

Democrats' neo-McCarthyism echoes red-baiting attacks on civil rights movement of the 1950s

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17 November 2017

A 21st century McCarthyism has emerged in recent months, in the form of a frenzied campaign spearheaded by the Democratic Party alleging that “Russian meddling” is responsible, not only for the defeat of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, but also for instigating or deepening social, racial and political divisions in the US.

The language of leading Democrats today bears more than a passing resemblance to that of Wisconsin Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy more than 60 years ago. Then it was “reds under the bed” that posed an imminent threat to the “American way of life.” Today we are told that Putin’s Internet trolls are responsible for working-class anger over inequality, political corruption and police violence. In the 1950s, McCarthy demanded that the media root out subversives. Today, top Democrats in Congress are demanding that Facebook, Google and YouTube turn over information on users and censor content.

According to the Democrats, Moscow is subverting American democracy, including by meddling in elections that are supposedly models of popular sovereignty—this some seven years after the *Citizens United* decision of the US Supreme Court made explicit what was already well known: that American bourgeois democracy is an empty shell, in which elections are reduced to a choice between the candidates of two officially entrenched right-wing parties that are equally controlled by a financial oligarchy.

Another ingredient in the anti-Russia campaign is the recent charge that Russia-linked individuals and web pages posed as supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement and of the protests against police violence. The *Baltimore Sun* and other news outlets cited a report about a Facebook page called Blacktivist, which had promoted a rally last year to mark the first anniversary of the death of Freddie Gray at the hands of the police. This allegedly was an attempt by the Kremlin to “heighten racial tensions during the 2016 presidential campaign”—as if the numerous nationwide protests were simply the product of the nefarious adversary in Moscow.

The demonization of Russia is part of the Democratic Party’s attack on Trump from the right. Rather than exposing his fascistic rhetoric, xenophobia and attacks on the working class, the Democrats have sought to prove their patriotic bona fides, ensure a hard line against Russia and build up an atmosphere of nationalism amid deepening worldwide geopolitical tensions. More and more, this campaign is directed against left-wing websites and organizations, with the aim of criminalizing dissent.

Millions of workers and youth, in the US and around the world, know relatively little about the US Red Scare and witch hunt associated most prominently with the name of McCarthy. Today’s defenders of the Second Gilded Age and advocates of imperialist war often piously denounce McCarthyism, even while they carry out their own neo-McCarthyite campaigns.

McCarthyism was utilized in the mid-20th century to whip up right-wing nationalism and super-patriotism. Charges of Soviet or communist subversion, infiltration and disinformation became the pretext for witch hunts in Hollywood, the universities and the labor movement. The witch hunt led to lost jobs and ruined lives, while sowing divisions within and weakening the working class. What began in 1947 with President Truman’s insistence on loyalty oaths for federal employees led within a few short years to the heyday of the demagogue from Wisconsin, whose Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations became the loudest promoter of the witch hunt.

Anticommunism did not begin with McCarthy’s own political career, nor did it end with his political downfall in 1954, after the political and economic establishment concluded that he had outlived his usefulness and he was censured by the Senate. The first Red Scare came immediately after the Russian Revolution a century ago, and anticommunism has been a constant feature of US political life since then, sometimes on a lower level and at other times, as in the period of McCarthyism, reaching a fever pitch.

As a recent book, *Black Freedom, White Resistance and Red Menace*, by Yasuhiro Katagiri, explains: “Even after the Wisconsin senator’s disappearance from the national political arena, McCarthyism’s unsavory legacies—the self-serving use and abuse of hearsay and insinuation, the deliberate indifference to hard evidence and the strident cries of ‘Communist conspiracy’ used to impugn the legitimacy of adversaries—outlived their original inventor and remained a part of the national political scene. In the South McCarthyism most often took a racist form...”

The charge of alien subversion was directed against every struggle of the working class, in strikes and union organizing and in the fight against Jim Crow segregation. Though somewhat less well-known as a target of red-baiting, the civil rights movement is an important part of this history.

A major role was played by the Southern wing of the Democratic Party, unchallenged by the administration of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s. A prime example of the activities of the Southern Democrats is contained in the early history of the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities.

This committee, founded in 1938 supposedly to examine Nazi and fascist activities, quickly turned almost exclusively to hunting socialists and communists. It was renamed the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1945 and continued its operations for the next 30 years.

