

Roy Innis, black nationalist turned right-wing Republican, dead at 82

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Roy Innis, who died in a New York hospital this week at the age of 82, was for nearly the last 50 years the national leader of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

Under Innis, one of the oldest organizations formed to fight the Jim Crow system of racial segregation in the US became a political vehicle for a form of right-wing black nationalism tailored to the interests of the Republican Party and US corporations.

CORE had been founded in 1942. It was actively involved in early struggles against segregation in interstate transportation, as well as in voter registration in the South, the lunch-counter sit-ins and the Freedom Rides of the early 1960s.

CORE's transformation was not merely the result of Innis's leadership. It reflected the crisis and decline of the protest movement associated with the civil rights reforms of the 1960s.

Roy Innis was born in the US Virgin Islands in 1934, and came to New York City at 12 years of age, in 1946. He later attended the City College of New York, where he studied chemistry. For a number of years he worked at a Bronx hospital and was active, in the early 1970s, in Hospital Workers Union Local 1199.

By this time he had already moved sharply to the right. The limitations of the civil rights reforms exposed the class issues, which erupted in the ghetto rebellions of the 1960s against the backdrop of deepening economic crisis and the escalating imperialist war in Vietnam. Innis's response was to repudiate any struggle for racial integration and the unity of black and white workers in the fight for social equality.

In this way, Innis, even as the struggles of the '60s intensified, reflected the reactionary essence of black nationalism and the slogan of "Black Power," a

political trend that was widely promoted within pseudo-left circles as radical and even revolutionary. His evolution expressed in the most direct form the real aim of this trend: the advancement of the interests of an aspiring black bourgeoisie, not those of the working class.

Innis's successful takeover of CORE, which he ran with an iron hand for the rest of his life, took place in the same year as the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. King was killed after denouncing the Vietnam War and organizing the Poor People's Campaign to raise demands for social, and not only racial, equality.

This was also the year of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis in Brooklyn, in which the demand for community control of the schools in the largely African-American neighborhood was advanced by the nationalists, used to attack the teachers, leading to teachers' strikes and racial tension.

Meanwhile, the movement against the Vietnam War grew rapidly, and protests at the Democratic Convention in Chicago were met with bloody police repression. Innis supported Republican Richard Nixon in the November election. After winning the presidency, Nixon, who had earned his spurs as the redbaiting congressman from California two decades earlier, announced that "black capitalism" was the answer to the crisis of the cities.

This was Innis's program as well. For the rest of his career, he compiled a notorious record. A longtime right-wing Republican, he advocated racially segregated schools and black capitalism as the solution to persistent unemployment and poverty. He became a vociferous supporter of right-wing, law-and-order campaigns, and a leading figure within the National Rifle Association. Innis backed Bernhard Goetz, the so-called subway gunman, who shot and seriously

wounded four black youth in 1984 in New York City, claiming he feared he was going to be mugged.

Innis also attacked such programs as affirmative action, but from the right, advocating not free and equal higher education for all, for instance, but rather a defense of the status quo in the guise of black nationalism.

In the area of foreign policy, Innis traveled to Africa, bestowing “life membership” in CORE on Idi Amin, the infamous and brutal military dictator of Uganda.

Innis became the darling of the Republican right, with former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani calling him a hero. His role was not dissimilar from that of such figures as Clarence Thomas, or of Trump’s nominee to head Housing and Urban Development in his cabinet, Ben Carson—although Innis never achieved the prominence of these right-wing defenders of big business.

Innis’s open repudiation of the initial goals of the civil rights struggle was only one side of the decline and collapse of the protest movement under its middle-class leadership. Most of the erstwhile civil rights leaders did not follow Innis’s path to the extreme right, but rather accepted the mantle of a semi-official African-American leadership that was bestowed on them by the dominant sections of American capitalism. Figures such as Jesse Jackson and Andrew Young, alongside black mayors and other top officials in the nation’s urban centers, were given the task of defending the profit system precisely as the murderous onslaught on jobs and living standards accelerated. These representatives of the upper middle class were amply rewarded for their services.

Innis became a favorite of another section of the ruling class, largely concentrated in the Republican Party, which had no use for this form of identity politics, but rather sought the cultivation of an openly right-wing layer within the black middle class.

Despite such highly publicized incidents as the violent altercation between Innis and Al Sharpton on a right-wing television talk show in 1988, where Innis brought up Sharpton’s role in the notorious Tawana Brawley hoax, there was little difference between these two demagogues and the different factions they represented.

Notwithstanding regular efforts and some high-profile appointments like Thomas, Colin Powell and

Condoleezza Rice, the campaign to build up a Republican Party base among African-American voters never got very far. This was partly because the ruling elite was able to find plenty of black Democrats who adopted the right-wing nostrums and programs favored by Wall Street. New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, for instance, is only one of many such supporters of charter schools and other privatization schemes and attacks on social programs.

CORE became little more than a letterhead in recent decades, a personal vehicle for Innis’s right-wing pronouncements. As its membership dwindled, the organization ran into financial difficulties. Innis was himself charged with corruption twice, in 1981 in connection with illegal fund-raising and misappropriation of the organization’s funds, and in 1986 in connection with not reporting \$116,000 in income on his tax filing. CORE found corporate funding to make up for its lack of a base, according to the obituary article on Innis in the *New York Times*. Among those firms backing Innis were Monsanto and ExxonMobil, whose CEO is Donald Trump’s nominee to be secretary of state.

Innis represents one stark example of the political dead end of the civil rights movement. If in his case it is especially glaring, the role of the African-American politicians and all of their allies—who claim to see the need for a second civil rights movement today, a tactic that is nothing more than a means of boosting the Democratic Party—is no less pernicious. On both sides, what is opposed is the urgent need for the unity of black, white and immigrant workers against the threat of dictatorship and war and in the fight for socialism.



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