

# The class character of the student protests on US campuses

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The student protests that began at the University of Missouri reached Yale University, Ithaca College, Amherst College and numerous other US campuses last week. The protests have focused on allegations of racism and racial insensitivity on the part of college administrators. The president of the University of Missouri system and the chancellor of the Columbia, Missouri campus—in part because of a threatened strike by the university's football team—were both forced to resign.

The Missouri protests were sparked by several incidents. Student government president Payton Head, who is African American, alleged in mid-September that unidentified individuals directed racial slurs at him in an off-campus incident. At an October 4 event organized by the Legion of Black Collegians, a drunken white student reportedly disrupted the activity and, again, used a racial slur. On October 24 police responded to a complaint and reported that a vandal had smeared feces in the form of a swastika on a residence bathroom wall.

For the most part, the incidents are anecdotal and isolated. The portrayal of the campus as a hotbed of bigotry by protest leaders and the eager media is grossly distorted and exaggerated. There are no reports of racist rallies or any similar activities. The claim that the white student population at the University of Missouri or the white population in America as a whole is seething with racial animosity is false and politically motivated. There is no evidence to back up such claims.

The university administration against which the anti-racism protests were directed has carried out reactionary attacks against various sections of the campus, including plans to strip graduate students and teaching assistants of health coverage, and attacks on professors. But the current protests made virtually no attempt to raise these issues.

Racist poison, along with anti-Semitism, xenophobia and other forms of bigotry and reaction, must be strenuously opposed wherever it raises its head. Such a fight, however, can only be successfully waged as part of a broader struggle in defense of the democratic and social rights of working people and youth, and in opposition to capitalism.

The student protests initiated over the past two weeks have a decidedly upper middle class character, aimed not at fighting for social equality but at carving out greater privileges for relatively privileged African American and other minority professionals. This is reflected in many of the demands that have been raised: more African American faculty, more funding for “ethnic studies,” the hiring of “a chief diversity officer” (at Ithaca College, for example), a new director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs (University of Kansas), and so on. This will benefit a small number of people and change nothing about the desperate social conditions facing large sections of

the working class, including a large majority of African American workers and youth.

None of the burning issues affecting millions of people of all backgrounds have been raised in the protests: growing poverty and social inequality, the assault on democratic rights, the imperialist war drive, the enormous debt burden faced by students and the fact that higher education as a whole is increasingly out of reach for working class youth.

The campaign is being supported at the highest levels. The *New York Times* can hardly contain its enthusiasm for the protests. On its front page November 12, just beneath yet another dispatch from Syria that had the odor of an item planted by the CIA, the *Times* ran a story about alleged widespread racism on the Columbia, Missouri campus.

It consisted solely of personal anecdotes. The *Times* wrote: “But well before that cascade of events here, many black students say that racial tensions were already woven into the fabric of everyday life at this, the state system’s flagship campus.

“Some black students say they are greeted with piercing stares when they walk by white-dominated fraternity and sorority houses. Others mention feeling awkward when other students turn to them in class when discussion turns to black issues. And then there are the tenser moments when white students talk disparagingly about the neighborhoods where many black students come from, whether the South Side of Chicago or the North Side of St. Louis.”

Embedded in the article is an interactive feature, with the headline “Have You Encountered Racial Conflict on Campus?” If the reader clicks on the feature, he or she is asked to describe incidents of racial conflict.

The *Times*, along with other important sections of the media and political establishment, is once again working to stoke up divisions within the American population along racial, gender and other identity lines.

The *Times* also seeks to encourage self-absorption and self-centeredness. The establishment is working on 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds, and in some cases producing seriously disoriented results.

This is the comment from Reine Ibala, a senior at Yale University, one of the most prestigious universities in America, with one of the most privileged student bodies: “My experience is of invisibility, of people almost walking into me as if I weren’t there; of having to repeat myself before being heard; of people speaking over me; of being unacknowledged when I enter a space and having my continent, my people, and experience as an African female ridiculed and dehumanized.”

Protests at Yale over the past several weeks have focused on an email written by Erika Christakis, a lecturer in early childhood

development, who questioned a memo sent by the university's Intercultural Affairs Committee on "culturally unaware and insensitive" Halloween costumes. For suggesting problems with "an institutional (bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students," there have been demands that both Christakis and her husband Nicholas resign their positions. There is a deeply anti-democratic strain in such positions.

