

Race and class in America

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The acquittal of George Zimmerman, the “neighborhood watch” volunteer who shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in February of 2012, has provoked popular outrage. The wanton slaying of an unarmed African American youth, who posed no danger to his assailant, and the judicial travesty of the killer’s exoneration have become a focus of broader opposition to the injustices that pervade American society.

Both the tragic death of Martin and the outrage of Zimmerman’s acquittal can be understood only within the context of decades of political reaction in the United States, in which the ruling class has relentlessly sought to promote social backwardness, militarism and an atmosphere of vigilantism.

As was the case after the death of Trayvon Martin, the focus of the response of the media, the political establishment and the various middle-class pseudo-left groups to Zimmerman’s acquittal has been to frame the case in exclusively racial terms.

The general call—yet one more time—is for a “national discussion on race.” This is an evasion of the more fundamental social, political and historical issues raised by the Trayvon Martin case.

Typical was the editorial in the *New York Times*, which declared that Zimmerman’s acquittal “certainly is about race,” and went on to describe the United States as “a country plagued by racism.” More hysterical variations on the same theme were provided by the International Socialist Organization’s *SocialistWorker.org* and the *Nation* magazine. The latter published a piece (“White Supremacy Acquits Zimmerman”) that denounced Zimmerman’s defense lawyers for citing “slave-owning rapist Thomas Jefferson.”

Was race an issue in the Trayvon Martin story and does it play a role in American life? Of course. But it cannot be understood as a thing-in-itself, ripped out of

its real material, economic, social and historical roots in the development of American and world capitalism. To do so is to obscure the more fundamental source of oppression of workers and youth of all races, colors, religions, etc.—the exploitation of the working class—and the real driving force of history: the class struggle.

More than 40 years have passed since the civil rights movement, which played such an important role in American political life. At that time, the question of race was understood to be bound up with class questions. It was widely accepted that the conditions facing African Americans—Jim Crow segregation, violence, lynchings in the South; poverty, police brutality, discrimination in the North—were embedded in capitalist society, and that racism was one of the most noxious tools used by the American ruling class to divide the working class.

In the great class movement for industrial unions that had preceded the civil rights movement, a critical issue had been combating racism and uniting the workers of all races and nationalities. Henry Ford worked to foment racial divisions, importing African American workers from the South to serve as scabs in the 1941 strike called by the United Auto Workers. His scheme failed mainly due to the efforts of socialist-minded auto workers who opposed all forms of racism and fought to unite the workers in a common struggle against industrial despotism.

The civil rights movement of the succeeding decades increasingly came to be embedded in the broader class struggle, including a series of militant strikes in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was becoming ever more clear that the struggle for civil rights was bound up with the struggle of the working class as a whole.

The civil rights movement came under the influence of socialists, a development that was bitterly opposed by more conservative leaders. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, though they remained reformist in terms of

their program, were influenced by socialist thought and saw the liberation of African Americans as inseparably linked to the struggle for social as well as legal equality. They were not, in contrast to Barack Obama, supporters of “free enterprise.”

In response to the social upheavals of the 1960s, the American ruling class adopted a policy of cultivating a section of the civil rights leadership and African American upper-middle class and integrating them into the system of economic and political power via the Democratic Party and through the medium of affirmative action and identity politics. This process coincided with the abandonment by the Democratic Party of any policy of social reform.

For more than four decades, the American ruling class has worked by such means to disconnect the question of race from the question of class. This has served the interests of a wealthy African American establishment, but the impact on the broad masses has been catastrophic. The conditions of the majority of African Americans today are worse than they were 40 years ago.

It is for the privileged layers of the upper-middle class that have benefited from affirmative action that the proponents of racial and other forms of identity politics speak.

There is a huge element of hypocrisy and self-interest in the attempt to utilize the Trayvon Martin case to promote racial politics. Political charlatans such as Al Sharpton, leaders of the official civil rights organizations, affluent African American media pundits and academics, fake-left groups such as the International Socialist Organization—all of them tied to the Democratic Party—have a vested interest in keeping the identity politics industry going.

These groups have no desire to address the broader social and political context of the Trayvon Martin case. Their position was summed up by Obama, who posted a stunningly hypocritical statement on the White House web site declaring, “We are a nation of laws, and a jury has spoken.”

It is virtually never mentioned that the “gated community” in Sanford, Florida where Trayvon Martin was murdered was riddled with foreclosed homes. In the nonstop media commentary on the Martin case, there is barely a mention of mass unemployment, rising poverty and the devastating impact of corporate wage-

cutting and government austerity.

Instead of a “national conversation on race,” what is needed is a “national conversation” on the horrific conditions produced by the collapse of the industrial infrastructure of the United States, the rise of a predatory financial aristocracy, the militarization and brutalization of American society, and the growth of social inequality.

These are conditions that can be overcome only through the unification of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program that opposes the capitalist system and the class exploitation at its heart.



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