

The Black Lives Matter movement

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Over the past 12 months, the world's lens has focused on the killing of Black Americans by US police. This racial oppression is rooted in the capitalist system, and the struggle to end it must tear out those roots.

The slaughter of six Black women and three men by 21 year-old Dylann Roof at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on 17 June was an act of terrorism motivated by race hate.

The reluctance of media and politicians to use the T word, that otherwise they use so freely, is a testimony to their sensitivities on this issue. Black people are by far the biggest target for such 'hate crimes'. Roof openly states that his motive was to start a race war in the USA, as he addressed his white supremacist fantasies to his victims. 'You rape our women and you're taking over our country. And you have to go.' Roof's subsequently discovered website, revealed that it was the recent period's protests against the police killings by of Black people that convinced him that 'Blacks are taking over the world.' Roof's prime target was Emanuel church's senior pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney who had organized rallies against the shooting by a white police officer of Walter Scott on 4 April.

Though the killers in such incidents may be loners, a whole slew of white supremacist websites like the one cited by Roof (Council of Conservative Citizens) incite their devotees to murderous acts. Moreover a number of arson attacks on Black churches across four southern states occurred in the week following Roof's rampage, probably stirred up by calls for the banning of the confederate flag from state capitols and other public buildings.

But dangerous as the white supremacist terrorists are, they are nothing as compared to the actions of the agents of 'law and order' and the way the 'justice system' deals with them.

Like a nightmare version of the film 'Groundhog Day', police killings of African-Americans in the United States repeat themselves endlessly. The assault while in police custody on 25 year-old Freddie Gray in Baltimore on 12 April 2015 and his death after being in a coma on 19 April shows the whole pattern of brutality, lies and impunity. He was denied medical care at the scene and transported in a police van not an ambulance and thereafter found to be in a coma. Although it was initially reported that he was unarmed, police claimed that he was armed with a switchblade knife.

In later reports, including from the office of the city prosecutor, this turned out to be a (legal) pocketknife. The pretext for the arrest was that Freddie made eye contact with one of the six cops that arrested him and then ran away from them. He was chased, knocked down, and thrown into a police van. Somewhere along the way his spinal cord was severed.

Everything about this particular case is eerily similar to many such incidents to hit the headlines over the last three years. The first was killing of 17 year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, on 26 February 2012, by armed neighborhood watch vigilante George Zimmerman. On 13 July 2013, he was acquitted on

a charge of second degree murder provoking nationwide protests.

#BlackLivesMatter started as a hashtag during these protests and was founded by three Black women activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. It grew into a nationwide movement with the killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in the summer of 2014 ? and impunity of the killers.

On 17 July 2014, in New York City, 43-year old Garner was put in a chokehold by a white police officer ? allegedly for selling loose cigarettes. Garner repeatedly gasped, ?I can?t breathe? 11 times as he was held down by several policemen. The officer responsible for the illegal chokehold was not charged with any offence. ?I Can?t Breathe? became a symbol and slogan of protests nationwide.

Then on 9 August 2014 came the death of Michael Brown, 18, in Ferguson, Missouri. Witnesses reported he had his hands up and was mouthing the words ?Don?t shoot?. Thus ?Hands Up Don?t Shoot!? became a another key slogan of the new movement. In November, a grand jury refused to charge the officer, Darren Wilson, responsible for the shooting. Brown?s death and the lack of charges sparked massive protests, in Ferguson and across the nation, as did the killing of 12 year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland Ohio on 22 November 2014, the shooting in the back and the planting of a weapon on Walter Scott on 4 April 2015 in South Carolina. Yet, these are only the incidents that made the national and international news. There were many, many other killings of unarmed, mostly Black men and women by the police between each and every one of these more publicized killings.

The question people around the world are asking is, what lies behind this incredible record of police slayings? The truth of the matter, as shown by history, is that these publicized killings are just a few threads in a bloody tapestry of societal oppression and police terror against the Black community in the US. In fact, there is nothing new about such events, it is just that the spotlight of publicity has finally focused on them, because of the proliferation of cell phone video and the instant communication provided by the Internet and social media sites. Racial harassment and murder are in the DNA of US police forces.

