Fifty years since the March on Washington

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Fred Mazelis is a founding member of the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party. He has played a leading role in the Trotskyist movement for over 50 years and participated in the 1963 March on Washington. He presents here his views on the significance of that event and the subsequent social and political evolution of the United States.

Today's rally at the Lincoln Memorial is part of a weeklong commemoration of the August 28, 1963 March on Washington.

The glaring contrast between the commemoration and the event that it is commemorating is epitomized in their keynote speakers. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. electrified a crowd of a quarter of a million with his "I have a dream" speech.

Fifty years later, Barack Obama will deliver an oration Wednesday that, if he were honest, would replace King's famous refrain with "I have a drone."

King spoke as a courageous champion of democratic rights and an opponent of inequality and war. Obama represents America's military and intelligence apparatus, which orders assassinations, military aggression and police state measures at home. He speaks not as the leader of a movement from below, but as a defender of the corporations, Wall Street banks and super-rich.

While Obama, the first African American US president, is hailed as the towering achievement of the civil rights movement, his presidency in fact represents a final nail in the coffin of this movement.

This 50th Anniversary commemoration is a mockery of the sacrifices of the mass civil rights movement of the early 1960s. It has been organized by a collection of opportunists and scoundrels who have devoted most of their political careers to exploiting the symbols of the civil rights movement—including the memory of King—to win political positions and, above all, make millions of dollars for themselves.

The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was one episode in a mass movement that spanned the period from the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 to the assassination of King in 1968. The attitude of the capitalist ruling class and its political representatives to this movement was one of fear and distrust. They sought to contain and co-opt the demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience; the student sit-ins and Freedom Rides; the voter registration drives; and the struggles for jobs and against poverty.

The original March on Washington had something of a semi-official character. While it attracted a crowd of 250,000, at that time virtually unprecedented for the capital, it was also endorsed by the most important sections of the political establishment. The Kennedy administration, after trying behind the scenes to have the demonstration called off, then gave its uneasy approval.

The March reflected the contradiction between the rank and file of the movement—the masses of Southern black workers and their Northern allies—and the conservative African American leadership represented especially in such organizations as the NAACP and the Urban League.

King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference sought to balance between the conservative leaders and the more radical youth and young workers who drove the movement forward. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and Malcolm X, though far from presenting a class perspective in the fight against Jim Crow racism, nevertheless reflected the anger and militancy that would explode in the urban ghetto rebellions of 1964-68.

King sought to pressure the ruling class and the Kennedy administration in particular, to put an end to segregation in the South. The 1963 March was designed to discipline the mass movement, and to channel it behind support for the Democrats. The passage of the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act in the two years following Kennedy's assassination were among the last gasps of American social reform.

King, however, was a serious political figure whose concerns extended beyond segregation. He understood that the civil rights legislation, far from solving the historic problems of inequality, exposed deeper issues and raised more political and social issues. In the last years of his life, the civil rights leader took a different path, which brought him into conflict with previous allies, including the NAACP and the administration of Lyndon Johnson.

King became a fervent opponent of the war in Vietnam. He turned increasingly to the class issues of poverty and inequality. Just months before his assassination in April 1968, he launched the Poor People's Campaign. King planned to build a movement uniting white and black workers in the fight for jobs and decent living standards.

He began to denounce capitalism as the source of poverty and inequality. In a 1967 speech delivered in Atlanta, Georgia explaining his opposition to the Vietnam War, King advocated a "shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society," warning, "When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, militarism and economic exploitation are incapable of being conquered."

In another 1967 speech he asked why there were 40 million poor people in what was then the wealthiest country in the world. "When you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth," he said. "When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And … when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the oil?' You begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the iron ore?'"

There is little doubt—and this is a view shared by millions throughout the world—that King paid with his life for his challenge, even if an inconsistent one, to the profit system.

The stage managers of this week's events in Washington are the antithesis of King.

In the aftermath of King's death, the civil rights movement repudiated the more radical aims that King had espoused. They embraced the policy of "black capitalism" pioneered by Richard Nixon, and affirmative action, a more "left"-sounding version of the same strategy. Many are now multimillionaires.

The goal of the new post-King orientation was not the elimination of mass poverty, but the securing of special privileges for a very small minority of the African American population. The striving for personal wealth and privilege by working within the capitalist system produced a generation of cynical self-promoters (Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton), corrupt politicians (from Coleman Young to Cory Booker), ruthless servants of US imperialism (Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice) and vicious opponents of democratic rights and advocates of a police state (Clarence Thomas, Eric Holder and Barack Obama).

The masses of black workers have seen their real incomes fall to below what existed when King lost his life 45 years ago, even as the social chasm dividing wealth and poverty among African Americans has grown wider than in society as a whole.

Nothing symbolizes this process more starkly than the fate of the city of Detroit, presided over for decades by black mayors and police chiefs as jobs and living standards were wiped out. Detroit is now being taken into bankruptcy by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, an African American hatchet-man for the big banks.

The Achilles' heel of the civil rights movement, and even its most radical and sincere representatives such as King, was its failure to break with the Democratic Party and recognize that the aims of social equality and democratic rights were realizable only in a struggle for socialism.

Along with Jackson, Andrew Young and other erstwhile civil rights figures, a crucial role was played by the AFL-CIO trade unions. The union bureaucracy, in 1963 at the height of its power and influence, worked night and day to keep the working class chained to the Democrats and through that party to the needs of the US banks and corporations.

Now, through their support for the Democratic Party and the administration of Barack Obama in particular, demagogues like Jackson and Sharpton are reliable defenders of capitalist exploitation.

In the weeks leading up to the commemoration this week, the media pundits have speculated on what Obama could say that would not draw an unfavorable comparison with King's 1963 speech. But this is not merely a matter of eloquence.

In the months before his death, King declared that the US had "committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world" and was its " greatest purveyor of violence." There is an unbridgeable gulf between King's struggle against imperialist war and Obama's role as president.

The democratic and social struggles with which the civil rights movement was identified half a century ago can be carried forward today only in a struggle against the political and social forces behind the official commemorations in Washington, and only on the basis of a new mass movement committed to uniting the working class in the struggle for socialism.