

Obama, race and class

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The statement Friday by President Obama, during a carefully staged “surprise” appearance in the White House briefing room, was a calculated effort to exploit, for definite political ends, popular anger over last week’s acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s killer. Martin, a 17-year-old African American, was shot and killed by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman in February of 2012.

Obama sought to accomplish a number of related goals. His remarks were coordinated with nationwide protests over the verdict, with the aim of associating himself with the victim’s family. At the same time, he attempted to shore up dwindling public faith in a criminal justice system that virtually guaranteed a not-guilty verdict. He vouched for the trial and verdict, while signaling there would be no further federal action on the case.

Above all, Obama sought to divert public attention away from any consideration of the underlying social and class issues—rising poverty and social inequality, the systematic promotion of individual violence and right-wing vigilantism—in favor of an exclusive focus on the racial aspects of the tragedy.

The commander in chief of the most powerful and aggressive military in the world began by dressing himself in the garb of the victim. “Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago,” he said.

He made repeated references to the “African American community” in the course of his 18-minute-long remarks. The presentation of America as an aggregate of “communities” based on ethnicity is fundamentally reactionary. Its main purpose is to cover over the deep class divisions that cut across all ethnic and racial lines in America.

It lumps together privileged multimillionaires such as Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and Obama himself with the masses of African American workers and youth who have been the hardest hit by the crisis of American

capitalism and the policies of the Obama administration.

Obama does not speak for Trayvon Martin. He speaks for a different social class, one whose interests are deeply antagonistic to those of the Martin family and the broad mass of working people and youth of all races and ethnicities.

The same day that Obama gave his remarks, the White House flatly rebuffed suggestions that the federal government should come to the assistance of the city of Detroit, forced into bankruptcy last week. Hundreds of thousands of working people in the city, most of them African Americans, face further punitive cuts in public services, jobs and living standards. The Obama administration, which supplied trillions to the Wall Street banks and tens of billions for the auto bosses, offers nothing at all to the people of Detroit.

There is another reactionary dimension to Obama’s harping on race. He cited the dismay of “the African American community” over the acquittal of Zimmerman, as though only African Americans would be outraged at the prospect of a black youth, guilty of nothing, being stalked and killed, and the perpetrator going scot-free. The truth is that the outcome of the trial was deeply unsettling to wide layers of the population.

Obama’s intervention in the Trayvon Martin case was hailed by the corporate-controlled media as an event of transcendent political importance. The president supposedly gave a glimpse of his innermost feelings, demonstrating political “courage” and “moral leadership,” according to the pundits on the Sunday morning television talk shows.

What cynicism! This is a government that has repeatedly asserted the “right” to kill its political antagonists overseas, including American citizens, using drone-fired missiles. It is engaged in systematic spying on the communications of the population of the

entire world. The American government is, as Martin Luther King Jr. once observed, the greatest purveyor of violence on the planet.

In its domestic policies, the Obama administration has systematically defended the interests of the super-rich against the working class and middle class population of all races and ethnic origins. Black, white, Hispanic, Asian, immigrant—all sections of the working class have borne the brunt of the economic crisis that followed the 2008 financial crash. While Wall Street profits and CEO bonuses have been fully restored, the jobs and living standards of working people have never recovered.

The Obama administration and the corporate-controlled media are pushing for a “national discussion on race.” This is nothing more than an effort to prevent any discussion of the class issues, in a country where the socioeconomic divisions are more acute than at any time in a century.

In his remarks, Obama made no mention of unemployment or the social crisis in America. Nor did he offer any policies. There were no proposals to mitigate poverty and social misery, to provide jobs for the unemployed, or to remedy the disproportionate impact of the economic crisis on the most oppressed sections of the working class, including African American workers.

There is a tremendous amount of cynicism, self-interest and hypocrisy in the official reaction to the killing of Trayvon Martin, including from groups like the National Action Network, the pro-Democratic Party organization run by Sharpton that organized the demonstrations over the weekend. A whole layer of fake “progressives” whose stock-in-trade is identity politics, including well-off African American politicians, pundits and professionals, is using the tragic killing of Martin to promote the politics of race—upon which their salaries and sinecures depend.

The aim is to advance the interests of more privileged layers of the upper-middle class. Under conditions where millions of people are coming to an understanding that there is something deeply rotten and dysfunctional about the existing economic and political system, and the class chasm separating the financial aristocracy from the broad masses of the people is emerging ever more clearly, these forces harp on the issue of race in order to sow divisions within the

working class and channel social opposition back behind the Democratic Party.

The central task of the working class is to free itself from the political influence of these pro-capitalist elements and build an independent mass political movement that will unite working people of all races and ethnic backgrounds in a common struggle against the profit system.



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