At its founding, the committee was chaired by Martin Dies, a Democratic congressman from Texas, and it quickly became known as the Dies Committee. Dies’ book, *The Trojan Horse in America* (1940), declared, “Moscow has long considered the Negroes of the United States

as excellent political recruits for the Communist Party, [and] it has envisaged an unusual opportunity to create racial hatred between the white and Negro citizens of the United States.”

Compare these words to the current claims, made mostly by Democrats in Washington such as California’s Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, that Russia is using the Internet to promote “discord in the US by inflaming passions on a range of divisive issues,” including seeking to “mobilize real Americans to sign online petitions and join rallies and protests.”

1954 was the year of the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in the nation’s public schools. The first stirrings of the mass Southern civil rights movement were also emerging. The Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott was launched later that year to fight against segregation and discrimination in public transportation.

The political representatives of Jim Crow carried out a policy of what was called “massive resistance” to racial integration. This included—in addition to the mass arrests and beatings of demonstrators, as well as the killings of civil rights activists like Medgar Evers, Viola Liuzzo and many others—an ideological and political crusade against alleged “communist infiltration and subversion.”

Paradoxically, McCarthy’s eclipse in the Senate breathed new life into HUAC in the House. The focus of its efforts became civil rights organizers and their liberal supporters in the South, who were depicted as “useful idiots,” allowing themselves to be used by the Moscow-directed communist conspiracy.

The charges of subversion, attributed to outside agitators, were a staple of the campaign in defense of Jim Crow. Behind the scenes, much of the witch-hunting was the work of Northern supporters of segregation, men like J.B. Matthews, whose political odyssey took him from religious pacifism, through a brief association with the American Communist Party in the early 1930s, to a career as a leading right-wing red-baiter. Matthews was the research director and counsel of the Dies Committee for more than six years, from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s. His later career spanned the period of the McCarthy witch hunt and the segregationist campaign throughout the 1950s and part of the 1960s.

Matthews was not an insignificant figure during this period. In the aftermath of the September 1957 Little Rock, Arkansas school desegregation crisis, for instance, he prepared a report titled “Communists, Negroes and Integration” for the right-wing Hearst Corporation media empire. According to Matthews, the problem was that communists were “at work, with their customary fanatical dedication, in stirring up trouble in the field of public school integration.”

At every point in the decade between the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 some ten years later, the civil rights struggle was attacked as the work of foreign agents of a hostile power. From Little Rock in 1957 to the lunch counter sit-ins beginning in 1960, to the Freedom Rides challenging interstate bus segregation in 1961, the March on Washington in 1963 and the Mississippi Freedom Summer voter registration campaign of 1964, Matthews and others were ready with press releases, blacklists and names of alleged conspirators and Communist “dupes.”

Much of the red-baiting campaign was conducted by what came to be known as the “little HUACs,” Southern state legislative “un-American” committees in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida and Tennessee, which used the witch-hunt techniques to defend segregation.

In Louisiana, for instance, the Joint Legislative Committee held hearings in March 1957, introducing a black ex-member of the Communist Party as a “national authority on the influences bringing about a sudden upsurge of disturbances between the races.”

For their own purposes the racist red-baiters targeted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which reflected the views of the most conservative and anticommunist elements

and had conducted its own purge of left-wing elements. In Georgia, Attorney General Eugene Cook gave a speech in 1955 that declared that the NAACP had “allowed itself to become part and parcel of the Communist conspiracy...fomenting strife and discord between the white and negro races in the South.”

This campaign continued without interruption into the 1960s. In the summer of 1961, at the time of the Freedom Rides, various Mississippi officials, including US Congressman John Bell Williams, made radio broadcasts declaring, in the words of the state attorney general, that “there is not a bit of doubt in the world” that the Freedom Rides were the work of communists.

By this period of the Cold War, many Republican and Democratic politicians in the North were criticizing Jim Crow segregation in the South, although they did absolutely nothing until the development of the mass movement of the early 1960s began to force their hand. During this entire time, however, J. Edgar Hoover remained in charge at the FBI, and Hoover’s role was in some ways even more sinister than that of McCarthy. Hoover cultivated relations with whoever occupied the White House over these decades, while at the same time encouraging the most openly racist elements in the South. The pathological racism and virulent anticommunism of Hoover, who ruled the domestic intelligence establishment for 48 years until his death in 1972, is well known. Hoover shared the Dixiecrats’ conviction that the civil rights movement was “communist-inspired.”

