

The historical and political issues in *Selma*

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The 50th anniversary of the historic 1965 march from Selma, Alabama to the state capital of Montgomery takes place in March of this year. The Selma struggle played a key role in the passage of the Voting Rights Act later that year.

That legislation, signed by President Lyndon Johnson in August 1965, outlawed the flagrant and longstanding violations of the post-Civil War 14th and 15th Amendments to the US Constitution, breaches that for generations disenfranchised millions of African Americans in the southern US.

Ava DuVernay's movie on the momentous events in Alabama 50 years ago has arrived in American theaters in time to become a contender for Best Film at this year's Academy Awards ceremony. It has also sparked debate over issues of historical accuracy, particularly in its treatment of the relationship between King and Johnson.

Selma, of course, did not take place in a vacuum. The mass movement against Jim Crow segregation, for equal rights in public accommodations and for the right to vote, had been growing for nearly a decade, since the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. The early 1960s saw the lunch counter sit-in movement and the Freedom Rides against segregation on interstate bus transportation.

This movement for democratic rights and equality was itself made possible by the explosive struggles of the American working class of the 1930s and 1940s that preceded it. American socialists had championed the struggle of African Americans against racial discrimination and lynch law in the US South, and considered it an integral part of the struggle for the liberation of the working class as a whole and for socialism.

Due to the reactionary pro-capitalist policies of the trade union bureaucracy, its support for US imperialism's post-World War II cold war confrontation with the Soviet Union, and its alliance with the big business Democratic Party, whose southern wing used violence and terror to uphold Jim Crow, the struggle against segregation unfolded largely outside of the organized labor movement. The AFL-CIO, under the arch-anticommunist George Meany, was basically hostile to the civil rights movement.

Nevertheless, the courageous struggles of blacks in the South were broadly supported by workers of every race and nationality.

This crucial historical and political context is absent from DuVernay's film. The question of the relationship between Johnson and King, on which much public debate has focused, while significant, is of secondary importance.

At every step, the struggle for equality was met by racist violence. In the two years leading up to the Selma march, the reaction against the civil rights movement had claimed the lives, among others, of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, the four schoolgirls killed in the infamous Birmingham church bombing of September 1963, and civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner in June 1964.

The plan to march on Montgomery was developed in the midst of the fight for voting rights in Alabama, then under the governorship of George Wallace. Some of the background of this struggle is depicted in *Selma*.

One impressive scene shows a local official sneeringly demanding that a prospective voter recite the preamble to the US Constitution, followed by

a question about the number of county judges in the state. When these questions are answered, they are followed by the demand to name every one of the judges. Finally, stumping the woman (Oprah Winfrey as Annie Lee Cooper) who has had the courage to attempt to register to vote, the official triumphantly marks "DENIED" on the registration form.

A voter registration campaign initiated by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1963 had made little progress, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by King, was called in to provide assistance in January 1965. As shown in the film, the Selma protests actually involved three attempts, culminating in the successful march led by King, which began on March 21 and reached the state capital about four days later.

The bulk of the film depicts the period between the planning for the first of the marches and the final and successful one. Some of the events, including internal debates on tactics within the movement, are explained or accompanied by on-screen logs of actual FBI reports that were based on wiretaps. The despicable racist and reactionary J. Edgar Hoover is shown at one point attempting to convince Johnson that King is a "moral degenerate."

The first of the Selma marches was inspired, in part, by the brutal beating and shooting of civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson, who died on February 26. March 7 was to become known as Bloody Sunday. King was not in Selma on that occasion. The march of about 600 was met and turned back on the Edmund Pettus Bridge by hundreds of police armed with tear gas and billy clubs, led by the notorious Sheriff Jim Clark.

A second attempt was led by King, but he turned the marchers back when the police suddenly gave way and King suspected a trap. After this action on March 9, the Rev. James Reeb, a Northern supporter of the voting rights struggle who had come to join the march, was beaten to death. Finally, a third march began on the 21st, after Federal Judge Frank Johnson overruled Wallace's attempt to ban it.

Some of the most effective moments in *Selma* show the state and racist violence facing the movement, including the horrible moment of the Birmingham bombing. The killings of Jackson and Reeb, as well as the attack on Bloody Sunday, are also shown.

We see Viola Liuzzo as she makes the decision to travel from Detroit to Selma to participate in the third march, and then at the march itself. We are later informed that she was murdered while driving back from Montgomery on March 25.

Selma has a huge cast of characters, one that suggests the sweep and significance of this period. The historical figures on screen are themselves something of an introduction to this important time. They include—in addition to King and Johnson—Coretta Scott King; lieutenants and associates of King such as Andrew Young, Ralph Abernathy, C.T. Vivian, Bayard Rustin, James Bevel, Diane Nash and Hosea Williams; SNCC leaders James Forman and John Lewis; civil rights activists Annie Lee Cooper, Jimmie Lee Jackson and Amelia Boynton; and FBI Director Hoover and Assistant Attorney General John Doar.

The performance of David Oyelowo as King is noteworthy. Without trying too hard to imitate the famous orator, he portrays King as a human being and as a leader, involved in numerous internal political conflicts,

tactical decisions and serious family tensions. Carmen Ejogo as Coretta is also effective. Tom Wilkinson as Johnson has, as we shall see, a rather thankless task of presenting a somewhat inaccurate picture of the Texas politician.

The numerous on-screen exchanges between Martin Luther King and Lyndon Johnson have generated controversy. *Selma* repeatedly shows a defiant King standing up to a recalcitrant Johnson, who resists the call for a voting rights bill. This becomes a repetitive refrain, with the image of Johnson and King as enemies drilled home.

Among the first to weigh in with criticism on this score was Joseph Califano, who was a special assistant to the president 50 years ago. In a column in the *Washington Post*, Califano declared that the film falsely portrayed Johnson as the enemy of King and the civil rights movement. Califano has been joined by author Elizabeth Drew and civil rights historian David Garrow, among others.

Selma goes so far as to suggest that Johnson ordered the infamous FBI harassment of King. One scene finds Johnson, frustrated in his dealings with King, asking an aide to get J. Edgar Hoover on the phone, and the scene then shifts immediately to one of King and Coretta listening to a tape, purportedly of King and a lover. No evidence has been found for the insinuation that Johnson personally ordered this intimidation campaign.

Of course, Johnson bore political responsibility for Hoover's role. The FBI's campaign against King in fact began earlier, under John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

The King-Johnson relationship is the film's central dynamic. King implores, Johnson opposes. King leads marches, Johnson is won over. The Voting Rights Act is passed.

This is valid up to a point. The defenders of Johnson in this debate overlook the fact that he, like Eisenhower and Kennedy before him, was responding to a growing crisis and movement of the working class. In this sense, Johnson was the nervous and reluctant representative of the ruling establishment, not the leader of the civil rights struggle that Califano would like to suggest.

At the same time, King's relationship with Johnson was not at this time an antagonistic one. The film misleads on this score, precisely to obscure important political issues. King's politics were anchored to the Democratic Party, the same party that ruled over the Jim Crow South, led by such men as George Wallace, portrayed in sinister fashion by Tim Roth.

King's dealings with Johnson led, under the pressure of mass struggle, to some legislative reforms, notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. At the same time, the policy of support for this party of big business had disastrous consequences in the years to come.

In order to understand this, the roots of the struggle have to be understood, along with its outcome and legacy. The mass civil rights movement was in decisive respects the extension of the upsurge of the working class that had built the industrial unions of the CIO only a few decades earlier. The experiences of African American workers who streamed—as part of the Great Migration of African Americans to the north—into the United Auto Workers and other CIO unions in this period had their impact on the growing movement against Jim Crow in the South after the Second World War.

The right-wing, anticommunist offensive of the postwar years, however, aided by the betrayals of Stalinism and the American Communist Party, had a disastrous effect. The civil rights movement, overwhelmingly working class in its composition but emerging in the years after the trade union bureaucracy had tightened its grip, was unable to develop a perspective for fundamental change in the economic structure of US society.

The movement against segregation developed largely under the leadership of the African American churches. Dr. King, still only in his mid-20s at the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, balanced between

the conservative leaderships of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and sections of the black church on the one hand, and more radical layers, including those around SNCC, on the other. Black Nationalism did not play a significant role at this time, although Malcolm X, in the brief period between his break from the Nation of Islam and his assassination just weeks before the Selma march, visited Selma, as shown in the movie.

The film's emphasis on King's mediator role, arguing with SNCC militants on the one hand and Johnson on the other, leaves the black masses out of the picture. To be sure, individual black workers in the South are movingly portrayed—Henry G. Sanders' performance as an 82-year-old activist deserves special note—but the film fails to give the sense that this was a period of mass upheaval sweeping the South and, by 1965, the Northern cities as well.

The 1960s was a period of explosive crisis within the United States, and the Selma march cannot be viewed in isolation from this. In the midst of the Cold War with the USSR, the postwar boom was beginning to visibly unravel, and the previous hegemonic position of the US in the world economy was beginning to erode.

