

Black Lives Matter cashes in on black capitalism

Lawrence Porter, Nancy Hanover
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Last summer, the Ford Foundation, one of the most powerful private foundations in the world, announced that it was organizing to channel \$100 million to the Black Lives Movement over the next six years.

“By partnering with Borealis Philanthropy, Movement Strategy Center and Benedict Consulting to found the Black-Led Movement Fund, Ford has made six-year investments in the organizations and networks that compose the Movement for Black Lives,” according to the Ford Foundation web site. In a statement of support, Ford called for the group to grow and prosper. “We want to nurture bold experiments and help the movement build the solid foundation that will enable it to flourish.”

In the wake of the monetary commitment by the big-business foundation network, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has explicitly embraced black capitalism. It appears the group is now well positioned to cash in on the well-known #BLM Twitter hashtag. Announcing its first “big initiative for 2017,” BLM cofounder Patrisse Cullors stated that it would be partnering with the Fortune 500 New York ad agency J. Walter Thompson (JWT) to create “the biggest and most easily accessible black business database in the country.”

BLM joins the ranks of prestigious JWT clientele including HSBC Bank, Johnson & Johnson, Microsoft, and Shell Oil. JWT also represents the US Marine Corps. CEO Lynn Power suggested that the BLM partnership would provide the advertising firm with an opportunity to “shape culture positively.” “I am really glad that our partnership with Black Lives Matter is giving us the opportunity to play a truly active role,” she enthused.

The joint project, Backing Black Business, is a nationwide interactive map of black-owned enterprises. This virtual Google-based directory has nothing to do with opposing police violence, from which Black Lives Matter ostensibly emerged. Cullors nevertheless portrayed the venture as enabling blacks to have “somewhere for us to go and feel seen and safe,” concluding, “In these uncertain times, we need these places more than ever.”

Such developments may come as a surprise to those who embraced the sentiment that “black lives matter” because they saw it as an oppositional rebuke to the militarization of police and the disproportionate police murder of African Americans. Many did not realize that the political aims and nature of Black Lives Matter were of an entirely different nature.

In fact, the election of Donald Trump has served to put even more distance between the large layers of workers and young people opposed to police violence and the privileged upper middle class layer that Black Lives Matter represents. The latter, developments have shown, are leveraging #BLM as a brand to make a name for themselves, find lucrative sinecures and, more generally, get on the gravy train.

BLM’s most recent scheme is even more crass than Backing Black Business. In February, BLM launched a “black debit card” underwritten by OneUnited Bank. “A historic partnership has been born between OneUnited Bank, the largest Black-owned bank in the country, and #BlackLivesMatter to organize the \$1.2 trillion in spending power of

Black people and launch the Amir card during Black History Month,” boasts OneUnited’s web site.

The debit card project is a part of a larger campaign by black multimillionaire celebrities, including Beyonce, Solange and Queen Latifah, to promote investment in black-owned banks. Describing the Amir debit card as another form of “black empowerment,” BLM spokeswoman Melina Abdullah called it “important on a lot of levels.” She said it will feature the “face of this beautiful black boy who will evoke for many folks people like Trayvon Martin.”

BLM has invested its money in OneUnited since its inception, according to Abdullah, who is also the chair of the Pan-African Studies Department at California State University, Los Angeles.

Teri Williams, president and chief operating officer of OneUnited, and the wife of its chairman and CEO, Kevin Cohee, echoed Abdullah’s sales pitch, adding that “when I hand [the Amir card] to someone, I’m saying to them that black lives *do* matter, that black money *does* matter and that we are an important consumer.” Debit card holders will receive regular notices requesting BLM donations, the bank noted.

The dubious history of the bank has apparently been no barrier to the partnership with BLM. OneUnited, the recipient of a generous Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) loan in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, was subject to federal audit when it failed to meet the terms of the agreement.

The audit provoked a minor scandal when it was revealed that the bank had provided CEO Cohee a lavish lifestyle including a leased Porsche, a “handsome living allowance,” an \$880,000 condo in Miami Beach, and \$26,500 per month to lease a mansion in Santa Monica, California. The government’s generosity, it was widely suspected, was connected to the fact that Democratic congresswoman Maxine Waters’s husband, who was also on the bank’s board of directors and owned stock in the company, stood to lose over \$350,000 if the bank failed.

