

The political issues behind the removal of Confederate monuments in New Orleans

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20 May 2017

On Friday, contractors for the city of New Orleans removed a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from public display in the city's downtown area. The Lee statue was the last of four city monuments to the Confederacy to be taken down. The other three commemorated P.G.T. Beauregard, a prominent Confederate general from Louisiana, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and the so-called Battle of Liberty Place, a race riot led by the White League that took place nearly a decade after the end of the Civil War and effectively ended Reconstruction in Louisiana.

The proposal to remove the statues was first made by Democratic Mayor Mitch Landrieu shortly after the 2015 shooting massacre at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina by white supremacist Dylan Roof.

At the start of the American Civil War in 1861, the port city of New Orleans was a vital conduit for cotton shipped down the Mississippi River from southern plantations worked by slaves. From New Orleans the cotton made its way to European markets. However, the city was retaken by Union forces only a year into the war and held by them until the end of the conflict in 1865.

The recapture of New Orleans, by far the South's largest city, was a key strategic reversal for the Confederacy, which lost the entire Mississippi River after the Siege of Vicksburg by Union General Ulysses S. Grant in July 1863.

Contrary to some media reports describing the statues as "Confederate-era monuments," all four of the statues were erected decades after the war, mostly during the period of legal racial segregation known as Jim Crow.

Particularly in recent months, the long-planned decision to remove the monuments was met with counter-campaigns organized by extreme-right circles, including white supremacists and fascistic elements. A rally led by the former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke at Lee Circle earlier this month was promoted by Breitbart News, the internet watering hole of the "alt-right," and by the neo-Nazi Stormfront website. Construction contractors throughout the region have been subjected to threats because of their role in removing the monuments.

Such forces, which have long had connections to the Republican Party, have been emboldened by the election of

Donald Trump, who has appealed to them through his right-wing populist rhetoric and his elevation of figures such as former Breitbart head Stephen Bannon to his White House staff and his naming of the reactionary former Alabama senator Jeff Sessions as attorney general. However, these forces have not attracted widespread popular support, as evidenced by the small turnout to their demonstrations throughout the city.

The removal of these statues is no cause for mourning by any class-conscious worker. They stood for more than a century as symbols not only of slavery, but of the longstanding policy of the American bourgeoisie of utilizing racism to divide and weaken the working class.

Mayor Landrieu's decision to remove the Confederate statues is not driven by concern for democratic issues, however. It is a tactical maneuver aimed at burnishing the Democratic Party's image under conditions where it is widely hated for its attacks on the working class and its pro-war policies.

The decision to remove the monuments is bound up with the Democrats' promotion of identity and racial politics, which are also used to divide the working class. Over decades, the Democratic Party has promoted identity politics to cultivate upper-middle class layers that see the rejection of class as the basic social category and elevation of issues of gender and race as an avenue for their personal advancement. This type of politics, falsely presented as "left-wing," has served to cover up the Democrats' abandonment of any, even minimal, program of social reform.

Landrieu recently published an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* placing his decision to remove the monuments in the spirit of Barack Obama's speech at the opening of the African American History museum in Washington last year. This only shows that his decision to remove the monuments has nothing to do with an honest reckoning with a "legacy of oppression," as he claims. The conditions of the vast majority of African Americans deteriorated under Obama alongside the further growth of social inequality fueled by handouts for the rich and austerity for the poor. Obama was and remains the representative of a new financial aristocracy that is no less venal and reactionary than the old Southern slave-owning class.

Few American cities have more firsthand experience with the ruthlessness and greed of the American ruling class than New

Orleans. The city was nearly destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a disaster that was itself the result of decades of official neglect, which left the city's levee system unable to withstand the hurricane's storm surges.

In the aftermath of Katrina, New Orleans was turned into a testing ground for social counterrevolution. Nearly all of the city's public schools were converted into privately operated charter schools, which serve as a mechanism for the transfer of funds from public education to the coffers of the corporate-financial elite. Over a decade after the storm, whole working class neighborhoods such as the Lower 9th Ward remain depopulated ruins, and tens of thousands of former residents have yet to return.

Five years later, in 2010, the coastal waters near New Orleans were made toxic by the BP oil spill, the worst environmental catastrophe in American history. From the beginning, the Obama administration worked on behalf of the oil company to mask the true extent of the spill, shield the firm from financial responsibility, and protect BP executives from criminal prosecution. Not a single company official has been convicted on charges stemming from a disaster made inevitable by the company's reckless pursuit of profit.

The campaign to remove the Confederate monuments in New Orleans, which has become a national news story in recent weeks, allows the Democrats to posture as popular opponents of the right-wing layers that Trump has drawn around himself. The importance of this for the Democrats is indicated by speculation last week by the *New York Times* that Landrieu, whose term as mayor ends next year, could be in the running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020.

There is a great deal of historical revisionism behind the campaign to remove the monuments, aimed at excising the *class* content of slavery and Jim Crow and presenting American society as being fundamentally divided by race. A programmatic statement by the Take 'Em Down NOLA Coalition, a pseudo-left organization that acts as a pressure group on the local Democratic Party, declares that "white supremacist ideas, represented by these symbols ... permeate USA society." The statement argues that this, rather than the capitalist system, is responsible for mass unemployment and police violence. It criticizes Landrieu and the Democratic-controlled City Council only for having "belatedly decided to join this progressive trend."

The basic dividing line in American society is social class, not race. The promotion of racism is a *class* policy whose aim has always been the prevention of a mass social movement uniting workers of all races against capitalist exploitation. Jim Crow segregation, in particular, was enacted after the emergence of the Populist movement in the rural south and labor struggles in Southern cities that threatened to accomplish just such a unification of the working class and oppressed farmers.

Perhaps in no other Southern city was this danger for the

ruling class as acute as in New Orleans, home to the region's largest working class population. On the city's docks, workers regularly crossed the color line during labor struggles, even during the height of Jim Crow. In the course of an investigation by the state legislature in 1908, after a successful New Orleans dockworkers' strike that united black and white workers, lawmakers declared New Orleans "the worst nigger-ridden city in the south."

"Echoing [these] sentiments," labor historian Eric Arnesen later observed, "steamship agent Alfred LeBlanc denounced New Orleans as the 'worst labor-ridden city in the country.' Commission members had no difficulty discerning the connection between the two observations." [1]

Because the working class remained tied politically through the trade unions to the Democratic Party, the party primarily responsible for enforcing Jim Crow in the South, it was unable to mount a political challenge capable of toppling the regime of segregation. Nevertheless, through their own experiences, workers began to grasp the class character of racism and the need to unite across racial boundaries in the face of a common enemy.

Socialists have always fought against racism. But they have always sought to do so by exposing its roots in a society based upon class exploitation and by uniting the working class of all races on the basis of a common revolutionary program. This must become the basis for a mass movement to defeat the Trump administration and secure the democratic and social rights of working people today.

Notes:

[1] Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 60.



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