

Fifty years since the Civil Rights Act

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Fifty years ago today, on July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act. The law banned racial segregation in most public facilities, forbade discrimination in hiring, and restricted unequal application of voter registration requirements. The reform, bitterly contested within the American ruling class, came in response to the mass protests known as the Civil Rights movement that swept the American South beginning in the 1950s.

Title I and Title VIII of the law targeted racist ballot procedures, but it was the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that barred voting restrictions such as the poll tax. Titles II-V outlawed segregation in public spaces. Title VI denied federal funding to government agencies that practiced racial discrimination. Title VII prohibited most employers from discriminating on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin and created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce the law. Titles IX, X and XI aimed to lessen the domination of the South's openly racist justice system.

Johnson sought to utilize the prestige of his assassinated predecessor John F. Kennedy, who had initially proposed the legislation, and staked his own political credibility on the law's passage. Even so, the law barely overcame the opposition and filibustering of Southern Democrats, including senators Byrd of West Virginia, Gore of Tennessee, Fulbright of Arkansas, and the notoriously racist Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. The bill "would have a tendency to bring about social equality and intermingling and amalgamation of the races in our states," declared Senator Richard Russell of Georgia.

After the bill's passage, a wave of racist violence swept the South. The days preceding the vote on the measure had witnessed the abduction and murder in Mississippi of civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. (See: "Fifty years since the murder of the Mississippi civil rights workers").

The generation of workers and youth who forced through the Civil Rights Act in the teeth of entrenched opposition were fighting against a legally enforced racial caste system known as "Jim Crow" segregation. There are many millions of Americans living today who recall the signs in the South that read "whites only," "blacks to the rear of the bus," and "colored drinking fountain." Virtually all public spaces were segregated. Blacks and whites could not send their children to the same schools, sit side-by-side in movie theaters or restaurants, or—most taboo of all—marry one another.

In the 1950s, less than ten percent of voting-age African Americans could vote in most southern states. They were effectively barred by poll taxes, literacy tests and "grandfather clauses"—rules that kept many poor whites from voting as well. In any case, general elections counted for little. All important votes took place at tightly controlled Democratic Party nominating conventions.

Behind this system stood racist and violent lawmen and courts, often referred to as "southern justice" or "Judge Lynch." Behind them was the white supremacist terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan, whose

origins went back to the campaign of violence and intimidation carried out by unrepentant pro-slavery forces in the aftermath of the defeat of the South in the American Civil War (1861-1865).

The Civil War had ended racial slavery, and in its aftermath, during Reconstruction (1865-1877), a degree of political equality existed, supported by the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution and the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875. But by the time of the disputed Hayes-Tilden presidential election of 1876, the development of industrial capitalism in the north had produced a huge growth of the working class, which the northern industrialists, represented by the Republican Party, saw as a greater threat than the remnants of the old slave-owning class in the South.

The Republicans concluded a sordid deal, giving the presidency to their candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, in return for a pledge to end Reconstruction and cede political control of the South to the Democratic Party, which had been the main pro-slavery party and remained a bastion of anti-black racism.

Sharecropping replaced slavery in the South, which continued to produce cash crops such as cotton, sugar and tobacco for the world market. A cash-poor system of agricultural land tenancy based on a crop lien system, sharecropping subsumed millions of blacks and poor whites.

In the 1880s and 1890s, an agricultural protest movement emerged in the form of the Farmers' Alliance and the segregated Colored Farmers' Alliance (the Southern variants of Populism), drawing the support of millions of poor and tenant farmers, white and black. It is not accidental that it was precisely in this period that lynchings reached epidemic proportions and the legal framework of segregation, heavily based on the US Supreme Court decision *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896), was put in place. In 1891, the Colored Farmers' Alliance reached its high mark of 1.2 million members. The following year, a record 161 African Americans were lynched.

In the same period, industries were growing, drawing millions of workers, white and black, from the isolation of the countryside to Southern cities. Millions more migrated to the great Northern cities, such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and New York.

Trade unions—including the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)—gained influence among New Orleans longshoremen, tobacco workers in Florida, lumber workers in Georgia, coalminers in Oklahoma, mill workers in Appalachia, and even among sharecroppers. After 1917, communism, inspired by the Russian Revolution, became a major influence among black steelworkers in Alabama. These workers were immensely courageous. Involvement in trade unions or radical politics marked an African American in the South for violent attack or even lynching.

