

MLK Jr., Obama and the Struggle Against Racism

An overwhelming 95 percent of black voters cast their ballots for Barack Obama. The scenes on the streets in Chicago and around the country were full of jubilation, as many working people, both Black and white, fervently believe that change is now on the horizon.

Spike Lee, the famous director of such films as *Do the Right Thing*, *Bamboozled*, *Malcolm X*, and others, has gone so far as to say that America has moved beyond race. The day after the election, he said the following on MSNBC: “It’s a new day. It’s a new dawn. It’s a new beginning.” Has the U.S. truly moved beyond racism? As nice as this sounds, this is unfortunately not the case.

Racism is interwoven into the very fabric of capitalism. Malcolm X once said: “You can’t have capitalism without racism.” We would add: “You can’t have racism without capitalism.” In other words, we cannot end the scourge of racism, while leaving capitalism intact, and ending capitalism is something that Barack Obama will not, and cannot do. Obama actually beat McCain by 6 percent amongst voters making more than \$200,000. This is just one indication that the wealthy feel that he is a “safe” choice as far as their interests are concerned.

The fact is, systemic racism still plagues America. One-quarter of Black Americans live in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, twice the percentage for whites. Currently, due to a racist judicial system, more Black men are in prison than are enrolled in college. In fact, despite the immense turnouts of Black voters in this election, over 1.5 million Black men were prevented from voting at all, due to felony disenfranchisement.

Obama’s victory proves that integration, not separation, is the deep desire of millions of Black workers and their white class brothers and sisters. However, genuine integration can never be achieved as long as the majority of the population is dominated by a handful of wealthy capitalists. Many Black capitalists are already planning to cash in on Obama’s victory. As one commentator pointed out rather bluntly in the *Wall Street Journal*: “Black Power Brokers Ready to Rise in Tandem With New President.” These super rich people have nothing in common with the average worker or young person, no matter what color they are.

Martin Luther King Jr., began with a pacifist and reformist approach, but soon realized that formal political

equality would not eliminate the institutionalized economic inequality and deep roots of racial discrimination. He was rapidly moving toward a class analysis on the eve of his murder. During a speech in Frogmore, SC in November of 1966 he said the following: “You can’t talk about solving the economic problem of the Negro without talking about billions of dollars. You can’t talk about ending the slums without first saying profit must be taken out of slums ... we are treading in difficult water, because it really means that we are saying that something is wrong ... with capitalism ... There must be a better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism.” He was in Memphis to support striking garbage collection workers when he was killed in April, 1968.

Tragically, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. were both assassinated before they were able to fully develop these ideas, but it is clear what direction they were headed. The magnificent Civil Rights movement, had it been able to link up with the struggle of the working class as a whole, could have been a massive force for social change – revolutionary change. This is why these leaders had to be eliminated.

Only the socialist transformation of society can truly lay the foundations for ending racism once and for all. Such a transformation can only result from the united struggle of all workers against the bosses.

In the meantime, we need union-controlled hiring halls in the poorest communities; a crash program of public works to create jobs and rebuild infrastructure; the outlawing of all forms of discrimination; and an end to the phony war on drugs that imprisons and disenfranchises millions. Some of these points were taken up by Cynthia McKinney’s Power to the People presidential campaign, which the WIL supported.

We did not support her because she is Black, but because her program raised important demands that need to be taken up by all workers, particularly Black workers, who most acutely experience the effects of this decaying system. Ultimately, these demands can only be achieved by uniting the whole of the working class, in a mass party of labor based on the unions, a political vehicle through which we can fight for our collective interests. That would truly be “change we can believe in.”

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Contact the Workers International League for more information on the struggle against racism, poverty, unemployment and war: the struggle for socialism.

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