

New York University hosts segregated “anti-racism workshops”: The logic of identity politics exposed

Tim Avery
13 August 2023

The Steinhardt School of Education at New York University (NYU) hosted a series of whites-only “anti-racist workshops” from February to June in what amounted to a quiet practice of segregation at a major American university.

The online program, organized by the Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative (EJ-ROC) at NYU Metro Center, was described on a page that has since been taken down from NYU’s website as “designed specifically for white public school parents in New York City.”

Anyone who has even a passing familiarity with the Civil Rights movement and the struggle against segregation in the American South should immediately recognize the fundamental contradiction between the phrases “whites-only” and “anti-racist.” Given this apparently obvious paradox, the reader could be forgiven for assuming that the organizers are simply ignorant of this history or are otherwise very confused.

But NYU did not approve this program by accident, and this workshop series is not a matter of a few mistaken individuals. It demonstrates that the logic of identity politics—the middle-class politics of race, gender, sexual orientation and so on—is not to eliminate prejudice, but to enshrine prejudice as the central axis of society.

In a leaked video of the first session, a parent in attendance says, “I am not completely convinced why it is so important to meet only as white people... It seems a little counterintuitive to me.”

“The purpose is to create a space where we can talk about our racism with each other,” responds Barbara Gross, the associate director of the EJ-ROC, “without burdening the people of color in our lives.”

“People of color are dealing with racism all the time,” she adds. “It’s a harm on top of a harm for them to hear our racist thoughts.”

The EJ-ROC also circulated a leaflet by another organization, the Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere-Los Angeles (AWARE-LA), which argues, “A white space serves as a resource to people of color who want to work with white people but don’t want to have to spend all their energy dealing with the racism of white people.”

The idea that “white” people are inherently racist, and that therefore “people of color” must be protected from their “racist thoughts,” is thoroughly reactionary and serves to legitimize the far-right conception that different “races” of humans stand irreconcilably opposed to one another.

The AWARE-LA leaflet justifies its segregationist practice with quotes from Black nationalist figures and organizations of the 1960s. It quotes an interview with Malcolm X conducted by Jack Barnes and Barry Sheppard and published in *Young Socialist* in 1965:

Whites who are sincere should organize themselves and figure out some strategies to break down the prejudice that exists in white

communities. This is where they can function more intelligently and more effectively, in the white community itself, and this has never been done.

Young Socialist was a publication of the Young Socialist Alliance, the youth group of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The SWP broke from the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)—the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky, which today publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*—in 1963. In breaking with the International Committee, the SWP capitulated to Pabloism, a revisionist tendency that emerged within the Fourth International after World War II, which rejected the program of world socialist revolution and wrote off the working class as a revolutionary force.

The predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the United States, the Workers League, was founded by members of the SWP who fought against the SWP’s shameful capitulation to Pabloism and national opportunism. *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (US)* summarizes the period:

The growing opposition to the war in Vietnam among masses of students, the eruption of violent protests by African-American workers and youth in major cities, and the militant strikes by substantial sections of the working class were indications of the crisis of American capitalism. The Socialist Workers Party, repudiating its Trotskyist heritage, responded to these developments by adapting to petty-bourgeois tendencies that dominated these movements. Its opportunism found expression in its promotion of Black nationalism as an alternative to the struggle for the unity of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. The SWP’s espousal of Black nationalism, including the demand for a separate Black nation, reflected its dismissal of the American working class as a revolutionary force. This perspective expressed the influence of the New Left, which derived much of its theoretical inspiration from the anti-Marxist conceptions of Herbert Marcuse, a leading representative of the “Frankfurt School,” who characterized the working class as a “proto-fascist” element in American society.

Modern identity politics, which is a cornerstone of both the curriculum at NYU and the electoral strategy of the Democratic Party, evolved from this very concoction of postmodernism and Black nationalism, combined with the promotion of politics based on gender and sexual identity.

In the past half-century, identity politics and affirmative served as mechanisms by which small fractions of traditionally marginalized groups have been elevated into the upper-middle class.