In the four-and-a-half years between November 1963 and June 1968, the subterranean social and political tensions erupted in the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, King and Robert F. Kennedy. The passage of civil rights legislation in 1964-65 took place amid the ghetto rebellions that swept much of the country over a five-year period, growing restiveness within the bureaucratically-led trade unions, and the movement against the war in Vietnam that encompassed millions of students, youth and workers by the end of the decade.

The American ruling class, facing this growing crisis, acted through its political representatives to grant modest concessions, measures that left the foundations of the system unchallenged. The maintenance of segregation and a regime based on racist violence throughout the South became untenable as American imperialism based its foreign policy on the fight for "democracy." It fell to Johnson, the canny politician from Texas, former Senate majority leader and vice president, to play a leading role in the dismantling of Jim Crow in the US.

There are many indications that King himself became increasingly aware of the limitations of the civil rights movement in the years immediately after the Selma march and the Voting Rights Act. The fight for legal rights only revealed the underlying issues of social inequality. The right to vote and the dismantling of segregation, important as they were, did little to provide decent jobs or social conditions for the vast majority.

King also became more conscious, in light of the Vietnam War, of the international dimensions of the struggle. He began to focus on the question of social equality, calling for a Poor People's March in the months before his death. Amidst growing disagreement with many of his associates, such as future Atlanta Mayor and UN Ambassador Andrew Young, King went to Memphis to participate in the strike of black sanitation workers. It was there that he was assassinated in April of 1968.

Following King's assassination, the civil rights movement quickly degenerated. The fight for social equality was dropped, and figures such as Young and Jesse Jackson came forward as defenders of affirmative action and other policies that enshrined social inequality and benefited only a small section of the black middle class. Meanwhile, the vast majority saw their living standards and conditions devastated by plant closures, budget cuts and other measures that were part of the social counterrevolution required by decaying American capitalism.

Of course, a film on an event such as the Selma march cannot deal with all of these experiences, but *Selma* largely ignores these critical issues. It exaggerates the conflict between King and Johnson in 1965, while ignoring the real conflict that emerged in 1967 and 1968 and ended with King's murder.

There must be a reason for the filmmaker to have proceeded in this fashion. It cannot be, as some have suggested, that Johnson was needed as a villain to “spice up” the story. There is a political agenda involved. DuVernay said as much when she told *Rolling Stone* magazine that the original screenplay for *Selma* was changed because, “I wasn’t interested in making a white-savior movie.”

As we have already explained, it is not a matter of building up Johnson’s role. Quite the contrary—his actions embodied concessions reluctantly granted in the face of the mass movement. By posing the issues in racial terms, however, DuVernay only covers up precisely those issues that King himself began to pose almost 50 years ago.

It is highly significant that Barack Obama, the first African American US president, screened *Selma* in the White House a few days ago. The audience included director DuVernay, former SNCC leader and longtime Democratic Congressman John Lewis, and multi-millionaire Oprah Winfrey, a co-producer of the film.

Selma ends with a headshot of Andre Holland, portraying Andrew Young, with a caption highlighting with approval his subsequent career as a capitalist politician and spokesman for US imperialism. A few seconds later we are told that King was murdered in 1968, but there is no other context provided.

Obama, following in the footsteps of Andrew Young and similar figures, finds it useful to give *Selma* an official screening. DuVernay did not want Johnson on the screen as a “white savior,” but she apparently looks on Obama, the current occupant of the White House, who has presided over record inequality and whose hands are dripping with blood from drone killings and other imperialist crimes, as a role model.

The mass movement of oppressed black workers in the 1960s, with which the names Martin Luther King, Selma, and Birmingham will forever be associated, shook American capitalism and helped inspire the student antiwar revolt and the last major strike wave in American history, both of which followed on its heels in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The absence of a mass socialist movement of the working class, however, meant that the problem of social inequality, which is ultimately rooted in class exploitation, could not be confronted.

If King, with all of his political limitations, saw some of the class issues that were posed in 1965, how much more urgent and obvious are they today? An Auburn University student who was an extra in *Selma* reports that the poverty rate in Selma and its surrounding county today is almost 37 percent, with 60 percent of children living below the poverty line.

The historic sacrifices made to win the right to vote have ended with record abstention in elections 50 years later, in Alabama and almost everywhere else, because workers see no alternative between the big business candidates, Democratic or Republican, black or white.

Selma captures some of the ferocity of the attacks on the working class and the sacrifices made in the course of the civil rights struggle, issues that are largely glossed over in the usual holiday tributes to King. Workers and youth unfamiliar with what happened in the America of the 1960s may well be shocked by what they see. At the same time, the task of making sense of these struggles will require a very different approach and a very different film than this first effort to deal on screen with the struggle of Martin Luther King.



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