The original McCarthyite witch hunt was not simply the product of the Wisconsin demagogue. It could not have taken place if it had not corresponded to the needs of American capitalism during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. It was used to intimidate all opposition and drive socialists out of the industrial labor movement that had been formed in the mass struggles of less than a decade and a half earlier. This campaign was used to put the nation on a war footing against the USSR. When the Cold War became less intense in the mid-1950s, McCarthyism subsided somewhat, while still being held in reserve.

The dominant sections of the US bourgeoisie concluded during this period that segregation in the South was incompatible with the interests of the ruling class as a whole. In the eyes of the liberal elements, it undercut the ideological and political struggle against the Soviet Union and China in the so-called Third World. With considerable success, the Stalinist regimes in Moscow and Beijing pointed to the apartheid-like system in the South as evidence of the brutality and repression of American capitalism, as well as the hypocrisy of Washington’s denunciations of communist “totalitarianism.”

There were also economic factors working against the continuation of officially sanctioned Jim Crow. American big business saw investment opportunities in this region, but segregation in public accommodations and the educational system interfered with such plans.

These processes—together, above all, with the mass movement for civil rights in the South—finally led to the dismantling of Jim Crow in the 1960s, almost a century following the end of slavery. The witch-hunting efforts of the “little HUACs” during this period were of a rearguard character. This outcome, however, in no way negates the historical significance of the red-baiting of the civil rights struggle. This whole episode demonstrates how the technique remains the stock-in-trade of reaction.

The world political situation has, of course, changed considerably over the past half-century. The protracted degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalinism led to its dissolution more than a quarter of a century ago. Why, then, has Russia-baiting, with all of its distinct echoes of the red-baiting of the mid-20th century, reappeared?

An oligarchic capitalism has taken shape in the former USSR, but it is nevertheless still perceived as an obstacle to the geopolitical aims and interests of a declining and crisis-ridden American imperialism. This is

part of the reason for the renewed McCarthyism, with its demonization of Moscow as the cause of practically all tensions and crises in the United States. For the first time in at least three decades, the US media and political establishment is consumed with a campaign against a “foreign adversary,” demanding total loyalty at home against this “alien threat.”

Behind the anti-Putin campaign lies above all the fear within the American ruling class of the growing anger within the working class, an anger that threatens to blow up the two-party political monopoly through which the corporate and financial aristocracy has ruled for generations. It is a measure of how far and how sharply to the right the bourgeois political spectrum has moved in the past two generations that it is the Democrats who are spearheading the new McCarthyism today.

This rightward movement also characterizes the African-American politicians and a layer of those black “activists” who have been anointed by the media and sections of the Democratic Party as the spokespersons for the struggle against police violence and other attacks on African-American workers and youth.

Leaders of the Congressional Black Caucus have joined with representatives of Black Lives Matter to echo the filthy rhetoric of the white supremacist politicians of the 1950s and 1960s. Instead of scornfully rejecting the attempt to turn protests against police violence into another justification for the foreign policy aims of American imperialism, they embraced them.

DeRay McKesson, for example, a Black Lives Matter figure and a Democratic aspirant for mayor of Baltimore in last year’s election, was quoted in the *Baltimore Sun* as warning against those who “have been really dismissive of the Russian influence for the past couple of months. This is a reminder that this goes deeper than some people want to believe.”

And Terrell Jermaine Starr, writing in *The Root*, agreed wholeheartedly with the campaign to demonize Russia. “The Soviets didn’t love us then, and Putin’s Russia certainly proves it doesn’t love us now,” he wrote, clearly indicating that the campaign against racism and police violence must be subordinated instead to corporate America and the Wall Street politicians of the Democratic Party. As this shameless support for the line of the US intelligence agencies demonstrates, McKesson, Starr and similar figures reflect the interests of an upper-middle-class layer of the population, not those of African-American workers and youth.

The criminalization of dissent is a bipartisan endeavor. Notwithstanding the bitterest tactical differences, the US ruling elite is united on the need to take on the working class. This includes directing outward the seething social tensions under conditions of record social inequality.

Trump and the Democrats are vying to lead the new witch hunt. While Trump encourages fascist elements and speaks in unvarnished terms of dictatorship and war, the Democrats play the anti-Russia card, trumpeting their connections to the intelligence and military establishment and leading the charge for censorship against left-wing opposition.

The new McCarthyism is a direct attack on democratic rights and it is aimed above all at the working class. The fight against it raises the need for an understanding of its historical antecedents, to educate and politically arm the working class for the struggle against the decaying capitalist system.



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