Tom Carter's lecture to the 2021 school of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), "The ideological foundations of Critical Race Theory," sharply describes the reality of upper-middle-class identity politics and the sort of "anti-racist workshops" that the EJ-ROC held at NYU:

There is good money to be made for those who have hitched their wagons to this tendentious nonsense. [Robin DiAngelo] recently charged \$12,000 for just one seminar at the University of Kentucky and \$20,000 for one three-and-a-half-hour workshop at the University of Connecticut. She typically charges between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per event. Tim Wise, author of the book *White Like Me*, likewise charges a speaking fee in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range...

These pricey "workshops" for white people resemble nothing so much as the "gay conversion therapy" practiced by Christian fundamentalists—in that the whiteness, like the homosexuality, can never be completely purged, but can only be meditated upon as a perpetual source of shame and guilt for the person so unlucky as to have been born in such a sinful condition.

Racial segregation is not foreign to NYU. Three years ago, a small student group called Black Violets circulated a petition that called for "Black student housing"—a "safe space" free of the constant burden of "educating ... uninformed peers about racism."

The university administration warmly welcomed the proposal for segregated housing despite the petition's relatively few signatures, and the Black Violets Themed Engagement Community was established in Brittany Hall.

There are doubtless many students at NYU who, out of a genuine desire to change society, come into contact with identity politics—and, just as surely, there are many who feel instinctively that something about it is not quite right.

But there is no way to answer the claims of identity politics or oppose it on a progressive basis without an historical understanding of its roots.

For this reason, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at NYU has made clarifying, exposing and fighting identity politics a central aspect of its work.

In 2019, the IYSSE at NYU held a public meeting titled "Race, Class, and the Fight for Socialism" in opposition to the New York Times' 1619 Project and its racist falsification of American and world history. David North summed up the 1619 Project during the 2023 Summer School of the SEP:

Committing enormous resources to this project, the most influential bourgeois corporate newspaper in the United States—the media flagship of the American state, the intelligence agencies, and the academic establishment—announced that it was initiating a fundamental revision of the narrative of American history. Neither the American Revolution nor the American Civil War were to be seen any longer as progressive historical events. The 1619 Project would decisively expose the Revolution as a desperate and cynical rebellion of slave owners, determined to thwart the efforts of the British Empire and the heroic Lord Dunmore to advance the cause of emancipation.

~~the~~ ~~World Socialist Web Site~~ ~~led~~ ~~have~~ opposition to the 1619 Project and posted interviews with a number of prominent historians. Without the progressive conquests of the American Revolution and the Civil War, the WWS explained, there could be no talk of socialist revolution today.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, the primary author of the 1619 Project, was hastily invited to appear alongside NYU President Andrew Hamilton at an event the day before the IYSSE's meeting. Clearly, this event was organized in direct response to the IYSSE.

The NYU administration's panicked response to the IYSSE reflected the desperation of the Democratic Party and the ruling class more broadly. As Carter explains,

The [ruling class's] *volte face* to embrace racial sectarianism has a short-sighted and desperate character. Unable to make a popular appeal on the basis of a genuine improvement in living and working conditions for masses of people, the Democrats have to resort to emotional appeals to various forms of prejudice, envy and mistrust. But the incessant talk of "white privilege" and "white fragility" ... will have the effect of driving workers into the arms of the far right and, in fact, undermining the real struggle to expose and eliminate prejudice.

Marxism insists that the history of human society is the history of class struggle and that the future depends on whether the working class can overthrow the capitalist class and establish a socialist society.

As Trotsky wrote in the founding document of the Fourth International, "The Transitional Program": "The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership"—that is, on the building of a revolutionary party that can lead the working class to power.

On the contrary, postmodernism denies the existence of objective history, and identity politics centers the subjective experience of people of various identities. These irrational ideologies reflect the efforts of the ruling class to divert genuine social opposition into the dead end of reformism, which invariably transforms its adherents into rabid supporters of capitalism and imperialism.

Above all, the ruling class's promotion of prejudice serves to undermine the organic striving of the working class for unity. Science has long disproved the concept of "race" as a biological category, but racism and prejudice persist precisely because the ruling class recognizes them as useful tools for undermining working-class solidarity and intentionally promotes them to the tune of millions and millions of dollars. Herein lies the significance of the fact that the EJ-ROC workshop targeted public-school parents.

The famous slogan of the Communist Manifesto is "Workers of the world, unite!"—not "Races of the world, divide!" Students at NYU who are interested in genuine opposition to backwardness and in the fight for the socialist transformation of society should contact and join the IYSSE at NYU.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact