

The socioeconomic basis of identity politics: Inequality and the rise of an African American elite

David Walsh
30 August 2016

Judging by many accounts in the media and from the statements of leading US politicians, race is a central issue in the 2016 elections.

At a point when the American people are more tolerant in their social views than at any previous time in history, they are informed on a daily basis that the US seethes with racial and ethnic hatreds, along with violent misogyny and homophobia.

The Democratic Party, supported by all of the various left-liberal and pseudo-left trends, is particularly aggressive and vociferous on this score. Identity politics, the self-centered, upper-middle-class obsession with race, gender and sexual identity, has become one of that party's principal pillars.

As opposed to earlier periods, today the question of race is not associated with civil rights, with a major program of social reform, with improvements in the social conditions of the working class as a whole and certainly not with socialism. The debate on race is largely built around demands for the allocation of greater economic resources to sections of the black petty bourgeoisie. There is a marked and noticeable absence of democratic demands and sentiments within the leadership of these upper-middle-class movements.

The character of the present campaigns, including the narrow and vicious tone of much of the rhetoric about race, can be explained if one examines a singular fact: the sharp growth of social inequality within the African American population.

The data suggests that while African Americans still play a very limited role at the heights of the corporate hierarchy, there is a highly significant and influential section that has benefited enormously over the past several decades. These people live in another universe and are deeply estranged from the broad layers of the black

working-class population, which has suffered continual impoverishment.

From the administration of Richard Nixon onward, US ruling-class policy has been to cultivate a black upper-middle class that would be loyal to the status quo. In return, this layer abandoned any connection to mass struggle, social protest and opposition to capitalism. This helps explain why there is no leading African American figure, in any field, who today speaks for and to the broad masses of the people.

The facts and figures are striking.

Nielsen, the global information and measurement company, produced a report in 2015, "Increasingly Affluent, Educated and Diverse," which "focused specifically on a segment of African-Americans who are often overlooked, those with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more. Their size and influence is growing faster than non-Hispanic Whites across all income segments above \$60,000." (The data comes from the US Census, American Community Survey, 2014.)

In fact, black households earning more than \$75,000 are the fastest growing income group in the country. According to Nielsen, "In the years from 2005-2013, the income bracket with the largest increase for Black households occurred in the number of households earning over \$200,000, with an increase of 138 percent, compared to an increase of 74 percent for the total population."

In 1960, around the time E. Franklin Frazier wrote his pioneering work, *The Black Bourgeoisie*, there were an estimated 25 black millionaires in the US. That number has grown 1,400 times. Today there are an estimated 35,000 black millionaires.

The concentration of wealth among African Americans is extreme. According to the Pew Research Study, 35 percent of black households have negative or no net

worth. Another 15 percent have less than \$6,000 in total household worth. Nearly 7 million of the total of 14 million black households have little or nothing.

Commentator Antonio Moore in the *Huffington Post* this past May noted that the wealth difference between an American black household in the top 1 percent and the average black household was several times larger than that among comparable white households.

“[T]he median net worth of the few black households in the top 1 percent was \$1.2 million dollars, while according to the Census, median net worth for all black households was about \$6,000 in total. A black family in the 1 percent is worth a staggering 200 times that of an average black family. If black America were a country, we would be among the most wealth stratified in the world.”

“Income segregation,” i.e., the tendency of people to live in *either* poor or affluent neighborhoods, has increased sharply among black families since 1970. “Segregation by income among black families was lower than among white families in 1970, but grew four times as much between 1970 and 2009. By 2009, income segregation among black families was 65 percent greater than among white families.” (*Residential Segregation by Income, 1970-2009*, by Kendra Bischoff of Cornell University and Sean F. Reardon of Stanford)

According to the *Washington Post* in 2013, the black middle class, measured by the number of families earning at least \$100,000 a year, has grown fivefold in the past 50 years. About one in 10 black households are now in that income category. Between 1970 and 1990, the percentage of black physicians, lawyers and engineers doubled. From 1990 to 2013, there was a 30 percent increase in the proportion of black managers and executives and a 38 percent increase in the proportion of black lawyers and engineers.

Decades of “black capitalism” and affirmative action have benefited a narrow but still substantial layer of the African American population. This is the social element that is most aggressively pursuing wealth and economic advantage today. It cannot be mere coincidence that the central figure in the University of Missouri protests in November 2015, hunger striker Jonathan Butler, came from this milieu. His father, Eric Butler, is executive vice president for marketing and sales at Union Pacific Corp. and raked in \$2.9 million in total compensation in 2015.

Importantly, African Americans have gained virtual parity with whites in the professional upper echelons. By 2004, blacks with a doctorate had a median income of

\$74,207, slightly higher than the median income of whites with doctoral degrees (\$73,993). (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*)

As a recent report (“Closing the Race Gap: Alleviating Young African American Unemployment Through Education”) argued, “African Americans and whites have nearly equal probabilities of employment at high degrees of education.”

What are the implications of this relative parity?

The obsession with race and gender involves the striving for privileges by a layer of black and female professionals, determined to carve out careers and incomes—under conditions of an intensely competitive “marketplace”—at the expense of their white or male counterparts. The shrillness and falsity of the current campaigns on race and sexual violence has much to do with the need, in the face of the fact that *there is no significant racial or gender pay gap for these already affluent layers*, to leverage past crimes and injustice, and exaggerate the present conditions, to justify continued or greater privileges. This is a bitter conflict taking place within the richest 5 to 10 percent (approximately \$190,000 to \$130,000 in annual income) of the population.

There is nothing “progressive” or “left-wing” about these campaigns and conflicts. Whether or not the president of the United States is a man or woman or the CEO of a bank or major corporation is white or black is of no possible interest to the working class. E. Franklin Frazier noted half a century ago that black business and political interests had “exploited the Negro masses as ruthlessly as have whites.”

Socialists reject racist politics in whatever form it appears. In the context of the 2016 elections, this means repudiating the racist and nationalist filth promulgated by both the Democrats and Republicans and all those who orbit around bourgeois politics. The election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party alone represents the independent political and historical interests of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact