundamental class issues. While making reference to the capitalist economic system, Davis described the prisons largely in racial terms, at one point saying “it was a way to manage black bodies in the aftermath of slavery.”

The line of figures such as Davis, Alexander, et. al. is that racism is endemic to American society, and, in particular, to the American working class. The history of the United States is a history of one form of racial oppression being replaced by another—from slavery, to Jim Crow, to the prison-industrial complex. In her remarks, Davis expressed disdain for Lincoln and the Civil War, a position that has become standard among these layers.

This form of racist politics has absolutely nothing to do with Marxism, with which Davis at times still pretends to have some association. It is the product of a strain of anti-Marxist thought going back decades, including postmodernism and neo-anarchism. Davis herself was a student of Herbert Marcuse, a leading member of the Frankfurt School and prominent figure in the 1960s protest movement. The central theme of Marcuse's thought was the non-revolutionary role of the working class in general, and the American working class in particular.

During the brief question and answer period following her talk, a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party challenged Davis' assertion that race was the fundamental dividing line in the United States. The SEP supporter denounced Davis' support for Obama, noting that Obama had gone even further than the previous Republican administration in shredding constitutional rights through its program of targeted assassinations.

In her evasive reply Davis asserted that her support for Obama was "critical". "It is possible to be both for Obama and against him," she declared. She went on to repeat the timeworn mantra of identity politics that the election of an African American president was progressive in itself.

In fact, Davis is part of an upper middle class milieu that, while posturing as left, supports Obama and the Democratic Party not in spite of its anti-working class policies, but because of them.



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