

# Financial scandal at Black Lives Matter foundation: Who benefits from racist politics?

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24 February 2022

On January 31, *New York Magazine* published an exposé by investigative reporter Sean Campbell (“The BLM Mystery: Where did the money go?”) detailing longstanding allegations by local chapters and anti-police brutality activists against the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (BLMGNF) regarding financial mismanagement and lack of support, financial and otherwise.

Among the major revelations:

- In November 2020, 10 chapters of the BLMGNF issued a public statement demanding greater financial accountability. The statement denounced the absence of “internal transparency about the unknown millions of dollars donated to BLMGNF, which has certainly increased during this time of pandemic and rebellion.”

Three months later, BLMGNF released, for the first time, some information about its finances. It reported that BLMGNF had raised more than \$90 million in 2020, incurred \$8.4 million in operating expenses, distributed \$21.7 million in grants to more than 30 organizations and retained some \$60 million.

- In March 2021, two mothers of victims of police violence, Lisa Simpson, the mother of 18-year-old Richard Risher, killed by Los Angeles police in 2016, and Samaria Rice, the mother of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, killed by Cleveland police in 2014, released a statement demanding that BLMGNF stop exploiting the deaths of their children to make money.

They wrote: “We don’t want or need y’all parading in the streets accumulating donations, platforms, movie deals, etc. off the death of our loved ones, while the families and communities are left clueless and broken. Don’t say our loved ones’ names, period! That’s our truth!”

- The following month, April 2021, the co-founder and then-executive director of BLMGNF, Patrisse Cullors, publicly disassociated the organization from a local protest organized in opposition to a white supremacist rally in Orange County, California. Instead, she urged BLM supporters to join a “worldwide electric slide” dance party streaming event sponsored by the UGG boot company, which was being held the same day.

That same month, the *New York Post* revealed that Cullors and her wife had purchased four properties worth approximately \$3 million between 2016 and 2021.

Cullors resigned as executive director of BLMGNF less than two months later, saying she wanted to concentrate on other projects, including books and a production deal with Warner Bros. In his article, Campbell quotes the local Orange County activist who was disavowed by Cullors as saying, “They got rich off my back.”

- Melina Abdullah, a professor of Pan-African studies at California State University Los Angeles and co-founder of Black Lives Matter LA, was recently featured in a Levi’s jeans “Beauty of Becoming” marketing campaign. In the *New York Magazine* article, Campbell notes that a Levi’s contractor worked to kill a minimum wage bill in Haiti.

- In February 2017, BLMGNF listed 25 local chapters. This was reduced to 19 chapters in 2019. Since then, the list of local chapters has been removed from the organization’s website.

The facts that have emerged demonstrate that Black Lives Matter is largely a creation of the corporate media and the Democratic Party, not a genuine expression of insurgent popular opposition to the pervasive brutality and social inequality of American society. The revelations illustrate the venal and privileged social layers whose interests are expressed by the elevation of race, rather than class, as the essential dividing line in society.

## Corporate money and black capitalism

In 2016, the Ford Foundation pledged \$100 million over six years to several organizations associated with the “Movement for Black Lives.” In 2017, One United Bank, the largest black-owned bank in the US, partnered with #BlackLivesMatter to introduce the “Amir” Visa debit card in a campaign to promote black capitalism.

Corporate donations exploded in the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020, which triggered protests involving millions of youth and workers in the US and internationally. Donors to various “anti-racism” groups tied to the Democratic Party included Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple—all of which were raking in record or near-record profits buttressed by trillions in government handouts under the CARES Act pandemic relief bill. Billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates saw their fortunes double as the stock market soared alongside rising death tolls, the calculated outcome of putting profits before human lives.

Given the nebulous character of BLM as an organization and its utter lack of financial accountability, the question arises: Why did powerful sections of the ruling class and one of its two major parties so heavily bankroll and politically promote the Black Lives Matter brand?

It is necessary to place the sudden prominence of the organization within the context of the mounting political and social crisis of American capitalism.

What would eventually become known as Black Lives Matter began as little more than a hashtag circulating on social media following the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the vigilante killer of Trayvon Martin.

The group's co-founders (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi) had neither a political record nor a popular following.

It was the events surrounding the August 2014 police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri that propelled Black Lives Matter into national prominence.

Coming on the heels of the police murder of Eric Garner in New York, the killing of Brown triggered angry and militant protests in the working class suburb of St. Louis. Within hours, local and state officials, including Democratic Governor Jay Nixon, flooded the town with heavily armed riot police, National Guard troops, military helicopters and armored vehicles, establishing de facto martial law. Hundreds of protesters were jailed, and reporters were threatened and detained by police wielding military-grade weapons.

Millions in the US and around the world watched in stunned horror as the government turned the city into a war zone. Six years into the Obama administration, the events in Ferguson ripped the lid off of the real state of social relations in the United States. The policies of endless war abroad and the militarization of society at home, alongside ever rising social inequality fueled by corporate bailouts and "quantitative easing," had only intensified under Obama.

The bringing in of an African American to lead US imperialism in place of the despised George W. Bush was aimed at giving US capitalism a political facelift. It changed nothing for the working class, black or white.

Particularly alarming for the ruling class was the response of young protesters to longtime "civil rights" frauds such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, who were met with boos or indifference when they were sent to Ferguson to defuse the protests and channel opposition once again behind the Democratic Party.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters in Ferguson were warmly received by young protesters when they pointed to the fundamental class issues uniting all sections of the working class and the social chasm separating black workers and youth from all sections of the political establishment and its two right-wing parties.

