Haymarket Books “Abolitionist Teaching” forum: A call to promote racial division among teachers

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On June 23, Haymarket Books and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture co-hosted an online forum titled “Abolitionist Teaching and the Future of Our Schools.” The event, advancing the Democratic Party’s program of identity politics, was intended to foment divisions amongst teachers and students based on race, as educators across the country are entering into struggle against the dangerous drive to reopen schools.

The event sought to paint white teachers as “privileged” and blamed the crisis of public education—which is under relentless assault throughout the country—on the predominance of “whiteness” in public schools. It was, to put it bluntly, an out-and-out racist affair.

Haymarket Books is the former publishing house of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), which was officially dissolved last year into the Democratic Party via the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders. As a result of its Democratic Party ties, Haymarket has received millions of dollars in funding from establishment nonprofits, including the Lannan Foundation, the Tides Foundation and the Wallace Fund.

The event was moderated by Brian Jones, formerly a prominent member of the ISO and currently the associate director of education at the Schomburg Center. Speakers included Bettina Love, athletic association endowed professor at the University of Georgia, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, associate professor of language and literacy at Georgia State University, and Dena Simmons, assistant director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and an associate research scientist at the Yale Child Study Center.

For nearly three years, teachers across the US and internationally have participated in a massive strike wave against the decimation of school funding. In the wake of both those struggles and the worldwide multi-racial and multi-ethnic protests against police violence, Haymarket and the Democratic Party are working overtime in an effort to block the development of socialist political consciousness among educators, students and advocates for public education. Their aim is to channel workers back into the Democratic Party for 2020 and beyond.

To this end, the “Abolitionist Teaching” forum was a combination of racist ideology, the self-promotion of black education advisors and an attack on public education by the assembled academics. They promoted the Democratic Party line that race and identities, rather than class, are the defining feature of American society.

“Abolitionist Teaching” is defined by its promoters as “anti-racist education,” but in reality it is just the opposite. It bases itself on the racialist narrative that public schools are “steeped in whiteness.” Opposing a class-based analysis, the speakers claim that “white supremacy” permeates the public school system and is the source of social inequality.

They put forward the heinous formulation that black students and educators are “spirit murdered” daily by their white educators and peers. Significantly, the panelists insist that psychological therapy by professionals (such as themselves) trained in eradicating “whiteness” is a necessary part of “abolitionist teaching.” In this “anti-racist” model the panelists call for free therapy for all educators and students based on their race. Black educators and students would receive special therapy to address traumas inflicted by white supremacy, and all white educators and students would receive tailored therapy to learn how to deal with their “white emotionalities” and “white fragility.” The emphasis on psychology in the final instance is about a ruling ideology of inherent difference being hammered into the heads of the working class and youth, and undoing integration and inherent desire for equality.

To remedy this, the speakers call for an end to “Eurocentric curricula,” and the overhauling of standardized testing, teacher evaluations and state standards which, they argue, perpetuate white supremacy. The majority of teachers naturally despise standardized tests and all the cruel methods constructed to loot the public education system and funnel money into for-profit charters. But what is really meant by an overhaul of “Eurocentric” curriculum is a call for the predominance of black educators as teachers and their promotion into positions of power, and for black curriculum, texts, and race-based pedagogy. Muhammad said white teachers had to “step aside and let black women lead.” The consensus of the group was that only those “white” educators who deal with their “white fragility” should be permitted in schools.

“Abolitionist Teaching” is also a demand for a larger slice of the multibillion-dollar education market by the speakers themselves and the black businesses they promote. Frankly, the event took on the money-grubbing character of an infomercial, with speakers promoting their operations: Love’s Abolitionist Teaching Network and Muhammad’s hillpedagogies.com. The latter emphasized the slogans “We Buy Black” and “We Educate Black,” noting that she “sometimes turns the book over of the curriculum districts chose to adopt and I see all white women. Who wrote the curriculum? Who wrote the state standards? Who didn’t write them?” The arguments are reduced to a criteria completely based on race, mimicking and, in fact, dangerously encouraging the worst racism of a previous era.

The same logic is to be applied to teachers, where their race matters above all—not their accolades from students, their credentials or their ability to help students learn difficult or complicated subjects. With language that would leave most teachers gasping, Love equated having a teaching job with “privilege” and demanded that “white” educators give up their “privileges” because “you have not earned them.” Select “white educators” could be allowed to teach, but only if they were able to overcome their inherent white supremacy, follow this racist pedagogy and subordinate themselves to the aforementioned dominating forces.

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As is well known, educators of all races have the “privilege” of second or third jobs, working nearly endless hours, buying supplies out of their own pockets and living in poverty or near-poverty. These conditions have driven educators to wildcat action across the country in defiance of their unions, as well as the law, to walk the picket lines from coast to coast and shoulder to shoulder, united among all ethnicities.

The speakers uttered nary a word against, for instance, the mass closures of schools in Chicago, Detroit or New York, the overstuffed and dangerous classrooms around the country or the growth of for-profit charters (of which increasing numbers are owned by black entrepreneurs). There was no criticism of Wall Street’s demand that educators and students return to classrooms, risking death for themselves or their loved ones as COVID-19 rampages across the country.

Not once in the hour-and-a-half program did the participants speak against the miserable conditions in schools after decades of attacks by both big business parties, or mention the billions of dollars in budget cuts currently threatening the nation’s educators and schoolchildren. The reality is that public schools across the country are mired in poverty, with crumbling infrastructure, poor resources and mass layoffs. But the Haymarket narrative turns reality on its head and blames white teachers for the crisis in education.

While there was no shortage of scorn for white teachers, not a single word was uttered against the political forces that are behind the assault on public education, particularly the Democratic Party, which is the primary promoter of the lie that a person’s identity defines his or her politics and social views. Applying the criteria only of identity, this entire milieu promoted and continues to hail the Obama administration, which oversaw education “reforms” such as "Race to the Top," which resulted in the widescale privatization of schools and stepped-up standardized testing. During the Obama administration, the jobs of over 300,000 school workers were eliminated.

The organizers paid lip service to the anti-capitalist sentiment of the working class and youth, with Jones asking at the conclusion if “abolitionist teaching” is “anti-capitalist by nature?” Love stated that “anti-capitalism is a part of that 50, 60 year plan towards freedom,” but for now it was necessary to work within the system.

Despite the occasional rhetoric to the contrary, these “abolitionist teachers” have not the slightest interest in abolishing capitalism—the real source of racism through its police, state and media. This racialist narrative seeks to obfuscate the root of inequality, the capitalist system. Instead it seeks greater access for its priveilged upper-middle class proponents to wealth and power.

Also conveniently omitted from discussion was the terrible impoverishment of workers and students in black-led or Hispanic-led cities—from Detroit and Chicago to Los Angeles. Rather, the speakers repeated the insulting lie that it is a person’s racial identity that makes them an “ally” or “enemy.”

The unions are likewise desperate to divide and weaken the resistance of educators, fully cognizant that their “seat at the table” depends on their performance as labor contractors, imposing continuous cuts and a return to classrooms under unsafe conditions. For this reason, they have signed on to the racialist agenda.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), led by former ISO-leader Jesse Sharkey, has collaborated with the Democratic Party in shutting down scores of public schools and diverting millions of dollars to for-profit charter schools that market themselves as having higher percentages of Black and Latino principals and educators and are generally more racially segregated overall than traditional public schools.

Black Lives Matter at School, first developed through the Seattle Educators Association (SEA) and former ISO leader Jesse Hagopian, has been endorsed by the National Education Association (NEA) and the Chicago Teachers Union. In its last contract, the SEA established “racial sensitivity” as a key element in the district’s hiring and firing while signing onto budget cuts.

Alongside the rest of the Democratic Party establishment, the Abolitionist Teaching Network reprises the lie made infamous by the 1619 Project that “blacks fought alone” in the struggle to end slavery and for their civil rights. This claim was untrue from the earliest days of the abolitionist movement, whose initial advocates and philosophical source were Enlightenment Europeans.

This lie was exposed by hundreds of thousands of white Union soldiers who gave their lives to end slavery in the Civil War. The interracial civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is yet another refutation. But the notion that “blacks fought alone” has become palpably absurd in the face of the events of the last month, during which hundreds of thousands of youth and young workers of all ethnicities marched throughout the world against the murder of George Floyd behind banners that read “Black Lives Matter.”

As the WSWS has analyzed, the main impact of racial politics, including affirmative action, has been the elevation of a small layer of African Americans and other minorities into the top 10 percent and even the top 1 percent of earners nationally. This group, deploying diversionary lies like “capitalism equals whiteness,” is merely concerned over who is winning the most lucrative teaching and consulting contracts. They are opposed to the socialist reorganization of society and any measures that would significantly impact the distribution of wealth.

In short, “Abolition Teaching” is another attempt at repackaging the Democratic Party and capitalist austerity, courtesy of a thoroughly corrupt social layer. In order to ensure there is no unified struggle against capitalism, these political forces want racial politics to dominate K-12 curriculum and classrooms from day one, and to use psychological coercion to convince students of their supposed inherent differences, thus fomenting racialist communalism. This is the last desperate card of the Democratic Party as it faces an upsurge in working class struggles and mass popular protests.

A powerful opposition to the thin gruel of irrationalism and racism, however, is advancing. That is the growth of the class struggle—international, interracial and among all ethnicities. There is a new turn towards Marxism and the Socialist Equality Party within the working class and youth. This fight for socialism is made even more necessary under the impact of the pandemic and the ruling elites’ demands for an unsafe return to classrooms. We urge educators to make the decision today to join our party and fight for the international unity of the working class and a society free of exploitation, racism and poverty through the abolition of capitalism.

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