

The promotion of racial politics and the US elections

Barry Grey
18 July 2016

In the run-up to the conventions of the two major capitalist parties, beginning with the Republicans on Monday, there is a relentless effort led by the Democratic Party and much of the media to portray race as the overriding social and political issue in America.

This campaign, a continuation of the Democrats' decades-long promotion of politics based on various forms of identity (race, gender, sexual orientation), has reached a fever pitch since the police murders of two black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, in Louisiana and Minnesota, respectively, and the gunning down of five police officers in Dallas.

It will only be intensified in the aftermath of the fatal shooting Sunday of three officers in Baton Rouge.

Last Wednesday, President Barack Obama held a White House meeting with police officials, politicians, leaders of the civil rights establishment such as Al Sharpton and prominent figures in the Black Lives Matter organization, including DeRay McKesson, where he defined the issue of police violence entirely as a matter concerning the police and "communities of color." The following evening he presided over an hour-long town hall event along the same lines, televised by ABC News.

The picture that is presented is of a country sharply polarized along racial lines, with a white population seething with racial hatred for blacks. This presentation is a lie.

What has actually happened? The murderous operations of militarized police who assault and kill virtually at will have once again been captured on video, provoking mass anger and revulsion, expressed in nationwide demonstrations involving thousands of people of all races and ethnicities. America is facing not racist lynch mobs, as in the Jim Crow South of the previous century, but rather the violence of the capitalist state and its front-line enforcers directed against the growth of opposition and resistance in the working class.

While the victims in the horrific killings in Louisiana and Minnesota were black, the previous week a video emerged of the June 25 execution, no less savage, of an unarmed white youth by two cops in Fresno, California, and a separate police cam video of the killing was released on Wednesday. It showed two cops pulling over 19-year-old Dylan Noble on a traffic stop and proceeding to shoot him four times, including twice as he

lay on the ground writhing in agony. That killing has been largely ignored by the media and not mentioned by Obama because it does not fit into their racialist narrative.

What virtually all of the victims of police killings—more than 1,500 over the past 18 months—have in common is their class position. They are working class or poor. The police are not invading wealthy neighborhoods, black or white, and shooting down the residents.

The mass struggles of the American working class have historically evinced a powerful drive to overcome racial and national divisions and unite all sections of workers against the common enemy. For its part, the American capitalist class has throughout its history reacted aggressively and violently to any sign of a unified struggle of the working class. Racism and racial politics, going back to the 19th century, have been used as instruments of class warfare to divide the working class.

Such was the case from the emergence of modern industrial capitalism in the US and the first mass struggle of the working class—the great railway strike of 1877. A study of the strike in the city where it first broke out, St. Louis, states:

"At an early strike meeting an eloquent address by the Black speaker asked whether whites were ready to support demands made by Black workers and received a resounding "We will!" in return. One of the five early Executive Committee members was Black." ("Class, Skill and Community in the St. Louis General Strike of 1877," David Roediger, *Journal of Social History*, Winter, 1985, page 225)

The response of the authorities was to dispatch black troops to attack the strikers.

Henry Ford employed the same tactics in an unsuccessful attempt to break the 1941 United Auto Workers strike for union recognition at his massive Rouge complex in Detroit. Ford imported African-American workers from the South to serve as strikebreakers. Socialist militants within the union had, however, championed the rights of black autoworkers and insisted on the need to unite across racial and ethnic lines. This

was a major factor in the victory of the strike.

In the 1950s, the Northern McCarthyite red-baiters joined forces with the Southern segregationists to witch-hunt as “communists” all those fighting to end racial apartheid and unite white and black workers in the South.

The assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 came at the very point that he was challenging the racial nationalism and separatism of the Black Muslims and Elijah Muhammad. Three years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered following his intervention in support of sanitation workers in Memphis, his call for a Poor People’s March and his talk of forming a new party of working people.

What dominated this year’s primary elections in both parties, expressed in different ways, was mass anger and disgust with the entire political establishment. The ruling elite was shocked and frightened by the powerful support among workers and particularly youth for the primary challenge to Hillary Clinton by Bernie Sanders, who called himself a socialist and focused his campaign on social inequality and Wall Street domination of the political system. The 13 million votes for Sanders showed that the issues that really concern working people and youth are class issues that go to the existing economic system, not questions of race or gender.

This coincided with mounting signs of a resurgence of class struggle, including the 54-day-long strike by Verizon workers, teacher protests and wildcat actions in Detroit and other cities, and protests by workers in Flint against the lead poisoning of their water supply.

The growth of class consciousness and anticapitalist sentiment expressed in the mass support for Sanders (despite Sanders’ own effort to channel opposition back behind the Democrats) has been met with a frenzied drive by the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign to “change the subject” by inundating the population with the politics of gender, sexual orientation and, above all, race.

If one reviews the major social and political issues promoted over the past several months by the White House, the Democrats and the media, the highly conscious character of this campaign becomes clear, as well as its close coordination with the Clinton campaign.

Just over the past three months, the Obama administration has intervened in controversies over transgender people’s access to public bathrooms and the outcome of a sexual abuse trial at Stanford University, promoting these as the decisive political issues of the day.

Now that Sanders has officially ended his campaign and endorsed Clinton, the Democrats appear to have settled on race as the main identity issue to flog in order to bury the basic class issues of economic inequality and Wall Street criminality. Gender, of course, remains a staple, with Clinton promoting herself as the first ever female major-party presidential candidate.

Such politics are associated with the interests of definite

privileged middle-class social layers, who are seeking not equality, but a more favorable distribution of wealth within the top 10 percent. They are exemplified by people like Black Lives Matter leader DeRay McKesson, who emerged from Obama’s White House meeting Wednesday night to praise the president and stress the need to cooperate with the police. McKesson was recently appointed to be the chief human capital officer for the Baltimore City Schools, a post that comes with an income of \$165,000 a year.

Today, the objective conditions exist as never before, within the United States and on a world scale, to unite the working class in a common struggle in defense of democratic and social rights. All sections of the working class, and workers in every country, are facing a brutal decline in living standards and social conditions.

What are the central issues in the 2016 elections? Just last week a new report was released showing that in 25 of the world’s advanced economies, including the US, two-thirds of the population are in income brackets that earn the same or less than their counterparts did a decade ago.

Conditions for the broad mass of black and Hispanic workers are worse than they were fifty years ago. Meanwhile, the devastating impact of the failure of American capitalism, especially since the financial crash of 2008, is having its most drastic impact on white workers. A raft of reports show rising death rates and infant mortality, falling life expectancy, and an epidemic of suicides, drug overdoses and early deaths from alcoholism, with white workers suffering the most severe collapse in living standards.

Meanwhile, the concentration of wealth and income within the top 1 percent, and, even more sharply, within the top 0.01 percent has accelerated under Obama.

The fight against police brutality and the violence of the capitalist state, as well as the struggle to end all forms of racism and discrimination, is completely bound up with the struggle against class exploitation, social inequality and the capitalist system that is their source. It requires the unification of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary anticapitalist and socialist program.



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