Selma and the legacy of the US civil rights movement

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Over the weekend, President Barack Obama headed an official 50th anniversary commemoration of "Bloody Sunday." On that day, March 7, 1965, hundreds of civil rights marchers demanding the right to vote were set upon and beaten by police as they marched over the Edmund Pettus Bridge from Selma, Alabama, heading for the state capital, Montgomery.

Obama's ceremony was a political farce, a state-sanctioned exercise aimed at sanctifying a corrupt apparatus with the blood of those who made great sacrifices—in many cases, the ultimate sacrifice—as part of the civil rights movement. While many thousands of ordinary people attended, the commemoration was presided over by representatives of the corporate and financial elite, including 100 members of Congress of both parties, as well as George W. Bush, who left office the most despised president in US history.

The event was designed to obscure the significance of Selma, the civil rights movement as a whole, and the trajectory of American politics during the five decades since.

The repression meted out on "Bloody Sunday" was one episode in a campaign of police violence aimed at crushing protests against the system of Jim Crow segregation in the American South. Southern blacks faced a raft of discriminatory measures, such as the poll tax, that effectively disenfranchised them.

While the specific aim of the civil rights movement was to end racial discrimination, it was part of a wave of social conflict that engulfed the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. It came only a few decades after the explosive battles out of which the industrial unions were formed in the 1930s. It was followed by powerful workers' strikes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the urban rebellions against discrimination and poverty, and the mass protest movement against the Vietnam War.

American capitalism was in deep crisis. The underlying momentum for the civil rights movement was imparted by the immense social struggles of the working class. The masses of workers and youth, black and white, who participated in the civil rights struggle saw it as one component of a broader social movement, carried out in the face of bitter resistance from the ruling class and its political representatives.

The form the struggle took was complicated, however, by the abstention of the AFL-CIO trade unions, politically aligned with the Democratic Party and American imperialism. The Democrats, based at the time on an alliance between northern liberals and southern racists, worked for a protracted period to undermine all attempts to end legally enforced racial segregation. The unions avoided any actions that would disrupt their political alliance with the Democrats, including blocking efforts to organize black workers in the south.

In the face of the social upheavals of the period, however, the American ruling class reluctantly moved to grant legal reforms, including those enshrined in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson five months after Selma. A number of significant social reforms were also enacted during this period, including Medicare and other anti-poverty programs.

The reforms wrenched from the ruling class during the 1960s, however, marked the last gasp of liberal reformism in the United States. The American ruling class responded to the deepening crisis of the capitalist system with a two-pronged strategy. Beginning in the 1970s and escalating in the 1980s, it carried out an unrelenting assault on the working class. Jobs were destroyed, living standards were driven down, public services were slashed.

To better carry out this offensive, the ruling class worked deliberately to integrate a small minority of the African American population into positions of power and privilege. Particularly after the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.—who, while remaining within the framework of the Democratic Party, had begun to focus his attention increasingly on the issues of social inequality and war—a section of the civil rights establishment was brought into the apparatus of state power. This included the likes of Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson and John Lewis, now a congressman, who was among the leaders of the 1965 Selma march.

During his 1968 election campaign, Richard Nixon called for giving a section of the African American population a "piece of the action." As president, he initiated a program of "black capitalism." He signed an executive order to form the Office of Minority Business Enterprise in March 1969, declaring that its aim was to "demonstrate that blacks, Mexican Americans, and others can participate in a growing economy on the basis of

equal opportunity at the top of the ladder as well as on its lower rungs."

Affirmative action, promoted by the Republican Nixon and then adopted as a central plank of the Democratic Party program, was aimed at bringing forward—in business, the military, local government, the police and academia—a privileged layer that would identify with American capitalism and facilitate the assault on the working class as a whole. Black nationalism became an ideological means for the restructuring of class rule on the basis of identity politics.

What have been the consequences of these policies? While the system of Jim Crow segregation was ended, the social position of the majority of black workers today is worse today than 50 years ago. According to official statistics, a third of African Americans live in poverty and hunger. Unemployment and underemployment are pervasive, in the northern states as much as, or even more, than in the south.

These conditions are fundamentally an expression not of racism, as claimed by the Democrats and their periphery, when they acknowledge the social crisis at all, but of class oppression.

This is evident in Selma itself. The town's population has fallen sharply over the past 50 years, while median income is a shocking $22,418, one half of the already low figure for the state of Alabama as a whole. Even by the government's own insultingly low threshold for poverty, 41.9 percent of Selma falls below it.

All of this is overseen by an African American mayor and police chief, and a City Council and school board that are overwhelmingly African American in composition.

Selma is hardly unique. The poverty rate in the city of Detroit, which has lost almost two-thirds of its population in recent decades, is even higher than in Selma. The city has been run by a predominantly African American political establishment for decades. A similar dynamic is repeated in city after city throughout the United States.

Obama, the first African American president, represents something of a culmination of these processes. The lies and demagogy in Obama's Selma speech cannot conceal the huge class gulf between the government he heads and the self-sacrificing workers and youth who led the fight for civil rights. They fought for equality. He represents privilege.

In his remarks, Obama quoted the immortal words from the Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal," but he presides over a level of inequality previously unheard of in American history.

While Obama spoke of the need to "honor the courage of ordinary Americans willing to endure billy clubs and the chastening rod, tear gas and the trampling hoof," he stands at the apex of a military-intelligence-police apparatus of immense brutality, which carries out a virtual reign of terror against working class youth of all races.

Just last week, the Obama administration announced its decision not to charge the police officer who killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri last August. Over the weekend, another unarmed young man was shot dead in cold blood by police in Madison, Wisconsin.

In his Selma speech, Obama noted the abysmal turnout of one-third or less of eligible voters in recent elections. "What's our excuse today for not voting?" he asked.

He did not, and could not, answer, but there is a powerful "excuse." Through bitter experience, millions of workers are beginning to conclude that there is no difference between the two big business parties, nor, for that matter, between the big business politicians of whatever skin color.

Perhaps the biggest lie of all is Obama's claim, echoed by the many liberal and "left" organizations orbiting the Democratic Party, that the "unfinished business" of the civil rights movement is defined by race.

At the time of the Selma marches, systematic, state-sanctioned racism was a major factor of American political life. Even then, however, racism was subordinate to, and a product of, class rule. It was used as a means of dividing workers and preventing a unified struggle against the capitalist system.

In relation to the explosive class battles of the time, the trade unions, the civil rights establishment, the array of middle class organizations worked to obscure the fundamental class issues and maintain the political domination of the ruling class and its political representatives. The basic question then was the need to forge a revolutionary leadership to unite the working class against the root cause of repression, inequality and war—the capitalist system itself.

Fifty years later, the fundamental class questions are all the more evident. While racism still exists and plays a role in American life, it is now accompanied by the state-sanctioned identity politics that serve a similar purpose: to pit workers against one another and block a united movement of the working class. As we enter a new period of working class upsurge, the burning question remains that of leadership. The "unfinished business" of Selma is the building of the revolutionary leadership of the working class needed to carry out the socialist reorganization of society.