The racist and pro-capitalist politics of Black Lives Matter

From the beginning, the “mothers of the movement” Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi—who collectively adopted the famous hashtag—specifically opposed uniting blacks, whites and immigrants against the brutal class-war policies of the capitalist state. Instead, the group did its best to confine anti-police violence protests within the framework of the capitalist system and push a racist and pro-capitalist agenda.

Even prior to 2013, however, all three of the cofounders had developed close ties to corporations, foundations, academia and/or government-sponsored agencies. Tometi, in particular, was a well-known quantity in these circles. She had spoken at the UN (presenting at the Global Forum

on Migration and Commission on the Status of Women), had been to the White House and met with Obama liaison Heather Foster, and addressed the Aspen Institute, a high-level think tank associated with the US military and intelligence community.

With one eye on the mounting protests and another on their hopes for a future Hillary Clinton administration, the group created a political platform in August 2016 entitled “Vision 4 Black Lives.” It was initiated by an amalgam of “non-hierarchical” but affiliated groups under the “BLM umbrella.” The platform centers on the demand for “ending the war on Black people.”

Promoting racial exclusivity, it calls for “reparations for past and continuing harms,” “divestment from institutions that harm black people,” the right to high-quality education “for black people,” a federal jobs program “for black people,” community control and black self-determination. Along the same lines, it calls for the defense of “black immigrants,” despite the plight of tens of millions of non-black immigrants as a result of imperialist war and exploitation the world over.

While these racialist demands are the axis of the Vision 4 Black Lives program, it also includes a smattering of democratic demands including free education for all, special protections for queer and trans students, free health services, free day care, and “cuts” to military expenditures. The BLM program lines up with a race-based variant of the “humanitarian” pro-imperialist agenda, critiquing “American wars” as “unjust and destructive to Black communities globally.”

The central purpose of “Vision 4 Black Lives,” and Black Lives Matter, has nothing to do with securing education, health care or other social rights for any section of the working class. It is to divide the working class, subordinate opposition to the Democratic Party and win more opportunities for privileged sections of the upper middle class.

The BLM program makes no bones about its entirely bourgeois, legislative orientation. “Congress would have to amend the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2005,” or “the DOJ [Department of Justice] has some discretion in how much funding it awards to police departments,” etc., the program states. That is, the Democrats can be pressured to implement reforms.

The real substance of the group’s policies is the unremitting injection of racial divisions and animosity into the movement of opposition to police violence. It aims to update the age-old tactic of divide and conquer, seeking to prevent the unity of the working class—black, white and immigrant—from challenging the capitalist system, the source of the deepening social and political oppression.

For this service to the bourgeois state, they are well rewarded. The Ford Foundation—with its long history stretching from its CIA fronts in the 1940s and the promotion of black capitalism in Detroit in the aftermath of the 1967 riots—provided a financial anchor for BLM’s expansion.

The Ford Foundation enlisted other such “philanthro-capitalists”: the Hill-Snowden Foundation, Solidaire (Ford Foundation and Leah Hunt-Hendrix, granddaughter of the oil and gas tycoon H.L. Hunt), the NoVo Foundation (started by Warren Buffett’s son Peter and daughter-in-law Jennifer Buffett in 2006), the Association of Black Foundation Executives (Kellogg Foundation and JPMorgan Chase and its Black Organization for Leadership Development [BOLD]), the Neighborhood Funders Group—Funders for Justice (also funded by Ford), among others.

In addition to the money, the leadership of BLM has been showered with honorariums, awards and junkets, both in the US and internationally. Cullors was made Woman of the Year for Justice Speakers by *Glamour* magazine, made World’s Greatest Leader by *Fortune* magazine and awarded an honorary doctorate from Clarkson University.

The media and the state

While spontaneous protests began to adopt the #BLM hashtag as opposition to police violence developed, it was the promotion by the bourgeois media that brought #BLM into national prominence. A study, *Beyond the Hashtags*, by Deen Freelon, Charlton C. McIlwaine and Meredith D. Clark, noted this fact, pointing to the large role of “mainstream media and corporations.”

