

The campaign over racism at General Motors and the class character of identity politics

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6 April 2021

A campaign by African American media millionaires over charges of racism at General Motors concluded last week with an agreement from the auto giant to quadruple its advertising spending with black-owned media over the next four years. The announcement by GM followed the publication of ads in major newspapers denouncing GM CEO Mary Barra as “racist” for giving black-owned media an insufficient share of advertising dollars.

The episode takes to a new level the efforts of the African American bourgeoisie to increase its share of the profits sweated out of the labor of the working class—black, white and immigrant—through the exploitation of identity politics.

On March 28 the group of wealthy celebrities and capitalists took out a full-page ad in the *Detroit Free Press* demanding that black owned media receive at least 5 percent of the auto company’s multi-billion dollar advertising budget. The ad featured an open letter to Barra that ended with a call for her to resign if she did not cough up.

The signers included:

- Byron Allen, founder and chairman of Allen Media Group LLC (reported net worth \$400 million). He owns The Weather Channel, seven other cable networks and other investments. He launched a similar operation against Comcast and Charter Communications alleging racial bias. Both companies settled with Allen. He has also threatened lawsuits against major Madison Avenue ad agencies.

- Rap star and actor Ice Cube, (reported net worth \$160 million). He co-owns the film and television production company Cube Vision.

- Junior Bridgeman, the head of Ebony Media, (reported net worth \$600 million). A former NBA player, he went on to become the largest Wendy’s restaurant franchise holder in the US and a major franchise holder for Chilis. He is the CEO and president of Bridgeman Foods, which operates Coca-Cola bottling plants in the US and co-owns Coca-Cola bottling operations in Canada. He is one of the wealthiest retired athletes in the world.

- Earl “Butch” Graves Jr., CEO of Black Enterprise, the leading magazine of black capitalism, a position given to him by his father. He also serves on the board of directors of AutoZone and co-founded the private equity firm Black Enterprise/Greenwich Street Corporate Growth Fund (\$91 million in capital).

- Don Jackson, CEO and founder of Central City Productions. He recently launched Stellar TV, a 24-hour, seven day a week religious television entertainment network targeted to African American audiences.

- Roland Martin, (net worth \$3 million) CEO of Nu Vision Media Company, journalist and former commentator for CNN. Martin is perhaps most infamous for leaking CNN debate questions to the Democratic National Committee in 2016 in the hopes of aiding the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton.

When Barra did not initially respond to their open letter, the group ratcheted up the pressure, taking out full page ads in the March 31 editions of the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and *Michigan Chronicle*.

In advancing their demands the group sought to cynically exploit for their own selfish gain the mass protests against police violence last year sparked by the horrific murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. While police killings are portrayed by the media and Democratic Party as primarily a racial issue, in fact, many of the cities where high profile police killings have taken place have been presided over by black elected officials and black police chiefs. A plurality of the 1,000-plus victims of police killings each year are white.

The open letter to Barra explicitly sought to tie the selfish strivings of the select group of privileged business owners with the interests of the African American population as a whole, declaring GM’s alleged snub was “horrendous considering we as African Americans make up

approximately 14 percent of the population in America.”

What do the concerns of these multi-millionaires have in common with the strivings of African American autoworkers to put food on their table and pay the rent in the midst of a raging pandemic and spiraling economic crisis?

In 2020 GM made \$9.7 billion in pretax profits, up from pre-pandemic figure of \$8.4 billion in 2019. This was accomplished by keeping factories running at full production throughout the year after a brief shutdown in the spring forced by wildcat job actions by autoworkers in the face of the spiraling pandemic. The result has been hundreds of confirmed autoworker infections and scores of deaths, with a real count made impossible due to the deliberate concealment of information by the auto companies in collaboration with the United Auto Workers and the corporate-controlled media.

Nowhere do Allen and his associates take exception to GM coining massive profits by brutally exploiting its workforce, including large numbers of minority workers, by forcing them to labor in the midst of a deadly pandemic. In fact, Barack Obama, the first African American president, presided over the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs at GM and the other Detroit-based automakers and a vast attack on wages and working conditions. This included the imposition of multi tier wage systems, alternative work schedules that effectively abolished the eight-hour day, and the expansion of part-time, contract and temporary workers paid lower wages and receiving few if any benefits. His administration oversaw a record transfer of wealth from the working class to the coffers of the super-rich.

Going all the way back to the 1970s the city of Detroit was presided over by a succession of black mayors who oversaw the impoverishment of the city, which, from what was once called the “Paris of the Midwest,” declined to become the poorest big city in America.

The reactionary trajectory of the black bourgeoisie is further underscored by the promotion of the Contract With Black America movement founded by Ice Cube in the wake of the protests against police violence last summer. It is modeled on the Contract with America, coined by Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich in 1994, with the aim of slashing government spending on social programs to provide money for tax cuts for the rich.

Ice Cube’s document explicitly defends capitalism. While ostensibly motivated by the issue of police violence, the lengthy document is focused on providing black-owned business, particularly those related to professional sports, access to a larger share of the wealth extracted from the labor of the working class.

In almost every indicator of social distress, the African American population is overrepresented. But this is not what

is agitating Ice Cube, Allen and their associates.

The attempt to equate their selfish striving for further enrichment with the mass, egalitarian movement for Civil Rights identified with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is nothing short of obscene. In fact, figures like Ice Cube and Allen have benefited from the conscious policy of the ruling class to create a social buffer against the working class by promoting the development of a thin layer of black capitalists, office holders and wealthy celebrities.

The strivings of this layer have nothing to do with the fight for equality and in fact only serve to stoke racial conflict and divide the working class to the detriment of all sections of workers.

The provocation by the black media owners should be seen in the context of the growing resistance by autoworkers, teachers, Amazon workers and other sections of the working class to the homicidal reopening policy of the Biden administration. It comes just days before the implementation of a 12-hour, seven-day schedule for skilled trades workers at the Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, a frontal attack on the eight-hour day.

Precisely at a time when the ruling class is seeking to eviscerate all the past social gains of the working class, including the gains of the civil rights struggles, a concerted attempt is being made to preempt a united movement of the working class.

Socialists understand that the central dividing line in society is not race, but class. In opposition to the selfish strivings of egotistical and privileged social layers the working class must advance a program of class unity, bringing together workers of all races, languages and countries in a common struggle to put an end to class exploitation. This means the socialist reorganization of society based on the principle of the prioritization of human need, not private profit.



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