The assertion that college campuses are saturated with racism and racially based violence calls to mind the claims of the feminist lobby that an all-pervasive "rape culture" prevails at the universities and colleges. There is something quite disoriented and self-serving about all these claims.

Postmodern subjectivism plays a role here. Individual experiences and perceptions take the place of rational political analysis. Meanwhile, as we have previously noted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, a type of communalist warfare is occurring on college campuses in the US, peculiar to frenzied sections of the American middle class, each of which is determined to gain economic advantage and prestige at the expense of the others.

It is worth noting that one of the individuals at the center of the University of Missouri protests, Jonathan Butler, who pursued a weeklong hunger strike, is the son of the executive vice president for sales and marketing for the Union Pacific Railroad, whose 2014 compensation was \$8.4 million, according to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest made evident the administration's general support for the protests at a press briefing November 9. Speaking of the protesters, Earnest observed, "I think this also illustrates something that the president talked a lot about in the context of—in his campaign, that a few people speaking up and speaking out can have a profound impact on the communities where we live and work."

Trailing along behind the *Times*, the bourgeois liberals and the Obama administration, in its usual manner, is the International Socialist Organization and its [socialistworker.org](http://socialistworker.org). The ISO's commentary is confined to empty demagoguery such as:

"Anti-racist protests rolled across the University of Missouri (MU) in Columbia like an irresistible force, as faculty and students—among them, the football team and its coaches—came together to challenge the administration's inaction in the face of rampant racism and injustice on campus."

Triumphantly, the ISO writes: "The [University of Missouri] administration also announced it would review its policies and would hire a first-ever diversity, inclusion and equity officer within 90 days." How pathetic, and how revealing.

*Socialist Worker* has nothing to say about the conditions facing the working class. It has not launched any campaigns against utility shutoffs or wage-cutting and the destruction of workers' pensions. The ISO web site has not published a single serious article about the United Auto Workers' sellout of the auto workers, or about the savage cuts imposed on those workers. That is of no interest. But anything that encourages the obsession with race and gender and advances the careers of the middle class "left" coterie is grist for its anti-working class mill.

The ultra-right and the Republican presidential candidates are attempting to make hay out of the situation and incite the most backward social elements. The *Wall Street Journal*, for example, denounced "Yale's Little Robespierres," a colossally misguided and ignorant characterization, and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie

blamed Obama for creating an atmosphere of "lawlessness."

The claim by the extreme right that it opposes the protesters' "intolerance" and stands for "free speech" is a wretched fraud. These proto-fascist elements back the military and CIA and support NSA spying and all other police state measures.

A revival of protest and criticism on American college campuses would be a welcome development. It is long overdue.

The mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s had an immense impact on social, political and cultural life in America. It was a democratic movement for integration and legal equality, not privileges for any racial or ethnic group, and was propelled from below by a deep aspiration for social and economic equality. The current campus protests do not evince such sentiments.

The limitations of the civil rights movement, which find expression today in the immiseration of wide layers of black and every other section of workers and the malignant inequality of wealth, were rooted in the acceptance by its leadership of capitalism and the political set-up, dominated by the two parties of big business.

Racism is not genetically imbedded in white people or anyone else, nor is it a mere psychological trait. Racial prejudice and all forms of backwardness emerge from the social relations under capitalism, the exploitation of one class by another. They are, above all, encouraged as means by which the ruling elite seeks to weaken and divide the working class.

The politics of those who dominate the current student protests, promoted by pseudo-left groups such as the ISO, play into the hands of racists, by sowing divisions and making race the essential category of social life. The axis of capitalist society is class, as proven by the prominence of many ruthless African American politicians, CEOs and generals who zealously defend the profit system, such as Barack Obama, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, innumerable mayors and congressmen, etc.

For students serious about a fight against the existing state of society, for those horrified by the drive to war and the impoverishment of ever-wider layers of the population, breaking beyond the bounds of the current "student activism" is critical. The various pseudo-left, "anti-racist," "anti-homophobia" outfits are political traps, designed to confine legitimate anger and struggle within the most harmless boundaries. Above all, in the eyes of the powers-that-be, students must be kept from turning to the broad layers of the working population and the fight for socialism.



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