Yet nowhere as in the South was the basic problem of the American working class posed so sharply: the need to break out of the

straitjacket of capitalist politics. In the North, beginning at the turn of the last century, the Democratic Party donned the mantle of reform—though it still dominated the “Big City machines” like Tammany Hall in New York. But in the South, the Democratic Party was the party of segregation and white supremacy.

The formation of a labor party would have had an enormous impact in the South, but the leaders of the insurgent Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s, including those linked to the by-then Stalinized Communist Party, fought to keep workers chained to the Democratic Party. After World War II, the CIO aborted “Operation Dixie,” the last significant attempt to unionize the South, over fears that it would cost the Democratic Party its dominant position in national politics. The campaign was also dropped, for all practical purposes within months of its official inauguration, because it cut across the CIO’s escalating anti-communist witch-hunt and purge. The most committed union militants in the South were socialist-minded workers, in most cases affiliated with the Communist Party.

The Southern working class remained overwhelmingly unorganized and the South became a cheap labor haven for Northern industry.

When the Civil Rights movement emerged in the 1950s, the trade union movement as a whole stood apart from it, and many leaders, such as AFL-CIO President George Meany, opposed it. Though a movement rooted in the working class and youth, leadership of the Civil Rights movement was left to middle-class elements dominated by the clergy, whose most notable representative was Martin Luther King, Jr.

As the movement spread, drawing in millions and shaking the entire structure of American politics, its primary focus initially was legal, not social, equality. Its leaders disavowed socialism, instead seeking to channel the struggle behind reformist sections of the same Democratic Party that ruled over Jim Crow in the South.

Still fearful that the Civil Rights movement might transition into a broader struggle of the working class, more far-sighted sections of the ruling class saw the necessity to offer compromises—a move hastened by the post-World War II uprising of the colonial oppressed in Asia and Africa, where the US was seeking to posture as the defender of “democracy” against nationalist and quasi-socialist mass movements backed by the Soviet Union and China.

The Civil Rights Act joined a series of decisions by the Supreme Court, including *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), and executive orders from American presidents in the 1950s and 1960s enforcing civil rights legislation and court rulings.

A century after the Civil War, Jim Crow was formally dismantled. But it quickly became obvious that federal guarantees of legal equality meant little in the face of immense poverty in the American South and the onset of deindustrialization in the cities of the North. Even King had drawn this conclusion by the late 1960s, launching his interracial “Poor People’s Campaign,” sharply criticizing the Vietnam War, and heightening his FBI profile as a “communist” in the period leading up to his assassination in 1968.

In reality, racial oppression had always been a pillar of class exploitation. Dispensing with an openly racist legal system in the 1960s, the American ruling class nevertheless retained the basis of its domination in the control of the state and the means of production.

The Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, along with Medicare and Medicaid, proved both the high-water mark and the last gasp of liberal reformism, which had failed to stem the gathering crisis of American capitalism. In 1965, five days of rioting left 34 dead in Watts, Los Angeles. Two years later an uprising in Detroit resulted in 63 deaths.

In 1968, 120 riots rocked the nation’s cities after King’s assassination. The urban uprisings coincided with mass trade union strikes and the anti-war protest movement. Meanwhile, the decaying world position of US capitalism, which came to the fore by the early 1970s, eroded the economic basis of reformist politics.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the federal government abandoned broad-based reforms in favor of affirmative action policies expressly designed to cultivate a layer of black leadership in business, government, academia and the military—what President Nixon hailed as “black capitalism.” The intervening years have seen the rapid growth of social inequality not only in US society, but *within* the African American population. A wealthy layer of African Americans and Hispanics has settled quite comfortably within the ruling elite, where it shares the ruling class hostility for all workers—whether black, white, Native American or immigrant—and its bitter hatred of socialism. Conditions for the vast majority of blacks have sharply deteriorated.

The opposition to socialism and Marxism has largely taken the form of identity politics, embraced by all middle-class ex-left organizations, which has provided a cover for the domination of political reaction and a relentless attack on the working class.

Fifty years after the Civil Rights Act, black workers can join white workers to vote for capitalist politicians—even black capitalist politicians such as Barack Obama—who cut their wages, bankrupt their schools, appropriate their money to slaughter workers in other countries, and tear up their democratic rights.

Now, even more than fifty years ago, the pressing task remains to break free of the Democratic Party and build a political movement uniting the working class in opposition to the two-party system and the capitalist order it defends.



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