

After the Zimmerman verdict

# Build a united struggle of workers and youth to defend social, democratic rights

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party

20 July 2013

*This statement is being distributed at demonstrations being held today in cities throughout the US. For a pdf version to download and print, click here.*

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 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—including sections of the Democratic Party associated with Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton that have organized many of the nationwide demonstrations today—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.

On Friday, President Obama spoke along similar lines in remarks that began by defending the conduct of the trial of Zimmerman, including the actions of the judge. He equated his own experience as an African American

with those of Martin and other working class youth, as if the vast social gulf separating the multi-millionaire president from the majority of black workers is of no consequence.

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. 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.

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.

This process has culminated in the Obama administration. The claim that an African American would implement a political program in the interests of working people because of the color of his skin has been disproven by five years of unrelenting reaction.

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 Sharpton, leaders of the official civil rights organizations, affluent African American media pundits and academics, the various “left” organizations 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. 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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