

The political issues behind the Trump administration's attack on DEI

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Starting the day that Donald Trump took office, his administration initiated a sweeping attack on “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI)—the identity-based privilege industry imposed in recent years in corporations, government and educational institutions.

Through the campaign against DEI, the White House is asserting unprecedented powers for the executive branch and dismantling democratic rights. Identity politics itself has laid the groundwork for this, fueling the growth of the far-right by suppressing the reality of class conflict and blaming one layer of workers—especially white men—for racial oppression, sexism, homophobia, etc., even as conditions have worsened for all layers of the working class. The result has been frustration and disorientation, sentiments which the far-right feeds off.

On January 20, Trump issued Executive Order 14151, “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing.” It described DEI as “illegal and immoral” and terminated all such “mandates, policies, programs, preferences, and activities in the Federal Government, under whatever name they appear.” It required a review of all equity-related federal grants, contracts, and services with the “aim of eliminating them” and reported on the “economic and social costs” of DEI in all areas of government. “Environmental justice” was singled out for special mention.

The following day, Trump issued Executive Order 14173, “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity,” which tasks government agencies, including the Justice Department, with rooting out DEI not just in state institutions but also in the private sector, on the grounds that they violate civil rights law.

Following Trump’s lead, newly installed Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Trump fired the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Charles Q. Brown who is African American, and five other top military officers, in a purge of those Hegseth called “DEI hires.” Trump put his overt racism on display when he asserted that the January 29 crash of an American Airlines jet and a military helicopter in Washington DC happened because of “DEI,” saying, “Brilliant people have to be in those positions.”

Three weeks after his executive orders were issued, Trump’s Department of Education issued a “Dear Colleague” letter that declared federal funding will be ended for educational institutions from preschool to the post-secondary level that fail to root out anything DEI-related or, importantly, that which the Trump administration might interpret as such. This includes not just matters “pertaining to admissions, hiring, promotion, compensation, financial aid, scholarships, prizes, administrative support, discipline, housing, graduation ceremonies,” but also “all other aspects of student, academic, and campus life.”

The letter prepares the way for the removal from curriculum of any subjects related to race, racial discrimination or the long history of racial oppression in the US—as well as all the study of the many other forms of inequality to which the DEI industry has laid claim. Trump’s anti-DEI orders have already resulted in a chaotic removal of content from websites and the abrupt termination of funding for scientific research utilizing

racial or gender categories.

In other words, in the name of undoing DEI, the Trump administration aims to ban the study of topics of immense importance, without which American society, culture and history cannot be comprehended.

American corporations, which not so long ago were bombarding their workers with DEI initiatives, have taken the cue. In the aftermath of the presidential mandates, numerous major businesses, including Amazon, Target and Walmart, have scrapped their DEI programs. Trump has demanded on his Truth Social account that Apple follow suit.

Meanwhile, many educational institutions are scrambling to rewrite mission statements, remove DEI language from their programming, de-publicize events that could be interpreted as DEI-related, and so forth. The University of Colorado took down its DEI website, for instance, while North Carolina’s public higher education system scrapped its requirement that students take DEI-related classes in order to graduate.

College administrators are terrorized by the prospect of losing federal funding, which, while a drop in the bucket compared to the amounts spent by Washington on war-making, sustains myriad programs and services at all levels of instruction. For example, according to Columbia University’s Community College Research Center, in 2017 these two-year higher education institutions got 18 percent of all their funding from federal resources.

Trump’s executive orders and the “Dear Colleague” letter are being challenged in court by local governments, higher education groups, scholarly associations and teachers’ unions as violations of free-speech, the boundaries of executive authority and procedures laid out in the Constitution and law. On February 21, a federal judge issued a temporary injunction blocking the Trump administration from canceling or altering federal contracts that it deems “equity-related.”

The White House claims that the purpose of its anti-DEI campaign is, as its January 20 Executive Order states, “serving every person with equal dignity and respect.” The letter issued by the Department of Education drapes itself in the language of the civil rights movement and insists it speaks on behalf of those who “come from disadvantaged backgrounds and low-income families.” Decrying “pervasive and repugnant race-based preferences and other forms of racial discrimination,” it criticizes the use of “crude racial stereotypes” and declares “segregation by race at graduation ceremonies and in dormitories and other facilities” to be “a shameful echo of a darker period in this country’s history.” “All students are entitled to a school environment free from discrimination,” it insists.

The letter even tries to present the Trump administration as a defender of historical truth, denouncing educational institutions for having “toxically indoctrinated students with the false premise that the United States is built upon ‘systemic and structural racism’” and teaching “students that certain racial groups bear unique moral burdens that others do not.”

How is it possible that a fascist president is able to posture as an advocate of racial egalitarianism?

