

Race versus class at Howard University

\$20 million for Hannah-Jones' racist journalism center while workers and students suffer

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Several hundred Howard University Hospital workers carried out a one-day strike Monday, citing unfair labor practices, insufficient staffing and low wages. The strike is an indication of an ongoing crisis at Howard University, which has seen student and faculty protests over the past few months in response to exploitation and miserable living conditions, among other grievances.

Located in Washington D.C., Howard is among the most prestigious of the historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States. While the university administration has gone to painstaking lengths to portray the majority-black college as a bastion of racial justice, the demands of students and staff have been consistently rebuffed, with the university insisting in one form or another that there are no funds to fix student dorms or to pay lecturers higher wages. Under these circumstances, it is necessary to examine more closely what the university does with its money.

In July 2021 it was announced with media fanfare that celebrity journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator and lead author of the *New York Times* 1619 Project—a racist falsification of American history which identifies as the source of all great events and social problems the oppression of blacks by whites—would be given a tenured professorship at Howard.

Furthermore, it was announced that Hannah-Jones would join Ta-Nehisi Coates, who was also granted tenure, in founding the so-called Center for Journalism and Democracy at Howard. The Center was financed with \$20 million from major corporate sources, including the Ford Foundation, Knight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and an anonymous donor.

The stated aim of this endeavor was, in the words of the university's campus news hub The Dig, to “educate the next generation of black journalists.” In his statement announcing the Center, university president Wayne A.I. Frederick thanked the donors for their generous financial support, which would serve to “provide a diverse pipeline of talent to America's newsrooms.”

These words encapsulate the actual purpose of the center. “Democracy” is equated with the elevation into highly paid corporate and academic positions of a narrow, privileged, and

dependable layer—“talent” that will exhibit no “diversity” in political thought.

In remarks given to the university newspaper, Hannah-Jones repeatedly boasted about the huge financial support given to her project, saying “I believe that this center—with its budget and with its placement at Howard University—and ability to serve a network of HBCUs really has potential to be transformative” adding, “It's going to be one of the best funded journalism centers, not just among HBCUs but in the whole nation.”

Despite the huge sums of money poured into this project and the gushing praise lavished upon it by the corporate press, there is no indication, nine months after it was announced, that anything of value has been provided to the students and faculty at Howard. What exactly, they might ask, are these millions of dollars being spent on, and who is benefiting?

These questions might have been asked by the students who last October occupied the Blackburn administrative center to protest abysmal living conditions. Despite the fact that students pay on average over \$28,000 per year for tuition, not including rent and other costs, they confront vermin infestations and black mold growing in poorly-maintained dorms. The month-long protest, which pitted majority-black undergraduate students against the university's wealthy administrators, also majority-black, demonstrated that Howard, despite its racial makeup, is no oasis of equality.

The protest was ultimately brought to an end after a confidential agreement was negotiated between the university and student representatives. While the exact details of this deal were kept under wraps, it is clear that the root causes of the protest have not been resolved.

On February 21, a student tweeted: “ANOTHER HOWARD UNIVERSITY HOUSING SITUATION. Student[s] living on campus in West Towers have gone 2 days without hot water, heat, internet and electricity. No mass communication from faculty or administration.” On March 22, another student tweeted: “Students in Howard University's Howard Plaza West are experiencing hell right now.” She explained that faulty air conditioning units were leading to temperatures as high as 81 degrees inside the dorms.

In late March, hundreds of non-tenured faculty and adjunct professors rallied in support of a planned strike over wages and working conditions. The threatened strike was abruptly called off after behind-the-scenes negotiations between the university and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 500-affiliated University Lecturers Union. The union declared that a “historic victory” had been won, with a tentative agreement reached between the union and the administration. The details of this “victory” have been sparse. Very likely, the union colluded with the university administration to avert the strike, which threatened to draw together the struggles of faculty, students and campus staff.

Whatever the machinations that have temporarily suppressed the faculty’s fight, it is clear that the needs of professors, adjuncts and other faculty have not been met and any supposed gains will be wiped out by rapidly rising inflation in the cost of food, fuel and housing.

According to the SEIU, Howard professors are the lowest paid among HBCUs when their salaries are compared with the cost of living in the Washington D.C. area. Many are forced to work multiple jobs in order to pay bills. In addition, their jobs are precarious, with non-tenure-track professors subject to termination after seven years.

Despite the supposed difficulties Howard faces in adequately compensating faculty and providing safe living conditions for students, Frederick is the highest paid university president in the D.C. region, with an annual salary of \$1.64 million. He answers to a board of trustees made up of venture capitalists and Democratic Party-aligned politicians. The university controls an endowment of nearly \$850 million.

It is in this context—a workforce and student body being highly exploited by a wealthy elite—that the hiring of media celebrities such as Hannah-Jones and Coates must be placed. Hannah-Jones’ main claim to fame is the 1619 Project, a falsification of history that aims to make race conflict the driving force of American history, twisting the past to fit the narrative. Among its numerous erroneous claims, which have been challenged by principled historians, is that the American Revolution was fought to defend slavery.

Coates is known as the foremost advocate of race-based reparations—a reactionary demand which serves to split the working class. One of his most well known books is a tribute to the Obama administration, whose title, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, sums up the orientation of the race-obsessed upper-middle classes. The fact that millions of black workers were impoverished under Obama—who oversaw the largest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in history and carried out war crimes in the Middle East and North Africa—is a matter of indifference to Coates.

Claims by such figures as Coates and Hannah-Jones to be fighting for racial justice are a thin veneer for the interests of the privileged upper-middle class social layer they represent. Indeed, what is interesting about them is not so much their

work in “journalism”—Hannah-Jones’ byline appeared on just 23 articles in over seven years at the *New York Times* prior to being hired at Howard—but what they embody as a social type: the grasping careerist, the affluent petit-bourgeois who views the wealth of the ruling classes with envy and wants a bigger piece of the action.

The spectacle surrounding Hannah-Jones’ hiring at Howard is a case in point. Concurrent with her acceptance of a tenured position at Howard, Hannah-Jones publicly turned down an offer of lifetime tenure at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). Hannah-Jones threatened legal action when the UNC Board of Trustees did not act with sufficient haste in granting her tenure, claiming that this was a racist attack. It never seems to have occurred to her that receiving multiple lucrative opportunities from respected universities is a luxury that is denied the vast majority of educators, regardless of skin color.

While Hannah-Jones, Coates and other peddlers of race politics claim to be struggling against “institutional racism,” they also apparently never ask themselves why they are showered with money and adulation by powerful (what they would call) “white institutions” like the *New York Times*, the MacArthur Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation and others.

Hannah-Jones and Coates are both recipients of MacArthur Foundation \$625,000 “genius grants.” Hannah-Jones is known to rake in hundreds of thousands of dollars in speaking fees. In January, she was paid \$25,000 for a one-hour talk over Zoom at Cosumnes River College in Sacramento, California.

Nor do they ask themselves why they garner the political support of the Democratic Party, the oldest capitalist party in the world and the institution which is now leading the drive toward imperialist world war—a war drive necessarily accompanied by a vicious assault on the living standards of the whole working class.

The conflict at Howard in fact refutes the main thesis of the 1619 Project, and of the identity politics pseudo-left. It demonstrates that class, not race, is the main division in capitalist society. Moreover, it exposes the essential purpose of identity politics as an essential ideological defense of an economic order which is the source of social inequality and war.

The emergence of the class question at Howard University is a harbinger of things to come. The working class, internationally, is entering into struggle. As this conflict comes more and more into the open, it will become ever clearer that the proponents of “racial justice” have aligned themselves firmly with capitalism against workers of all races.



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