It goes right back to the slave patrols of the 18th and 19th centuries and their function has always been to protect the ?private property? of the ruling class, including their human ?property?, slaves, and the violent control and repression of anyone who might question and challenge their rights to that property. Today the middle classes, mainly white, who have separated themselves off in suburbs and gated communities to follow the American Dream, live in a pathological fear, induced by corporate media and right wing politicians, that the excluded and deprived (seen mainly as Black and Latino) will rob them of their property and their lives.

Yes, in the political arena, there have been changes in law that has outlawed the legal restrictions imposed by the infamous Jim Crow system in the former Confederate States of America. Yes, Affirmative Action and President Lyndon Johnson?s War on Poverty did make some difference in that a Black middle class has grown in the last half century. But these so-called ?gains? have come at a glacial pace for the great majority of Black people and, for all but the lucky and better educated few, most people of color still face the facts of grinding poverty, systemic racism that limits opportunity under capitalism, and, in today?s political environment, even a roll-back of many of the political gains made in the first flush of reforms in the initial years after the great Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s, ?60s, and ?70s.

One of the features of Black oppression in the US is the complicity of the Democratic Party, and especially Black Democrats, in the oppression of Black people today. Since the 1960s, the Democrats have played the role of being the part of the establishment that is ?on the side? of Black people. They have done this with the aid of some of the veterans of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, such as Rev Jesse Jackson and Rev Al Sharpton. They were able to do this because northern and western

Democrats were the primary proposers in the White House and Congress of the bills that destroyed the last vestiges of the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation in the American south. Another reason was the killing of many of the more radical leaders of those movements. Most of the older Civil Rights veterans joined the Democrats and later generations of politically minded Black people followed suit. They managed to politically expropriate the much more radical original movements in the decades that followed.

The Democrats have reaped the electoral benefits of fostering a soft version of 'identity' or 'community' politics ever since, holding up the mirage of integration into the American Dream of middle class prosperity. Since the goal of the original Civil Rights struggles was winning democratic rights and participation in the economic prosperity promised by American capitalist society, and also because the trade union movement had long bought into this and renounced the goal of political independence, there was no mass working class socialist party to intervene and give an anticapitalist lead to the struggle. And with it was lost the aspect of focusing on poverty, bad housing, lack of well-paid jobs and inferior schooling that not only the Black Panthers but Martin Luther King too, in the months before his assassination, had raised.

Instead middle class leaders, like Jackson and Sharpton concentrated on the rise of their class out of the mass of poor Black people, with the excuse that they were providing role models that would make the latter become more aspirational. The election of Barack Obama was the pinnacle of achievement for this strategy. Events from Ferguson onwards have shown how hollow this is. It has become obvious to most Black people that, in spite of more Black faces in positions of authority, like Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, those people are incapable of changing the cops' practice of killing poor Black youth on the streets every day.

Indeed, when it comes to mass protests on the streets, they are willing, like President Obama himself, to condemn protesters as 'thugs who are trying to tear down what so many fought for' and rush to call in the National Guard, like Mayor Rawlings-Blake did. Not only is the Mayor of Baltimore Black, so is the Police Commissioner. And not only is the President of the USA Black, but so were his last two Attorney Generals. The Congressional Black Caucus has risen from nine members in 1969 to 43 in 2013. But, for all this, the murderous police reign of terror continues unabated in the communities of the poor, the disadvantaged and the working class.

This is all inextricably connected to the economic devastation that the neoliberal capitalist model, ascendant since the Reagan years, has had on American cities. As a completely bourgeois party, Democrats, including Black Democrats, have bought fully into the neoliberal mindset that has targeted the gains in employment opportunities and social services that working class people made through the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. The Democrats merely promise that they will be 'kinder and gentler' when cutting services for the rest of us, while offering repeated tax cuts for the wealthy and the corporate behemoths. Baltimore is merely one example of these economic policies. It starts with good jobs leaving the city for places in the world where exploitation is easier and more profitable. Then the white population, most of whom are more regularly employed and on higher wages, leave the cities for the suburbs, putting pressure on the tax base and city services. With the lack of opportunity caused by the lack of jobs and this 'white flight', the population left behind becomes poorer and poorer.

A proportion of desperate people in such conditions will take any way out, even if it is illegal, including selling drugs and petty crime. This then becomes the pretext for mainly white police officers visiting a reign of terror on any Black youth on the streets, especially if they fail to show 'respect', i.e. submissiveness. Add to this fact that many cases, city authorities use the laws to levy fines in order to make up budget.

