

After police killing in Ferguson, ISO calls for a ‘Black agenda’

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4 September 2014

The events in Ferguson, Missouri—the police murder of 18-year-old Michael Brown, the demonstrations that followed his killing, the imposition of virtual martial law, the line-up of politicians and media behind the police—have revealed the explosive state of class relations in America. They have also exposed the ruling elite’s use of police state methods to crush social opposition to its policies of war and austerity. They have, moreover, drawn attention to the yawning class divide separating African-American workers from the black elite allied to the Democratic Party.

The response of pseudo-left organizations around the Democratic Party, such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), has been to do step up their promotion of racial politics and their efforts to stir up racial divisions within the working class. These organizations, which have their social base in more privileged sections of the upper-middle class, seek to block the development of class consciousness and the emergence of a politically independent movement of the working class.

An early response to the events in Ferguson published on the ISO’s web site, *Socialist Worker*, was written by Dave Zirin. In “Racism Killed Mike Brown,” Zirin attacked the former basketball great Kareem Abdul Jabbar for writing a column arguing that poverty, not race, was the decisive factor in the Ferguson events. Those who hold such a view, Zirin declared, were “lost without a compass.”

“Michael Brown was shot dead by the police because he is Black,” Zirin insisted. “If he was white, no matter how poor, he almost certainly wouldn’t have died.” (See the WSWs commentary, “Class, race and the police killing in Ferguson, Missouri”)

Zirin’s comment preceded the disgusting eulogy delivered by the Reverend Al Sharpton at Michael Brown’s funeral. Sharpton, who collaborates closely with the Obama administration, spent much of his speech castigating Ferguson residents for supposedly engaging in violent behavior and creating “disturbances.” He denounced African-American workers for not embracing the “success” of wealthy blacks such as himself and instead “sitting around

having ghetto pity parties.”

Sharpton’s speech underscored the immense social gulf between the official “civil rights” leadership and the vast majority of the African-American population. More and more workers and youth, including African-Americans, hold figures such as Sharpton and Jesse Jackson in the contempt they so richly deserve. This is bound up with broad disillusionment with the entire political establishment, including Obama, the first African-American president.

The discrediting of charlatans such as Sharpton and the racial politics they peddle is an important aspect of the growth of political consciousness, with increasing numbers of workers beginning to recognize that the problems they face are rooted in the entire existing economic and political system.

The ISO’s response to these developments is to promote a brand of politics that is even more virulently based on race, summed up in the demand that African-American leaders adopt a “Black agenda.”

Of particular note are recent columns by Zirin and the ISO’s Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a regular writer for *Socialist Worker* who specializes in identity politics.

Zirin followed up his earlier denunciation of Abdul-Jabbar with an article that is even more racist in its approach. “[W]hite America doesn’t see poverty, police brutality and institutionalized racism in Ferguson or anywhere else,” he complained in “Confronting the facts about Ferguson” (August 28). “If the white majority can go to sleep at night content with the idea that Michael Brown is dead because of the individual choices of Michael Brown, then they don’t have to confront racism as a living, breathing virus, needing to be confronted, quarantined and destroyed.”

In this slander against so-called “white America,” a category the ISO shares with the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist outfits, one sees a type of politics whose logic is bloody sectarian and nationalist conflict such as that seen increasingly in the Middle East, Africa and Asia due to the absence of revolutionary socialist leadership.

Zirin’s claim that white workers are indifferent to police

brutality is belied by the fact that the majority of victims of police killings in America are white. (See, “Class and race in US police killings: A further comment”).

In “What divides Black America?” (August 27), Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor worries over “out-of-touch attitudes and policies of Black political leaders” such as Sharpton. Taylor complains that Obama, Sharpton, et al. have accepted the “post-Black,” “color-blind” narrative, and that they “lack...a specifically Black agenda.”

What is this “specifically Black agenda?” It clearly has nothing to do with socialism. In its articles on Ferguson, the ISO studiously avoids calling for opposition to the capitalist system. It merely makes various calls for mild reformist measures (to be implemented by pressuring the Democratic Party).

Taylor does not spell out the concrete content of her desired “Black agenda,” but since she raises it as a criticism of proponents of existing race- and gender-based affirmative action policies such as Sharpton, Jackson and Obama, she must be demanding something more stridently racist. One can only assume that she wants a type of politics that openly and directly attacks whites as racist enemies of blacks.

In her article, she criticizes Sharpton’s eulogy for Michael Brown for denigrating African-American residents of Ferguson. What if he had instead attacked “white America” as the culprit in Brown’s murder? Would that have better conformed to her “Black agenda?”

All of this is entirely compatible with continued support for the Democratic Party. Taylor makes some damning admissions about Sharpton and the Democratic Party. She acknowledges that in “cities across the US, the Democratic Party champions the privatization of public services and continued attacks on government spending.”

These criticisms, however, are of a tactical character, spoken from the standpoint of an advisor to the Democrats, not a principled opponent. Taylor cites the comment of Maryland representative Elijah Cummings, a Democrat and the head of the Congressional Black Caucus, that “the 2014 elections are very, very important.” Taylor responds, “*Voting is not unimportant*, but the idea that we will simply vote our way out of the crisis that has exploded in Ferguson and threatens to detonate in every US city is naive or specious.” (Emphasis added).

Taylor, of course, means *voting for Democrats is not unimportant*. However, more will be needed for a “way out of the crisis that has exploded in Ferguson and threatens to detonate in every US city”—that is, more will be needed to avert or suppress the eruption of class conflict in the United States. That is the ultimate aim of the “Black agenda”—the diversion of class anger along racial lines as part of an effort to preserve the capitalist system

The ISO is an adjunct of the Democratic Party. It enthusiastically welcomed Obama in 2008 as “the transformative candidate” because of his skin color. In a 2009 article, Taylor hailed the Obama presidency as a “new era” and a “welcome change.” As for Sharpton, Jackson and the rest of “black leadership,” the ISO has worked and will continue to work closely with them as part of the Democratic Party and its periphery.

The ISO’s anti-working class politics are rooted in the privileged class position of those it represents—a layer of academics, trade union bureaucrats and corporate-financial beneficiaries of affirmative action policies. They speak as advisers to the likes of Sharpton and Jackson on how to prevent the working class from breaking free of the Democratic Party, in exchange for the latter’s championing of various lifestyle and identity issues popular among the upper strata of the middle class.

The American working class has not, however, passed through the experience with identity politics over the past four decades in vain. In particular, the experience of the Obama administration will not soon be forgotten.

Workers in the US—whether white, black, Asian, Latino, Native American or immigrant—share with each other and with workers the world over a bond far more powerful and objective than the racial and national issues used to divide them. They are part of the same social class, one whose basic interests can be defended only through a united struggle for socialism in opposition to the capitalist system and all of its political representatives and pseudo-left defenders.



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