

The strike at General Motors: Class struggle vs. the reactionary politics of racial division

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An enormous struggle is taking place in the United States, the heart of global capitalism. More than 46,000 autoworkers are engaged in a strike against General Motors, one of the most powerful industrial corporations in the world. After decades of suppression, the class struggle is reemerging, and the consequences will be felt throughout the world.

The immense traditions of class struggle in America are rising to the surface, expressed in the statements of auto workers—opposition to the corporations, the desire for unity, hostility to the existing society. To this must be added the universal hatred of the United Auto Workers, which has been exposed as a bribed tool of corporate management.

It is at such moments that workers begin to find their voice. On the picket lines, workers of different races, genders and ethnicities are united by a common conception of their shared exploitation and their determination to fight for a future for themselves and their children. Workers have been heartened by messages of solidarity from Mexico, Brazil and Germany, expressing the international unity of the working class.

Everything that is taking place contradicts the reactionary narrative that has proclaimed the death of the working class and the end of the class struggle, supposedly replaced by conflicts centered on race, gender and sexual orientation. Not only does the working class exist, but the class struggle is, as Marx insisted, the driving force of world history.

This fact terrifies the ruling class, which is responding by doing whatever it can to foment racial and ethnic divisions.

Just one month ago, the *New York Times* published a special 100-page edition of its Sunday magazine on “The 1619 project,” which presented a race-obsessed

falsification of American history. The conflict between “black people” and “white people” is at the center of American society, wrote the *Times* columnist Nikole Hannah-Jones, and “anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country.” This conception is being actively promoted through an aggressive campaign in the media and on campuses throughout the country.

As the WSWs wrote in its statement analyzing the 1619 project, entirely absent from the *Times* narrative is any reference to the history and development of the American working class. “There is no class struggle,” the WSWs wrote, “and, therefore, there is no real history of the African-American population and the events which shaped a population of freed slaves into a critical section of the working class.”

Entirely left out in the *Times*’ account is the way in which racial divisions were consciously and deliberately promoted by the ruling class to undermine class consciousness in the decades following the Civil War. Among the most prominent examples of this pernicious form of ideological warfare was the racism and anti-Semitism promoted by Ford and the other auto companies in the 1920s and 30s, which was overcome in the formation of the industrial unions, led at the time by socialist-minded workers.

Over the past forty years, the promotion of racial divisions has become a central component of pseudo-left politics, a reactionary attack on socialism rooted in the interests of privileged sections of the upper middle class.

The racist historical narrative serves contemporary political purposes—to divide the workers against each other, to block and divert the development of class consciousness. In an earlier essay published by Hannah-Jones, in July 2016, the *Times* columnist, in responding to incidents of police violence, wrote of “the vast gulf

between the collective lived experiences of white Americans and that of black Americans,” which “can make true empathy seem impossible.”

Where does one see this “vast gulf” among the striking GM workers? Whether black or white, they have the same experience of declining wages, attacks on jobs, the destruction of health care. And this is true not just of auto workers in the United States, but of workers in all sectors and throughout the world.

The past year has seen strikes of teachers from West Virginia and Kentucky to Oklahoma and Arizona—states condemned as bastions of racism by the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left. Last month, the largest strike in the American south in recent history involved black and white workers at AT&T in a common struggle. Mass demonstrations have spread from Puerto Rico and France to Algeria, Hong Kong and Sudan.

Neither, it must be pointed out, is there a racial divide among the indicted UAW officials—which include among them black and white executives who have demonstrated their equal ability to steal from workers and accept bribes from the companies. This is part of an enormous growth of social inequality within minority populations, with a small minority brought into positions of power and privilege in academia, the state, corporate board rooms and the trade union apparatus.

Anyone who comes to the picket lines talking about “white privilege”—or, for that matter, male privilege and patriarchy—should be viewed as a company provocateur hired to try to divide workers against each other. While organizations that surround the Democratic Party have largely ignored the struggle of autoworkers, to the extent that they intervene it will be in the attempt to bolster the UAW while injecting racial and gender politics.

The fight to unify the working class in the United States across all racial, ethnic and gender lines is a component part of the struggle to unite workers throughout the world on the basis of their common class interests. The racist and identity politics that is the specialty of the Democratic Party is the counterpart to the anti-immigrant chauvinism promoted by the Trump administration—and facilitated by the Democrats—which is aimed at pitting workers in the United States against their class brothers and sisters in Latin America and Asia.

The strike at GM is a stage in a much broader tendency. The growth of the class struggle is an objective process that profoundly undermines all efforts to divide the working class along the lines of nation, race, ethnicity, language or gender. As the class struggle develops and takes on an openly anti-capitalist and socialist character, the nature and role of racist identity politics, and the organizations that promote it, will be ever more clearly revealed.



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