Statistics

A few statistics can bear out this claim for resistance to reform of capitalism and rid society of Black oppression. While the laws that supposedly held back economic progress for Black Americans were rolled back 50 years ago, the economic oppression still remains. For the last half-century the unemployment rate for the Black population in the US was always twice (or more) than the unemployment rate was for white Americans. Always. Not just in some years, not even just in most years. Always.

The US is undergoing a recovery in employment levels but the inequality still remains ? non-Black workers? unemployment rates fell much earlier and faster during this recovery, although overall 45 per cent of these were lower-wage jobs. There are still currently close to 2 million of registered Black people without jobs. In February, the unemployment rate for African-Americans was 10.4 per cent, while the comparable rates for whites, Hispanics and Asians were 4.7 per cent, 6.6 per cent and 4.0 per cent, in that order, (figures released in March by the Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Since the Reagan years, the wealth gap between whites and Blacks has not improved and still today stands at a 6:1 ratio. In other words, whites today, and for the last 30 years, are six times as wealthy as Black people and other people of color in general. And to top it all off in 2012, Black people in actual poverty were 28 per cent of the Black population. As a comparison, among non-Latino whites only 12 per cent of this population is counted as living in poverty. Clearly, judging by these statistics something is terribly wrong if you're trying to enact reforms that enable equal opportunity.

A brief look at the history of the Civil Rights movement and its victories involving the enactment into law in the US of equal rights and equal opportunity shows the meager results of these reforms for the mass of Black people, at least over the medium term involving decades. In fact, an argument could be made that only the short-lived reforms that were enacted under President Lyndon Baines Johnson's War on Poverty and governmental policies involving Affirmative Action, had any measurable affect at all on Black economic status.

It's not a coincidence that the gains that were made under these two programs stopped dead with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and his pioneering version of neoliberal economics. The much-vaunted ?Trickle down effect ? of Reaganomics was in fact a disaster for the working class in general, but a catastrophe for the fortunes of Black people. If significant changes to this picture cannot be made in half a century, by laws banning discrimination, will that change ever happen?

The statistical data is irrefutable, but this does not prevent the underlying reasons becoming the subject of vigorous debate. The extreme right wing, represented by the Tea Party Republicans across the country, fall into thinly veiled racist reasoning for the lack of Black economic progress. It must be something inherent in African Americans that make them unable to compete in the wonderful world of capitalism. Whether it's a lack of motivation, sheer stupidity, laziness encouraged by generous government handouts, or outright tendencies to criminality, it's apparent ? they argue ? that Blacks will never be do better in the economy than they are now. As such, this should just be accepted, not be made so much of ? or even talked about at all. The only hope is exposing their unprotected backs to the lash of capitalism. ?If you don't work for whatever pittance the bosses want to pay, then you don't eat.? And if you are forced to steal to feed your family and get caught, you go to jail, there to be put to virtually unpaid labor for the bosses.

Of course this view leaves out the economic progress that was made with the War on Poverty and Affirmative Action programs. Although these programs were limited by being reforms taken under the auspices of capitalism and by their extremely short historical duration, they actually did make progress. It is of course doubtful to put it mildly that, even if continued to this day, they would have completed the job of eliminating Black economic oppression, but any view that negates the very real progress that was made is

not consistent with objective reality.

The center-right and center-left contingent of the political class view this issue through the prism of the free market and more specifically the so-called free competition among workers in the labor market. The philosophical basis for this is just as economically laissez-faire as the Tea Party, but will grudgingly admit that there were some holdovers from slavery and Jim Crow that had to be corrected to make equal opportunity open to Black citizens. Some even will even go so far as to admit that Johnson's War on Poverty and Affirmative Action worked to level this playing field somewhat. But they are quick to say that the need for such programs has passed and that in any case, eventually, the system itself would have eliminated the problem.

They point to Black successes stories, now in their ranks as exploiters, as support for this view. Herman Cain (a Tea Party Republican and radio commentator), Ben Carson (retired neurosurgeon and author), Clarence Thomas (Associate Justice of the Supreme Court), Allen West (author and former member of the House of Representatives) and Obama himself are used as examples of Black people who have "realized the American Dream". It is used to "prove" that anyone can succeed under capitalism, even the most oppressed of groups. Obama did the same thing in his 2009 Inaugural address when he drew attention to the fact that "a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served in a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath".

Of course, the one glaring flaw in this logic is that all of these tokens of capitalism working on its own to equalize opportunities for people of color neglect to point out the fact that all of these people were products of those self-same Affirmative Action and War on Poverty policies that are "no longer needed". This attitude of a "post-racial" America also ignores the masses to focus on the tokens, that the "haves" under capitalism are a vanishingly small percentage of the overall Black population in the States.

Because of the mass acceptance of the neoliberal ideology since the advent of Reagan by both political parties, there is no longer any sort of realistic countervailing tendency, at least not in the political class, to the abuses of neoliberalism and its extraordinarily negative effects on Black people. That tendency of opposition today, for the most part, has to come from outside of the political system of the dictatorship of capital.

Black Resistance

One thing seems certain; the pressure will not come from the older generation that fought the battles in the past - the Jesse Jacksons and Al Sharptons. They have been co-opted by the Democratic Party for the most part and now have a large stake in the system. They can decry violence against people of color, but they can't lead any effective resistance to what is obviously a systemic problem, since they are now part of that system.

This has resulted in some tensions in the face of the resistance. Al Sharpton has been called out by the real leaders of this movement for his opportunism many times and sometimes very publicly. Sharpton ranted against the young generation organizing the fight back in Ferguson and Baltimore at a meeting of his National Action Network, in Harlem:

"Anytime you have movements, whether it's in Ferguson, whether it's in New York, whether it's in Denver, wherever it is, when they got you more angry at your parents than they got you at the vote you're supposed to be out there for, you're being tricked and you're trying to turn the community into tricks?..It's the disconnect that is the strategy to break the movement. And they play on your ego. "Oh, you young and hip, you're full of fire. You're the new face." All the stuff that they know will titillate your ears. That's what

a pimp says to a ho.?

Josmar Trujillo, founder of the group New Yorkers Against (Police Commissioner) Bratton, responded:

As we move ahead here in New York, inspired by Ferguson youth, we're speaking truth to power. Sharpton, and others like him are in fact much too cozy with power to fill that role. For the former informant to paternalistically admonish younger, more dynamic leaders by comparing them to "hoes" is just another self-serving attempt to squash dissent as he wrestles for control of a movement that's leaving him behind.?

Sharpton's rage is understandable though no cause for sympathy.

In response to the recent wave of police murders, the utter failure of the legal system to grant redress or even to charge the perpetrators has created new generation of Black activists. Unlike their elders, who have been totally co-opted by the Democratic Party, these activists are not tied to any political party; they are tied to an issue. And under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter they are connecting the rampant police killings and the failures of the justice system to the major problems and issues for Black Americans, economic, political, and social.

The vigilante and police violence perpetrated on Black people, mostly Black male youth, is not something new either. Just like permanent economic inequality, violence against Black people from both state and private actors, vigilantes like George Zimmerman the murderer of Trayvon Martin, the actions of "lone wolf" terrorists like Dylann Roof has always been a factor of the Black experience in the US. In too many instances to name, police, and even heavily armed individual racists have been given carte blanche to kill the unarmed with impunity. If you are white and the victim is Black, especially if you're a cop, you almost certainly will walk free. In the US the cops kill a Black person every 28 hours ? and that's an "at least" figure because many localities don't keep proper records on this.

The Unions

The role of American unions in the struggle for Black liberation has been a checkered one from the outset. The Knights of Labor of the 1870s admitted African American workers but the American Federation of Labor, led by Samuel Gompers, which concentrated on skilled trades, had shameful record of excluding them from membership and, as a result, of keeping crucial sectors of the economy all-white. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which led huge strikes by steelworkers and autoworkers, actively set out to recruit Black workers and waged major common struggles for union recognition in unity in the 1930s and 1940s. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters led by A. Philip Randolph, formed in 1925, eventually won higher wages, seniority, and a cut in hours for 35,000 Black porters and maids. They played a major part in Civil Rights agitation, forming the March on Washington Movement in 1941. Randolph's members also supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott and were to the fore throughout the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

The big unions of the AFL-CIO remained mired in the fruitless pro-capitalist policy of "business unionism" for decades. In the 1960s, though many of their leaders formally supported the Civil Rights movement, they bitterly opposed the anti-Vietnam war movement. Without this change in attitude, givebacks that harm the economic existence of their members and the very lives of their African American members are inevitable and will get worse with every contract and every confrontation.

