Fifty years since the US Civil Rights Act

Patrick Martin
11 April 2014

The weeklong official commemoration of the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has featured speeches at the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas by President Obama and ex-presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. These ceremonies, and particularly Obama's keynote speech Thursday afternoon, have served to cover up rather than illuminate the historical importance of the struggle against segregation and racial discrimination.

None of the four presidential speakers has any genuine connection to the mass movement of millions of African American workers and youth—broadly supported by working people of all races—that first shook and ultimately shattered the legal semi-apartheid of the American South known as Jim Crow. All four presidents represent, in different ways, the efforts of the American ruling class to reverse the gains made by working people in the 1960s and make ever-greater inroads against their living standards, social conditions and democratic rights.

Carter was the first Democrat elected after Johnson, who was virtually driven out of office by the mass popular movement against the Vietnam War, which compelled him to abandon any effort to win a second full presidential term. Carter campaigned for the presidency as the most right-wing of the Democratic candidates, committed to curbing rather than expanding the welfare state measures enacted under Johnson. His administration featured one confrontation after another with the working class, including the 111-day strike by coal miners who defied his presidential back-to-work order.

Clinton campaigned for the presidency in 1992 as a "New Democrat," one who personified the rejection of the policies of expanded social programs and concessions to the working class once associated with the Democratic Party. Working with an ultra-right Republican Congress, Clinton carried through "welfare reform," the abolition, for the first time in US history, of one of the basic social safety net programs established by the New Deal and Great Society reforms of the 1930s and the 1960s.

As for Bush, his attempt to associate himself with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is an obscenity. He personifies the transformation of the Republican Party—which in 1964 provided heavier congressional support for the bill than the Democrats—into the party of the most racist and reactionary component of the American political establishment, with its main political base in the Southern states.

Nor is Obama, the first African-American president, an heir to the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, as he claimed in his keynote speech. He is rather the end product of the measures adopted by the US ruling class to tame, neuter and destroy the mass movement of the 1960s. The civil rights struggles represented a genuine egalitarian impulse, a fight to improve the living standards and expand the democratic rights of the most oppressed sections of the working class, to the benefit of all working people.

Substituted for this was the cultivation of special privileges for a select few through programs such as affirmative action, first proposed by President Richard Nixon as a way of co-opting the civil rights movement, under the slogan "black capitalism." The goal was to elevate a layer of more privileged African Americans, then women and Hispanics, and later gays and lesbians, into positions of power and influence, while leaving the fundamental social structure of American capitalism unchanged. Identity politics was promoted as the cover for this process and became the political basis of the Democratic Party, in particular.

Obama was part of that layer of African Americans cultivated by the talent-spotters for corporate America and the military-intelligence apparatus. His first job after graduating from college was for Business

© World Socialist Web Site

International, a front company for CIA ventures overseas. He was later recruited to Harvard Law School before being plugged into a political career in Southside Chicago, then elevated improbably, first to the US Senate, then the White House.

Once in office, he has displayed unwavering loyalty to the interests of the American ruling elite, from the bailout of Wall Street to the buildup of the police-state apparatus of spying, to the promotion of imperialist military operations and political provocations in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, East Asia and now Ukraine. Poverty is at the highest level since the 1960s, food stamp usage at an all-time high. One figure sums up the class character of the Obama administration: during his first term in office, the richest one percent of the US population captured 95 percent of all increases in income.

Media commentaries on the civil rights anniversary have noted the wide scope of the reforms associated with that period: in addition to the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), these included the establishment of Medicare and Medicaid (1965), federal aid to elementary and secondary schools (1965), the Fair Housing Act (1966), and the first environmental and consumer protection laws.

But there is no serious assessment of the eventual failure of these efforts. This was not just the outcome of the Vietnam War, which became the sinkhole for the resources that Johnson had initially proposed to devote to the "War on Poverty." In the final analysis, it represented the failure of American capitalism.

In the richest country in the world, at the height of the post-World War II boom, it proved impossible, within the framework of the profit system, to alleviate poverty significantly or make any long-term improvement in the conditions of life for the broad masses of working people. On the contrary, the five decades that followed have seen the growth of economic inequality to unheard-of dimensions.

Obama's pretense of social reformism will be hailed by liberal publications such as the *Nation* as a turn to the left, and given credibility by pseudo-left organizations such as the International Socialist Organization. This is a fraud.

Obama seeks to associate himself with the civil rights struggles of the 1960s only to provide a political cover for a discredited right-wing administration and a Democratic Party facing mass disaffection at the polls in the upcoming congressional elections.

There is one striking similarity between Lyndon Johnson and Obama. LBJ notoriously pored over maps of North Vietnam, personally selecting targets for pulverization by US B-52s. Obama's equivalent is his "Terror Tuesdays," when he sits down with intelligence aides to determine whom the CIA and Pentagon will exterminate with drone-fired cruise missiles.

Johnson sought to combine social reform and imperialist war, leading to his political debacle. Obama combines imperialist war and reaction all down the line: the dismantling of social benefits, the bankruptcy of major cities like Detroit, wage cutting spearheaded by the federal government, police-state spying on a gigantic scale.

The real lesson of this historical epoch is that the perspective of creating a more democratic and egalitarian capitalism failed and was doomed to do so. The profit system is incompatible with genuine democracy and equality. It must be overthrown through the independent political struggle of the working class and replaced by a socialist system, in which the stranglehold of the financial aristocracy is broken, its criminally obtained wealth is expropriated, and economic life is placed under the democratic control of the entire people.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site