

Behind Trump's attack on the NFL football players

Patrick Martin
26 September 2017

Donald Trump's vulgar and threatening comments about NFL football players have shocked millions of people. However, a focus on the president's personality traits cannot explain why he provoked a public conflict with these athletes over their involvement in protests against police violence and racism. The reasons must be found in the deepening political crisis of the Trump administration and of American capitalism as a whole. And it is an understanding of this crisis that must guide the actions of working people and youth.

Under conditions of mounting war threats against North Korea; the devastation of Puerto Rico, a US territory, by Hurricane Maria; and the near-collapse of the latest attempt by the Republican-controlled Congress to repeal Obamacare, the US president devoted 12 tweets in 30 hours to the observance of the national anthem at sporting events. No other event warranted such attention.

What took place last weekend arose from a deliberate decision by the president of the United States to weigh in against a long-running campaign of protest against police brutality and violence, especially against African-American youth. Trump sought to provoke as much outrage as possible, particularly among the black athletes, who comprise 75 percent of NFL teams, and in that way arouse his ultra-right and fascistic social base.

Trump does not care that his positions are massively unpopular, or that the players have widespread support. He is not seeking to assemble an electoral or parliamentary majority, but to whip up a lynch-mob atmosphere within a minority of the population, which can be directed towards the violent suppression of any public opposition to the policies of his government, and particularly against opposition to the actions of the police and military.

Trump's last tweet on Monday morning was perhaps

the most brazenly racist, as he hailed the performance of NASCAR race drivers, nearly all white, contrasting the absence of protests at Sunday's race in New Hampshire to the actions of football players, who protested in large numbers at 15 game sites.

Football players of all races have been justifiably angered by Trump's demand that NFL owners fire any "son of a bitch" who exercises his right of free speech. But the vulgar language is more than just insulting. It has ominous overtones. Trump is inviting and justifying in advance the use of violence against those who protest police killings, and by extension, anyone who protests against the policies of his administration.

The president used similar language while he was a candidate to encourage violence against those who sought to take a public stand against his ultra-right campaign. In several well-publicized incidents, his supporters took his suggestion and punched, beat or otherwise set upon anti-Trump protesters. In some cases, guns were drawn.

Trump is following a sinister example. Forty-seven years ago, President Richard Nixon used similar language to denounce protesters against the War in Vietnam, declaring that students opposing his decision to expand the war by sending US troops into Cambodia were "bums." Three days after this remark, on May 4, 1970, National Guard troops opened fire on peaceful protesters at Kent State University in Ohio, killing four students.

It is not just a matter of distant historical precedent. One of Trump's longstanding political cronies and advisers, Roger Stone, got his start in capitalist politics as a "dirty tricks" operative for Nixon. Trump's first political mentor, attorney Roy Cohn, played a central role, alongside Nixon and Senator Joseph McCarthy, in the anti-communist witch hunts of the 1950s. Trump's

speechwriters have modeled many of his appeals on Nixon's claims to represent a "silent majority," while his political operation has reprised Nixon's "southern strategy," aiming to capitalize on the backward and reactionary traditions of the southern "Bible Belt."

Liberal media critics have bemoaned Trump's denunciation of the football players, as well as his war of words with top NBA basketball players Stephen Curry and LeBron James, calling his rhetoric "divisive." But it is intentionally so. Trump is making a deliberate appeal to racial and other forms of bigotry, including misogyny and anti-gay bias, as well as prejudice against immigrants and refugees. He issued his stream of tweets against the athletes on the eve of his administration announcing a new travel ban, adding North Korea and Venezuela to the list of predominantly Muslim countries targeted in the initial executive order.

More fundamentally, Trump and those aides who have publicly defended his attacks on the athletes are demanding absolute public conformity in relation to the US military and police. As Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said Sunday, "This is about respect for the military, the first responders." This is particularly imperative in relation to nationally televised sporting events like NFL games, which have long been venues for celebrations of militarism, with flyovers by fighter jets and ceremonies featuring color guards and gigantic flags.

Like Nixon during the Vietnam era, Trump is seeking to mobilize right-wing forces on the basis of chauvinism to suppress widespread popular opposition to war. At that time, Nixon's efforts culminated in the Watergate scandal and his own forced resignation to avoid impeachment. Trump faces a different and even more unfavorable political landscape, with American society more deeply divided than ever, not along lines of race or gender, but along class lines: never has the gulf been greater between the super-rich and the vast majority of working people, of all races and ethnic origins.

Trump engages in more open appeals to racism than Nixon because his goal is not the winning of the next presidential election, but the building of an extra-parliamentary movement of the extreme right, based on the police and sections of the military, to establish authoritarian forms of rule.

There is no doubt that the reaction of the players, in

uniting broadly to defend their democratic rights, and the widespread popular support for them, reflect the deep-seated allegiance to democratic principles among working people in the United States. Trump has encountered far more hostility than he expected, and on Monday the White House was clearly engaged in a political maneuver to defuse opposition and disguise its real aims.

Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders opened her press conference with a statement noting that September 25 is the 60th anniversary of the integration of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas, one of the seminal events of the civil rights struggles. She sought to fend off a barrage of hostile questions about Trump's attack on the NFL players, claiming ludicrously that the president "was not against anyone."

This is only political posturing, however. The real goals of the Trump administration remain as before: continued military buildup; provoking war crises, which threaten to break out into full-scale war, not only with North Korea but with China, Iran and Russia; attacking the democratic rights of the working class; and carrying through the destruction of domestic social programs like Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security.

The response of the NFL players is a politically healthy sign. It has shocked both the Trump administration and its liberal "critics," who share a common class allegiance to the interests of Wall Street.

But the defeat of this government requires more than instinctive and politically inchoate resistance. It requires the building of a political movement of the working class to break the grip of the corporate and financial oligarchy and champion its own social interests—for jobs, decent living standards, social benefits, democratic rights, peace—through a socialist program. Only the development of such a class program can counter the appeals of ultra-right and fascist demagogues to nationalism, racism and other forms of bigotry, and unify the entire working class—black, white, native born and immigrant—in a common struggle for social equality.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact