

Martin Luther King Day marked with an open racist in the White House

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16 January 2018

Ever since its adoption as a US federal holiday more than 30 years ago, Martin Luther King Day has been the occasion for hypocritical declamations by the ruling class and its media representatives. The birth date of the leader of the mass civil rights movement in the American South, who was both promoted and persecuted by the American state while he was alive, is used for banal and dishonest affirmations of American “democracy” and “diversity.”

After his death, King was turned into an icon. His persecution by the FBI and the likely involvement of the state in his assassination are ignored in the official ceremonies. This is all for the purpose of covering up the fact that the social equality fought for by millions of workers during the period of the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s has not been achieved and will not be achieved under the capitalist system.

This year, the anniversary observances of King’s birth are more hypocritical than ever before, given that the head of state in the US is an open racist who cultivates the support of white supremacists. This took on a grotesque character in the White House ceremony last Friday, as Donald Trump signed a proclamation of MLK Day only one day after his tirades against “shithole countries” such as Haiti and African nations, along with his expression of a preference for immigrants from Norway.

After remarks in the White House from Trump’s Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, an ultra-right African-American official who opposes public housing and assistance to the poor, and a nauseating statement from a nephew of the slain civil rights leader, came the spectacle of Trump himself stealing out of the room as reporters shouted, “Are you a racist, Mr. President?”

The media commentaries on Trump’s behavior, as well as those in the pseudo-left and left-liberal press, focus on Trump in a vacuum, as if his racist remarks have little if any significance beyond the putrid mind of this billionaire con man. Virtually none of the supposed opponents of Trump bother to ask, let alone answer, the question of where he comes from and what he represents.

Trump is the product of decades of economic decline and political reaction. It is impossible to conceive of this bigot in the White House without the nearly 50 years of social counterrevolution, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, that led up to his Electoral College victory in 2016. Trump embodies the decay of the American oligarchy, of which he is a part.

It is necessary to take an objective look at the state of US society and the legacy of the civil rights movement in light of the Trump presidency. This is all the more important in light of the fact that April 4 will mark the 50th anniversary of King’s assassination in Memphis. The half-century provides ample evidence from which to draw some conclusions. The aftermath of King’s death constitutes an indictment of American capitalism, of the Democratic Party, and of the epigones of King in what has come to be called the civil rights establishment. A sober evaluation of the civil rights movement and the role of King is also in order.

The economic and political crisis of US capitalism was already coming to the surface in the period leading up to King’s assassination. Even in the heyday of the post-World War II economic boom, when Lyndon Johnson was presiding over the “War on Poverty” and signing the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965, American capitalism had no solution to the persistence of poverty and inequality. This was vividly displayed by the rebellions that convulsed cities across the US in the mid-to-late 1960s, alongside the growing movement against the war in Vietnam. These upheavals exposed the breakdown of the post-war order and marked the beginning of the end of US global supremacy.

It was this economic and social crisis, not the personality of any individual politician, that dictated the shift in ruling class policy from reformism to reaction. While Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher have come to symbolize the shift in the US and Europe, it began earlier, with the election of Nixon and his so-called Southern strategy, to maintain divisions within the working class and build up the states of the former Confederacy as a continued bulwark of reaction. The presidency of Democrat Jimmy Carter, who pioneered

deregulation and fought bitter battles with American coal miners and other sections of the working class, laid the basis for Reagan's decade of union-busting and onslaught on social programs.

The US ruling class licked its wounds from the defeat in Vietnam and stepped up a counteroffensive against the working class in the US and internationally. A crucial component of this counteroffensive was the integration of a small layer of black politicians, including veterans of the civil rights movement, into the political establishment, first on the local level and then nationally. The program of affirmative action, first enunciated under Nixon, was expanded, championed above all by the Democrats, with the aim not of providing genuine equality and opportunity for all, but of providing a niche in the elite for a small section of African-Americans, while pitting blacks against whites for a dwindling number of jobs, college admission placements, and the like. Identity politics was adopted as the reactionary substitute for the struggle for genuine equality.

Fifty years after the death of Martin Luther King, the verdict could not be clearer. American capitalism has shown its true colors. It has produced record levels of inequality, the destruction of good-paying jobs and an erosion in living standards unprecedented since the Great Depression, along with the build-up of a police state, massive government spying and police violence, and a government of, by and for the financial oligarchy.

While popular attitudes reveal significant advances toward racial equality—as indicated in popular culture and in the rates of racial intermarriage—the escalating assault on the poorest sections of the working class is translated into intractable housing and school segregation and gross disparities in wages, health, life expectancy, and in such consequences of poverty as mass incarceration, for blacks and other minorities. While every poll regularly shows the growth in support for equality and opposition to racism, especially among the younger generation, gains such as those made in voting rights are under relentless attack.

These last 50 years have also thrown into stark relief the failure of the national reformism, even of the most left-wing variety, as espoused by Martin Luther King. The civil rights leader took courageous steps in the last years before his brutal slaying. Exactly one year before the assassination, he denounced the war in Vietnam, in a speech that called forth bitter hostility from the Johnson administration and from the great majority of King's civil rights colleagues as well. In the months before he died, in a very limited but significant step, King declared that the civil rights reforms revealed that the overriding issue confronting the US was poverty, and he launched the Poor People's Campaign to unite blacks and whites facing common economic hardship.

King refused to break from the Democratic Party, however. He insisted on the fight for social reform within capitalism. He remained within the framework of religious pacifism, speaking for a section of the liberal middle class and in opposition to the building of a revolutionary leadership based on the working class. This class weakness paved the way for the collapse, after his death, of the movement he led. The reactionary role played today by every leading spokesperson of what is fraudulently called "black America" cannot be fully understood apart from this important component of King's legacy and career.

The socialist alternative is the only basis for defending all the gains of the working class over the past century and more. These include the democratic rights gained in the long and bitter struggle against Jim Crow segregation. The Trump presidency has already ushered in a period of social opposition and mass struggle, against the danger of war, reaction and the fascistic appeals regularly made from the White House. A new period of class struggle is opening up in the United States and around the world, triggered by record inequality and the inevitable crash of the current global speculative financial bubble.

The advocates of identity politics come forward at precisely this moment to prescribe the same poison of the capitalist status quo that produced Trump in the first place. In their defense of capitalism, they work to whip up and deepen divisions within the working class, a policy that serves the most reactionary aims. The lesson of the civil rights struggles and their tragic aftermath requires an opposite perspective: the need to unite every section of the working class—African-American, white, Hispanic, Asian and immigrant—in the struggle for socialism and internationalism.



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