It was under these conditions that Democratic Party-aligned media outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* proclaimed Black Lives Matter, virtually unknown prior to Ferguson, as the genuine voice of opposition to racism and police brutality. Taking advantage of the political naiveté and lack of historical knowledge of the class struggle among workers and youth, the product of decades of reaction and attacks on history and science, the ruling class promoted BLM in order to frame the struggle against racism and police killings entirely in racial terms, the better to channel the growing resistance behind futile schemes for police "reform" and the nostrums of Democratic politicians.

Leading Black Lives Matter representatives made repeated trips to the White House in 2015 and 2016. President Obama lavished BLM with praise, declaring he was confident it would "take America to new heights" with a new civil rights movement.

Meanwhile, Obama rejected demands that the program for funneling billions of dollars worth of military equipment to local police departments be ended, and his administration opposed efforts to legally rein in the police, arguing in federal court in support of "qualified immunity" and other legal pretexts for condoning police repression.

In 2016, the Democratic Party doubled down on its promotion of racial and gender politics in the election campaign of right-wing war hawk Hillary Clinton. Shocked by the broad support for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries from workers and youth who took his talk of socialism and a "political revolution" against the "billionaire class" for the real thing, the Democratic Party establishment even more insistently promoted racial and identity politics to obscure the basic class issues related to social inequality.

The Clinton campaign openly promoted BLM, whose leaders returned the favor by working to channel social opposition behind her campaign, as

did Sanders when he failed to gain the nomination. Clinton's barely concealed hostility to the working class and promotion of identity politics played into the hands of the fascistic Donald Trump campaign, elevating this personification of corporate criminality and reaction to the White House.

As the WSWS has explained, the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic was a historic trigger event, compounding all of the contradictions and crises of American and world capitalism. The 2020 elections unfolded under the impact of the pandemic and the refusal of the ruling class to take the needed measures to contain it, alongside an emerging rebellion in the working class against the corporatist trade unions.

The Democratic Party rescued the near-moribund campaign of Joe Biden by making an appeal directly on the basis of race in the South Carolina primary at the end of February 2020. Under the sponsorship of a longtime fixture among black Democrats in Congress, James Clyburn, the party establishment was able to turn the tide and secure the nomination for a representative of the party's right wing.

The police murder of George Floyd in May of 2020 triggered the largest protests in US history. They were multiracial and multiethnic. The majority of those who marched and rallied against racism and police violence were white. Protests were held not only in large urban centers but in small towns and parts of the Deep South. They quickly spread around the world.

They were fueled not only by revulsion over the daily toll of police murders and outrage against racism but basic class questions of poverty, social inequality and the incompetent and murderous response of the capitalist system to COVID-19.

The demonstrations were immediately defined as "Black Lives Matter" protests in order to counter the growth of class solidarity and awareness of the international character of the struggle against all of the evils of capitalism.

A recent *Washington Post* analysis revealed that corporations donated \$50 million to various "racial justice" groups following Floyd's death. The increased funding was accompanied by the encouragement of backward right-wing attacks, based on notions of ineradicable white racism, on genuinely revolutionary figures of US history. This included the desecration and removal of monuments of figures such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and Ulysses S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln.

As the WSWS explained on June 11, 2020, following the funeral for George Floyd:

The demonstrations have given expression to a powerful desire for fundamental change. Within this movement there are growing numbers of people who recognize that police brutality is a manifestation of deeper social ills, rooted in the economic structure of society and the extreme concentration of wealth within a small segment of the population. This growing awareness, which trends inevitably toward socialism and the explicit rejection of capitalism, frightens the ruling class. It is therefore doing everything it can to divert the mass movement toward politically manageable channels. This is the function of the racial narrative that dominates all official discussion of police brutality and the murder of George Floyd.

## **A political balance sheet**

Following Biden's victory in 2020, the BLMGNF released an official

statement declaring that “Black people—especially Black women—have saved the United States” by voting Biden into office.

Really? What is the balance sheet?

The Biden administration has adopted the “herd immunity” policy of Trump, opening up the population to mass infection and death, with COVID-19 deaths soon to hit 1 million.

It is dragging the people of the US and the world into a war against Russia that threatens to ignite a nuclear holocaust.

It has unleashed uncontrolled inflation, driving workers into deeper poverty as living costs rise far above wage increases.

Nothing is being done to counter the Republican assault on voting rights. All pretenses of social reform have collapsed. The modest relief measures enacted at earlier stages of the pandemic have been scrapped and new social measures have been dropped.

As for police reform, Biden has encouraged the states to use hundreds of billions of dollars in pandemic relief to increase funding of local police, while token police reform bills have been dropped.

The rampage of police violence and murder continues unabated, with police killings continuing to top 1,000 a year.

Trump is allowed to continue building his fascist movement without hindrance, while the Democrats work to cover up the conspiracy to overthrow the Constitution, appealing for “unity” with Republican “colleagues” who condoned the January 6, 2021 coup attempt.

Black Lives Matter and other identity-based movements represent the bourgeoisie and a privileged layer of the middle class that seeks personal gain through the promotion of the politics of race and gender. Under Obama, social inequality among African Americans increased at a faster rate than in the population as a whole. Over the course of his presidency, from 2007 to 2016, the top 1 percent of African Americans increased its share of the total wealth owned by black people in the US from 19.4 percent to 40.5 percent.

The pseudo-left plays a critical role in promoting this brand of politics. It goes hand in hand with support for the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of Wall Street and the CIA, and attempts to prop up the hated pro-corporate trade union bureaucracy. It has long served as an ideological weapon of the capitalist class to divide the working class.

The fight against police brutality and racism can be won only through the abolition of the capitalist system and the struggle for socialism.



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