The oppression of black people in the USA today

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The systematic oppression of black Americans is deeply embedded in the fabric of US society. In a nation made up of immigrants, blacks were the ones brought there forcibly and kept as slaves for 150 years. Although racism afflicts many ethnic groups, racism against black people is “justified” by a racist ideology derived from slavery and the hundred year old apartheid system of Jim Crow, which insists on their inferiority to whites. Though officially hidden today, it underpins the horrific inequality in education, employment, housing, healthcare, and levels of poverty dividing black and white Americans. A 2008 report by the National Urban League (Annual Report on Socio-economic Conditions in Black America), which investigates the realities faced by black citizens, has uncovered some brutal facts. It finds that there is still indisputable evidence that the criminal justice system is pitted against young black men, and systematically criminalises them.

For example, blacks who are arrested are seven times more likely to be imprisoned than whites; they are sentenced to death four times more often than whites, and the average prison sentence is 10 months longer for black men than for white men. In addition 98 per cent of District Attorneys, those responsible for initiating prosecutions, are white and black jurors are challenged far more than whites.

Black Americans make up 12.2 per cent of the American population, but black men under 25 years of age are 15 times more likely to die by murder than white men. Black men make up 48 per cent of those on death row. Of the two million people imprisoned in the US, one million are black. Yet blacks are still 20 times more likely than whites to be a victim of hate crime. The US legal system uses systematic racist techniques to convict and sentence blacks. The death penalty is racist. An in-depth study by researchers, ‘Prison Nation: the Warehousing of America’s Poor’, found that whether someone is given the death penalty is down to the quality of legal defence, not the facts of the crime. Most of those on death row could not afford their own lawyer. So the death penalty is also a class issue - there are no rich people on death row. The National Urban League also finds:

- More than 80,000 Black Americans die every year due to lack of health insurance
- Black people are less likely to own their own home than any other ethnic group
- Black women are five to six times more likely to receive sub prime mortgages than white males
- Blacks people are three times more likely to receive higher rate mortgage loans (54.7 per cent of blacks compared to 17.2 per cent of whites)
- 25 percent of the black population live below the poverty line, and of those under the ages of 18, 33.5 per cent live in poverty.

These are just some examples of the horrific inequality black people face in the USA, not to mention the racism that also works on unconscious levels, racism which exists in the workplace, in social relations, and
in the education system.

As the whole world saw in 2006, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, in the richest country on earth the black and poor inhabitants were left to save themselves or drown. Hungry survivors were shot at when they took food from abandoned shops.

And two whole years after Katrina, tens of thousands of its victims are still awaiting permanent housing (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination). New housing projects which were promised by the government simply are not being built. Public housing for low-income families is being demolished to make way for new private housing, and rents on existing homes are being raised. On average Black male fulltime workers earn only 72 per cent of the earnings of their white class brothers. For women, the comparable ratio is 85 percent. In boom and recession alike, black unemployment is double the white rate. In the 40 years since Martin Luther King was assassinated, the income disparity between blacks and whites has narrowed by only three cents in the dollar. In a country with very little public housing, black homeownership is only 47 per cent compared with 75 per cent for whites. In 2005 the median per capita income was $16,629 for blacks and $28,946 for whites. At this rate it would take another 537 years to reach income equality. But if Democrats and Republicans keep on demolishing welfare programmes, this snail's pace improvement will go into reverse. (All figures from: Race and Extreme Inequality by Dedrick Muhammad in The Nation, June 11, 2008)

It's not surprising that Barack Obama declared in March this year that "race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore" and spoke of the racial divide between black and white which he hoped to overcome. But what is he actually promising to do for African-Americans?

Obama's manifesto, Blueprint for Change, contains some positive measures such as providing support for ex-offenders including mental health counselling, job training, and re-integration. Non-violent offenders on drugs charges will be sent to rehabilitation centres instead of to prisons. However these measures are really only sticking plasters on the gaping wounds of racism. There is in Obama's programme nothing like a strategy to lift black people out of poverty, find equally paid jobs for the unemployed and stop police and legal harassment. It will take more than the election of a black president to do this. Indeed the candidate of a capitalist and imperialist party like the Democrats is bound to fail to meet the hopes of African Americans. Socialists want to address this burning question. We must overcome the divisions between white, Latino and black workers and weld them into an organised force, a party which puts to the forefront of its struggle the ending of black oppression and exploitation. In general white Americans of all classes are privileged in relation to black people. Nevertheless white workers, especially the poorer majority, are much less privileged than the middle class. Poor whites are also sidelined and exploited, patronised and abused, which can lead to a clear need for solidarity between poorer black and white workers. Especially in the present period, when the failure of capitalism is being brought home painfully to the great majority of Americans, a revolutionary socialist party can unite the fragmented working class and raise once more the banner of a socialist America, free from poverty, oppression, inequality and racism.

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