

DeRay Mckesson and the right-wing character of racialist politics

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The online newspaper *Voice of San Diego*, in conjunction with the San Diego State University School of Journalism and Media Studies, held a “Politifest 2016” event on campus last month. This year’s keynote speakers were the right-wing author and executive editor of *National Review*, Reihan Salam, and DeRay Mckesson, a leading member of the Black Lives Matter movement and the interim chief human capital officer for the Baltimore public school district.

The event attracted city officials and union bureaucrats, including from the United Food and Commercial Workers union, one of the event’s sponsors. Also present were various county officials advocating for new California propositions and members of the feminist organization “Run, women, run,” which encourages women to run for office.

The daylong event drew a crowd of over 1,200 people. The different sessions that made up the event generally reflected the spectrum of bourgeois politics in the United States. There were no sessions devoted to issues such as unemployment, poverty, economic inequality or war.

The complete prostration of academia to the ruling establishment was on full display. This was perhaps best expressed in the exaltation of identity politics throughout the event, personified in the main attraction, DeRay Mckesson. His session, “A Conversation with DeRay Mckesson,” drew over 300 people.

Mckesson spoke on a number of topics including his personal experiences in the Black Lives Matter movement, methods of organizing, the 2016 election, his new role in the Baltimore city education system, and for-profit policing. The broader theme under which each of these topics was discussed was that of the “complexity of identity,” above all race.

Mckesson commented that one of the great achievements of the Black Lives Matter movement has been the promotion of a “public conversation about blackness,” adding that “we are talking about identity in ways that are really powerful. We have to keep these conversations about identity at the forefront.”

His entire keynote presentation was focused on the twin abstractions of “whiteness” and “blackness,” as though racial identity was an absolute and all-encompassing definition of a human being. What these rigid categories would mean for a biracial or multiracial person is incomprehensible.

Mckesson claimed, “One of the interesting things about whiteness is this idea that whiteness has to be present in everything. ... One of the things that the white lives matter or all lives matter campaigns sort of does is that it forces white people to even be a part of the oppression, that black people don’t even get to be upset in their own space.”

The insistence by figures like Mckesson that the identity of an individual is determined by social constructs such as race, nationality, ethnicity or religion, serves only to obscure the fundamental class divisions in society. Depicting the black community as a cohesive, classless element of society conceals the fact that it is the capitalist class of all races, black included, that oppresses and exploits the black working class in this country. In fact, the black community is among the most economically unequal and class-divided in today’s society. By one estimate, a black family in the top 1 percent is worth a staggering 200 times that of an average black family.

The race-based view of politics presented by the ostensibly “left” speaker, Mckesson, was of a strikingly similar character to the observations of the event’s right-wing representative, Reihan Salam of the *National Review*. He commented in his presentation, “there are a few different paths Republicans can take, one of which is to try to become a whites-only party that represents affluent as well as working class whites. Another path is for it to be the part of the middle, including the Hispanic middle and some component of the black middle as well.” Both Republican and Democratic parties use race as a tool, to divide the working class, and to implement policies that only benefit the ruling class and the upper echelons of the middle class.

The political establishment uses pundits like Mckesson and Salam seek to inundate the population with a picture of a

starkly divided America on the verge of a race war. This is simply not true. Mckesson and others who attribute police violence wholly to racism ignore that fact that it is the capitalist system that produces both.

It was notable that at one point Mckesson expressed skepticism about reports of police killing of whites, suggesting that the victims were really Latinos who had been “miscoded.” He also cited an incident in which a police officer did not shoot to death a mentally ill white man who was brandishing a weapon.

Mckesson’s role as an appendage of the political establishment became more evident once the topic of the presidential election was broached about halfway through the session. He openly denounced Trump and sent a clear signal that he was supporting Hillary Clinton.

Referring to people's concerns over Hillary Clinton he said, “You should have concerns. But this is not about the lesser of two evils. There is one evil,” i.e., Trump. He went on to denounce anyone who would refuse to vote for Clinton on the grounds they would be harming African-Americans.

A Trump administration “will grind certain people to ashes, poor and black people,” he said, adding, “I’m not voting for a candidate, I’m voting for myself.” He then spelled out what this meant: “Hillary cannot win and cannot form government without black people. Trump can do both.”

In other words, a Clinton administration will have high-paying positions and privileges for people like Mckesson, while a Trump administration will do without them. The orientation of a privileged layer of blacks to the Democratic Party—regardless of the anti-working-class and reactionary character of its policies—could not be expressed more crudely.

Mckesson’s own political record demonstrates his orientation to the ruling elite. After being arrested this July in Baton Rouge for protesting the police killing of Alton Sterling, Mckesson joined other figures at a White House meeting with Obama to discuss “concrete actions” to mend relations between police officers and black communities.

Underscoring his friendly relations with Obama, Mckesson reminisced at his San Diego appearance about the “incredible” campaign of 2008. Ignoring the deeply reactionary policies and record of the Obama administration, he said, “the landscape of hope has changed.” For the broad mass of workers and youth, including and with particular severity black workers and youth, the Obama years have seen a further descent into poverty and social deprivation. The social position of African-American workers has fallen disastrously precisely over the period in which the policies of affirmative action and the politics of race and gender have been elevated to essential props of capitalist rule in America.

Obama has changed “the landscape of hope,” however, for a narrow, highly privileged layer of middle class blacks, Hispanics, women, gays, etc., who have been allotted a share of the increased wealth and profit mined from the increased suffering of the masses. Mckesson, currently making a comfortable six-figure salary in a position where he is in charge of human resources for the Baltimore schools—handling, among other things, disability and workers compensation claims—is a representative of this self-satisfied and corrupt social layer.

The reactionary character of racialist politics and the Black Lives Matter campaign is proven by the very fact that this tactic of division by race is fully embraced by the entire political, academic, and media establishment. While the police continue day in and day out to brutally murder working class and poor people of all races, the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement insist on begging for reforms from the very powers who employ this body of armed men to protect their interests. They demand only to have more racial diversity among the oppressors—more black police, police chiefs and mayors—not to abolish the system of oppression.

The grievances of the social forces who form the backbone of Black Lives Matter have nothing to do with the increasingly desperate plight of working class people, black or white. They could care less. It has to do, rather, with envy and frustration over the unequal distribution of income and wealth within the top 10 percent and demands for more money, more power and more prestige for the lower rungs of the wealthy upper-middle class.



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