Trump's billionaire acolyte Elon Musk gives Hitler salutes at mass meetings. Among the core of the January 6 rioters who attempted to overturn the 2020 election—just pardoned by Trump—are white supremacists and open neo-Nazis, with whom the president regularly consorts. Leading figures in his administration and others in the Republican Party promote the virulently antisemitic “great replacement” theory. The president demands the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. He has previously banned people from Muslim countries from entering the US.

Trump's violent anti-immigrant campaign, mobilizing the most degrading ethnic stereotypes, overwhelmingly targets racial minorities, especially people of Latino background, who form the majority of both legal and illegal immigrants in the US today. In September, the president promoted the false claim that Haitian refugees in a small Ohio town were eating others' pets. One could go on.

Above all, Trump is working to carry out a social counter-revolution of unprecedented scale, gutting everything that the working class has secured—from science to social programs—over decades of struggle.

That such an administration is able to present its reactionary policies as being motivated by America's egalitarian traditions is extraordinary.

The reason Trump is able to do so is not just because he is a liar. Rather, the purveyors of “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” critical race theory, MeToo politics and the like have made themselves a useful target of attack by the far-right because of the bankruptcy of their essentially reactionary ideology. Denying that the working class as a whole is oppressed and insisting that all whites, especially white men, are “privileged,” they want not a universal improvement in conditions for the masses, but special allotments for themselves distributed by a capitalist system that they staunchly defend.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, for instance, one of the leading advocates of DEI in academia today, has a three-hundred plus page book on the alleged universality of white racism that includes not a single demand for better working conditions, higher wages, more funding for schools, or anything else that would truly improve the situation confronting the bottom half of the population, of all races. It is entirely dedicated to insisting on the virtues and necessity of affirmative action.

Moreover, DEI and its affiliate conceptions have been used at workplaces, educational institutions and civic organizations to witch hunt individuals who are allegedly not members of the oppressed and to stoke racial divisions. Among the most toxic examples of DEI initiatives has been the imposition of “racial affinity group” housing on college campuses—in other words, racial segregation.

DEI has also been in the business of creating lucrative “career opportunities” for elites of the “right” category—university appointments, managerial positions, consulting jobs, etc. Such posts are generally inaccessible not just to “whites,” but also the vast majority of minorities, who are on the bottom-end of the socioeconomic ladder and have been denied the education and credentials necessary to get such jobs by decades of stagnating wages and cuts to public service.

Storming over “white privilege” does not put food on the table of a single working family, black or otherwise, nor is it intended to. But for those who gain access to DEI's coffers, there is real money to be made. According to PR Newswire, the global DEI consulting market alone in 2022 was valued at \$9.4 billion. Before Trump's election, it was projected to grow to \$24.4 billion by 2030.

A critical component of the DEI campaign has been its assault on historical truth, and especially America's revolutionary traditions. In the DEI worldview, the American Revolution and the Civil War were little more than cunning efforts by whites to establish and maintain “structural racism.” American society is condemned to an interminable state of “white supremacy” that requires a never-ending stream of “social justice” and identity-based initiatives—programs that just so happen to benefit only

the most privileged layers of minorities and women.

The New York Times 1619 project, which the WSWS exposed as a pile-up of lies and distortions, was rooted in and sought to advance this outlook. Notwithstanding the absence of a factual basis for the claims it made, the 1619 Project was distributed to schools across the country. The effect of this is not just to sow divisions, but to demoralize the youth. If the US is hopelessly racist, what is the point of fighting for anything?

The Republican Party and Donald Trump tap into the widespread disgust among all sections of the population over DEI and identity politics-led attack on historical truth, the revolutionary traditions of the United States, and workers who happen to be white. The far-right further advances its cause by falsely stating that DEI and its related conceptions are Marxist.

This points to Trump's actual purpose in attacking DEI. The ultimate object is the working class. The rooting out of “race talk” on the campuses will quickly transform into the suppression of the right's real fear: “class talk.” This is already evident in the vicious crackdown against anti-Gaza genocide protests on America's campuses, an assault on freedom of speech fully backed by both capitalist parties.

Over the course of years, the *World Socialist Web Site* has elaborated the Marxist critique of racialism, critical race theory, DEI, and all its related conceptions. Nothing rivals the WSWS' work, which is based on the principle of working class unity and the necessity of casting aside all divisions stoked for centuries by various layers of the ruling class as they work to divide and conquer.

The socialist opposition to DEI is left-wing and animated by the fight for social equality. But this in no way alters socialists' implacable opposition to Trump and his fascist promotion of racism.

In this sense, workers must indeed learn to “discriminate”—but on the basis of class, not race. That is, to come to understand that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the working class and the capitalist class and all of its ideologies, and to draw out the necessary conclusions.



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