

California Ethnic Studies Curriculum imposes “critical race theory,” excludes Martin Luther King Jr.

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The newly-imposed California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC), which in part covers 20th century African American Studies, deliberately excludes Martin Luther King Jr. from the curriculum and diminishes the civil rights movement that he led. After four years of debate, redrafting, and more than 100,000 public comments, the California State Board of Education (SBE) voted unanimously to approve the final draft of the ESMC on Thursday.

The ESMC is a set of guidelines and sample lessons covering four major areas: Black/African American studies, Chicano/a studies, Native American studies, and Asian American studies. The curriculum will be used to encourage more districts in the state to implement ethnic studies courses. It is projected to serve as the basis of curriculum for a future California law that mandates ethnic studies as a prerequisite for high school graduation.

Steeped in the ideology of critical race theory, which holds that white racism against “people of color” is the root cause of all social inequality, the entire program is meant to obscure the fundamental factor that binds youth of all races and national background together in America’s most ethnically diverse state—social class. California school children will instead be taught, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*’s definition of critical race theory, that white people—including white working class children—are to blame for all social ills:

Critical race theory (CRT), the view that the law and legal institutions are ... used by white people to further their economic and political interests at the expense of people of colour. According to critical race theory (CRT), racial inequality emerges from the social, economic, and legal differences that

white people create between “races” to maintain elite white interests in labour markets and politics, giving rise to poverty and criminality in many minority communities.

Commentators on the right wing have denounced critical race theory and California’s new curriculum as “leftist.” However, the idea that race is determinative of social structure is now, and has always been, a right-wing position.

It is precisely this right-wing racialism that leads the new California ethnic studies curriculum to exclude Martin Luther King Jr. and downplay the civil rights movement. King led the last mass progressive movement for racial and social equality in the United States. His calls for common action among all the oppressed and exploited, and his well-known opposition to imperialist war, runs counter to the present-day ideology of the Democratic Party. This is why he is cut from California’s “ethnic studies” curriculum.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Dr. Clarence B. Jones, age 90, a veteran of the civil rights movement who served as legal counsel, adviser and speechwriter for King. Presently, Jones is the founding director of the Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice at the University of San Francisco.

“When looking at the history of the United States and African Americans in the 20th century, the monumental leadership principally but not only of Martin Luther King Jr. is a historical fact,” Jones told the WSW. “I don’t know how you can look at the history of the United States and exclude Martin Luther King Jr. That’s like saying Frederick Douglass or Sojourner Truth doesn’t matter.”

He continued, “What needs to be involved is a factual

account of the history of the African American experience including Martin Luther King Jr. and others. To exclude Martin Luther King Jr. is to diminish history and his legacy which had as its foundation racial unity, it was not racial separatism.”

Last October Jones wrote an open letter expressing deep opposition to the ESMC for its exclusion of King and its demeaning of the civil rights movement, calling the draft a “perversion of history” which will, if approved, “inflict harm on millions of students in our state.”

The letter was addressed directly to California Governor Gavin Newsom, California State Board of Education president Linda Darling-Hammond, and California Superintendent Tony Thurmond. Jones demanded the curriculum be rejected “unless and until changes are made to correct these falsehoods and distortions.” As of this writing, Jones has not received a response from either Newsom, Thurmond, or Darling-Hammond to his letter. He told the WSWS that he does not accept the cosmetic changes that have been made to palliate opposition.

Jones’ open letter stated:

It is a fact that the Black Freedom Movement of the 1950s and 1960s under Dr. King’s leadership transformed our country, overthrowing a century of Jim Crow segregation and white supremacist terror throughout the former Confederate States. This fact, which I had thought was well known to all educated persons, has been removed from the ESMC. This is morally unacceptable and renders the entire curriculum suspect.

The imposition of ESMC has been a sham. Opposition to the curriculum has been ignored, including that from Jones, one of the most prominent remaining veterans of the civil rights movement. This continued during a live public call-in on Thursday. Comment on the curriculum lasted over three hours and was mostly in opposition. Many teachers and parents spoke against the use of critical race theory.

One parent stated:

“The model curriculum is still infected with critical race theory, the belief that every person, interaction and institution must be viewed through the prism of race. Teaching this neoracism is harmful for many reasons. ... California’s children increasingly know other multiracial children or are multiracial but just when this is liberating

themselves from the racial boxes of the past, critical race theory would track our children back into those mental cages. Please don’t inflict critical race theory on our children.”

Another parent said:

“As a parent of an African American child, I do not want my child being taught he is a victim. Labeling will frame that child’s future. White children should not be taught that they are evil because of the color of their skin. That is racism. This is creating further division and will create a generation of individuals who hate themselves. Reject it outright. Thank you.”

The utterly reactionary purposes of racist politics are on full display in California, a state politically dominated by the Democratic Party. Far from being in any way “left” or oppositional, racial ideology has only facilitated increasing levels of social inequality in California, where, as of 2020, 124 billionaires controlled nearly \$1 trillion in wealth.

While the Democrats impose critical race theory on school children, they are herding them and tens of thousands of teachers and staff into unsafe classrooms in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the California Department of Education (CDE), the same Democratic Party officials leading the vote and the ethnic studies bill, are spearheading the homicidal reopening of schools.

During a CDE meeting held March 5 for the signing of SB86 to reopen schools, Speaker of the California State Assembly Anthony Rendon stated, “This is a key moment, and we cannot rest until every child is back in school and every educational assistance they need to put this pandemic in the past.”



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