

Hillary Clinton and Black Lives Matter: A revealing confrontation

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The video of an 18-minute interchange between Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton and two activists for Black Lives Matter, which took place August 11, was posted on the Internet August 19. It has since been viewed, tweeted and otherwise commented on millions of times.

The corporate-controlled media has also paid considerable attention to the incident, describing it as an “intense” and “awkward” confrontation. Depending on the political allegiance of the various media outlets, Clinton’s engagement with the activists has been alternately praised as “responsive” or pilloried as unduly accommodating.

The exchange was certainly revealing, of both sides. Clinton, an experienced ruling class politician, was able to easily twist the Black Lives Matter activists around her finger, while the political outlook of the latter lent itself quite readily to this exercise in twisting.

Despite the purported militancy of Black Lives Matter, and its aggressive disruption of campaign appearances by Democratic presidential hopefuls Bernie Sanders and Martin O’Malley, the two who spoke with Clinton, Daunasia Yancey from Boston and Julius Jones from Worcester, were extremely deferential.

Yancey began by assuring Clinton, “I just want to say that I’ve looked up to you since I was like a baby. I’m an ardent feminist.” Jones added, “I think the next step, respectfully—and I have attempted to allow you, and I feel like we have allowed space for a nice conversation, and it’s a pleasure and an honor to be in this dialogue with you.”

The two raised mild criticisms of the record of both Hillary Clinton and former President Bill Clinton for supporting the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. This law, a bipartisan effort backed

by both Republicans and Democrats in Congress, contributed to the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of poor and working-class Americans, many of them African-American, mostly for possession of small quantities of narcotics.

The two activists presented the issue entirely within the framework of race and identity politics, which has been the semi-official program of the Democratic Party since the mid-1970s. Nothing in their comments suggested the slightest opposition to the capitalist system or the class exploitation of working people, black, white, Hispanic, Asian or immigrant.

On the contrary, they addressed the social structure of the United States entirely in black-white terms, painting white workers as inherently racist. Julius Jones spelled this out at length, telling Clinton, “And until we, as a country, and then the person who’s in the seat that you seek, actually addresses the anti-blackness current that is America’s first drug ... America’s first drug is free black labor and turning black bodies into profit, and the mass incarceration system mirrors an awful lot like the prison plantation system.... And until someone takes that message and speaks that truth to white people in this country, so that we can actually take on anti-blackness as a founding problem in this country, I don’t believe that there is going to be a solution.”

Clinton had no problem in addressing this pseudo-radical phrase-making, even declaring at one point that it was true that “this country has still not recovered from its original sin,” i.e., slavery. She touted her own anti-racist credentials, from her early work with Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund to her friendship with the first black mayor of New York City, David Dinkins.

Defending the repressive measures of the 1990s, Clinton cited support for law-and-order measures

among black politicians. She argued, “It’s important to remember—and I certainly remember—that there was a very serious crime wave that was impacting primarily communities of color and poor people. And part of it was that there was just not enough attention paid. So you know, you could argue that people who were trying to address that—including my husband, when he was president—were responding to the very real concerns of people in the communities themselves.”

Clinton went on to elaborate on the proper relationship between the protest activities of Black Lives Matter and the political fortunes of the Democratic Party, emphasizing that protest action was useful both in mobilizing people at the polls and pressuring for specific government actions.

What did this exchange reveal in class terms? Clinton is a leading representative of the American imperialist bourgeoisie. That is not an epithet, but a statement of fact: she is a highly experienced political operative of the most ruthless ruling class on the planet, the American financial aristocracy.

Clinton addressed the two protesters as people who could potentially be of use, both in her political campaign and in her subsequent efforts to suppress popular anger and opposition among minority workers. The two from Black Lives Matter, whatever their individual motives, represent a section of the privileged middle class, seeking greater access to positions of influence and a share in the spoils of American capitalism. They are happy to play the role set out for them by Clinton.

What is most remarkable—and revealing—about the whole encounter is that in nearly 18 minutes, neither “activist” spoke the name of the current President of the United States, the defender of Wall Street and commander-in-chief of US imperialism, Barack Obama.

The first black president is also the president who has spearheaded the militarization of local police forces, whose administration has sided with the police in every Supreme Court case involving excessive force and misconduct, whose Justice Department has refused to prosecute a single policeman for civil rights violations in the murder of black youth and workers.

Obama is a living refutation of the claims made by groups such as Black Lives Matter, and their pseudo-left apologists, that the elevation of African-Americans

to positions of influence within the structure of American imperialism will improve the conditions of life for the vast majority of the oppressed.

There is legitimate and widespread anger over police violence, which has erupted in mass protests over the past year, since the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. This anger is connected to deep class grievances over ever-rising economic inequality, unemployment and poverty, as well as racism by police directed at African-Americans, Hispanics and other minorities.

Black Lives Matter does not represent this sentiment. It speaks on behalf of a section of the middle class, wedded to race politics, that is looking for more perks and positions, particularly within or through the intercession of the Democratic Party. That is why its protest actions have been directed towards the Democratic candidates in the presidential campaign.



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