This media role became obvious as social tensions reached a boiling point with the brutal gunning down of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland and the acquittal of the killer of Michael Brown in November 2014. The corporate-controlled press responded to the outpouring of opposition among both black and white youth by consistently describing Black Lives Matter representatives as the official opposition to police violence.

As data accumulated by killedbypolice.net and other news media sources underscored the fact that police killings were directed against poor and working class whites as well as inner-city blacks, the issues of social inequality, poverty and class began to take center stage. The more universal slogan “All Lives Matter” came into wide use.

BLM denounced the specter of growing class unity and decried “All Lives Matter” as illegitimate and even racist. The group focused its demands on black “community control,” federal tracking of police killings by race and affirmative-action-type government programs.

BLM personnel meanwhile were being groomed for top-level official positions. Leading Black Lives Matter spokespersons made repeated trips to the White House in 2015 and 2016 to hold meetings with President Obama and his representatives. The Democratic Party was conferring official authority upon the group. During a meeting in February 2016, Obama went even further, praising DeRay Mckesson and Brittany Packnett, two Black Lives Matter leaders. “They are much better organizers than I was when I was their age, and I am confident that they are going to take America to new heights.”

Later in July, at a separate meeting with Obama, Mckesson and Packnett agreed that Packnett would serve as an official representative on Obama’s Task Force for 21st Century Policing, with Attorney General Loretta Lynch and National Association of Police Organizations President Michael McHale.

These remarkable meetings of top Black Lives Matter associates with the US president and his top police agencies demonstrated that the group had no objection to being incorporated into the state apparatus. Indeed, a “seat at the table” was their aim. Anticipating further positions in the next administration, Black Lives Matter associates Mckesson, Packnett and Johnetta “Netta” Elzie met with Hillary Clinton in October 2015 for a lengthy 90-minute meeting on “policy questions.” Clinton was then the frontrunner for US president as well as the CIA and intelligence community’s preferred candidate.

The Sanders factor

During this period, the campaign of Bernie Sanders for president began to rally unexpectedly large crowds, and the ruling elites became increasingly nervous. Fraudulently presenting himself as a socialist advocating “political revolution against the billionaire class,” Sanders won the support of large numbers of youth and workers.

It was in this context that decisions were taken to provide support to the divisive racialist agenda of BLM at the highest levels of government. This policy decision was in tandem with Clinton’s escalating drumbeat of identity politics, which she increasingly relied upon as a political counterweight to Sanders, even using the mantra “Black Lives Matter” in her campaign speeches. For their part, BLM leaders Mckesson and

Packnett endorsed Clinton; Garza, while not endorsing, said she cast her vote for Clinton.

BLM is now being compensated for its role in seeking to shore up support for capitalism. However, they will get little traction peddling the discredited old canard, first advanced by President Richard Nixon in the late 1960s, that millionaire black businesspeople represent some kind of advance for the black population as a whole.

Class differentiation is, in fact, now greater *within* the African American community than in society at large. While the majority of black families are living in or near poverty, the number of black millionaires has grown to 35,000. But this small group, and those immediately below its gilded ranks, are the well-off layers and social interests for which Black Lives Matter speaks.

BLM's hostility to the working class and reactionary rhetoric play an ever more dangerous role in the current political climate, dovetailing with the extreme right wing and legitimizing racialism.

Their assessment of the election of Donald Trump demonized the white working class, a view also promoted by Hillary Clinton, the *New York Times* and other pro-Democratic Party media. Utterly hostile to the unification of the working class against the class-war policies of the new government, BLM sees the possibility of "opportunities" under the Trump administration. Vowing to train 300 black leaders to take positions on "school boards, city councils, neighborhood councils, and every branch of government," the group looks to a further political future within the Democratic Party.

Under unprecedented conditions of imperialist war, social inequality and state repression, Black Lives Matter finds themselves now eagerly entering bourgeois politics and embracing black business schemes. Moreover, their bent for self-enrichment has a logical conclusion. To maintain a seat at the table, they will collaborate even with the likes of Trump.

The use and promotion of Black Lives Matter by key elements of the capitalist state demonstrate once again the class role of identity politics. For workers and young people looking for a way to fight, the social physiognomy and political program of Black Lives Matter stand as an object lesson on the role of bourgeois class forces and the reactionary dead-end of racial politics.



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