Also unions need to recognize that their members' lives are more than about those pocketbook issues that have dominated contract negotiations for those same decades. Unions should be about the entire welfare of their members, not just the welfare of their bank accounts. And the welfare of the bank accounts of the

unions themselves and their bureaucratic tops. It's difficult to have a good quality of life when Black members and their families lose their lives in a hail of police bullets

Finally, the unions must step up for the Black population in the matter of systemic oppression simply because today there are no more loyal supporters of the unions than Black Americans.

While the overall density of union representation has dropped in all areas, Blacks are proportionally the most unionized demographic in the country. And polls show that Black people, unionized or not, support unions in higher percentages than other ethnic groups. This loyalty to the idea of organized labor must be reciprocated.

Thus it is encouraging that today the more radical rank and file initiatives within trade unionism became heavily involved in the post-Ferguson mobilizations, including not only the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, but locals and activists of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Unite HERE, and the Chicago Teachers Union. The Fight for \$15 that called out workers in 200 cities and towns on 25 April aims at recruiting the lowest paid and most marginalized workers.

If the unions can recover their roots ? and heroic past ? as class struggle organizations, then huge steps forward can be made for Black, Latino and white workers alike and the disparities and divisions between them overcome.

The Socialist Left

Many groups of the socialist left in the US, such as the World Workers Party and the International Socialist Organization, have involved themselves in the recent struggles against police violence. Many socialists, including members of Workers Power, have been involved in demonstrations and other actions that express the outrage that many feel about these judicial murders of unarmed Black youth by the police. But it must be stated that the mostly white socialist left can only offer ideas and support, certainly not attempt to take over and dictate what needs to be done. If that is tried, there will be a swift and justified rejection. We don't need to give even a suspicion of opportunism or we lose much more than we gain. Black people, and specifically, Black socialists must take the lead on the problems faced by Black people under capitalism.

The openings for anticapitalist, indeed revolutionary socialist politics are there for all to see. Many of the Black organizations that have arisen during the most recent struggles, although not explicitly socialist, are obviously influenced by socialist thought, past and present including from within the Black movements. Many of today's activists raise the issue of class and social inequality as a key-determining factor in continuing Black oppression.

Conclusions ? for now

It is a testimony to the sheer resilience of Black Americans that a recent poll showed that Black people have a more optimistic view of their future than any other group. Perhaps one reason is that the recent upsurge of self-organized militant actions has fueled a belief that "Yes we Can" change things. This will be true, providing we all stop waiting for a Black president or friends of Black people or friends of Labor in the Democrats to do it for us all. And perhaps it's because Black Americans truly are resilient, having faced so many obstacles along the way, both historically and in their own personal lives, that nothing can faze their hope.

But sheer optimism cannot cloud a clear-eyed analysis of the fact that, under capitalism, oppression because of color was, is, and always will be a fact of life for people of color. The reason is simple. Capitalism makes money on the oppression of Black (and brown) people in the US and worldwide. As long

as the profit motive exists as the primary focus for the economy and society as a whole, the politicians who are bought and paid for by the bourgeoisie will only do what they are forced to do to change it. And they will only do what leaves the system unchanged in its fundamentals. Moreover reforms can easily be clawed back.

Today voting rights and other hard won Civil Rights are also under attack, sometimes in conjunction with the rise of felony convictions and incarceration, and sometimes on their own and separately from these other issues. The struggle for Black liberation ? just like the struggle of the trade unions according to the great revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg ? is a Labor of Sisyphus. It has a tendency to be rolled back unless it is tackled at its origin.

The 21st of February marked half a century since the assassination of Malcolm X. We should remember his words ? ?the system in this country cannot produce freedom for an Afro-American. It is impossible for this system, this economic system, this social system, this system period.? He put it even more pithily ? ?You can?t have capitalism without racism.?

Stripped of all pretensions, explanations, and equivocations, the basic meaning of this short, but powerful sentence is that you will never get rid of racism until all of us, Black and white, brown, Asian, and native American, come together with a singular mission. To rid the US and the world of racism by ridding them of capitalism.

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