

The killing of Trayvon Martin and racial politics in America

5 April 2012

The killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida on February 26 has sparked opposition and protests throughout the country. There is widespread popular outrage over the senseless shooting of an unarmed young man, and the fact that his killer, George Zimmerman, has not been arrested or charged with any crime.

The background to the killing of Martin is the promotion of law-and-order vigilantism and the passage of reactionary legislation like Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law. Police and prosecutors have cited this law in justifying their refusal to take action against Zimmerman.

At the same time, the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression contributes to immense tensions building up in American society, which find expression in different forms, including violent actions by disturbed individuals such as Zimmerman.

Racial prejudice may have played a role in the killing of Martin, who was African-American. The initial public reaction, however, did not focus on race, but rather on the gross injustice involved. As Martin's mother, Sabrina Fulton, put it, "It's not about black and white, it's about right and wrong."

But the past several weeks have seen a concerted effort by sections of the Democratic Party political establishment and its supporters to seize on the killing of Martin to promote the reactionary politics of racial identity. Toward this end, these forces have put forward a grossly distorted picture of American society, politics and history—one in which race, and not class, is the central issue.

Jesse Jackson, for example, writes in a recent comment in the *Guardian*, "Racial profiling is all too common in the US, and has led to the killing of a young man." He compares the killing of Martin to that

of Emmett Till, brutally murdered by racists in Jim Crow Mississippi in 1955.

Not only is race the basic issue in the killing of Martin, Jackson insists, it is the basic issue in American society.

The same line is put forward, if anything more crudely and hysterically, by "left" outfits like the International Socialist Organization, one of many middle-class groups for whom race is a virtual obsession. The ISO's Sherry Wolf, in a report on protests in Sanford, quotes uncritically the statements of Jackson, NAACP President Ben Jealous and Al Sharpton. An ISO table set up at a demonstration, she notes, called for an end to the "new Jim Crow," a phrase included in virtually all of the articles on the Martin killing posted on the ISO's web site.

An earlier editorial from the ISO concludes by stating that it is necessary to "put the struggle against racism at the center of all our efforts to win change," while another insists that "every inch of US society is propped up by institutions that are racist and discriminatory to the core."

What is necessary is a "new civil rights movement," the ISO insists—meaning a race-based movement subordinated to the likes of Jesse Jackson and Sharpton, and, therefore, the Democratic Party and the Obama administration.

It is noteworthy that in all of the statements of the ISO on the matter, there is virtually no mention of the immense suffering of tens of millions of working people and youth of all races in the US, not to mention the rest of the world. These people are indifferent to the actual plight of working people.

Their attempts to present racism as the "core" of American society are false and reactionary. Racial inequalities exist and racism is promoted by sections of the ruling class. However, this is one particular

expression of the fundamental division in society: class. Indeed, the most horrific levels of poverty and unemployment for black workers are to be found in cities overseen by black mayors, politicians, police chiefs and businessmen.

At the same time, the past fifty years have seen vast changes in racial attitudes. To cite one indication, racial intermarriages now account for 14.6 percent of all new marriages and are on the rise.

The attempt to place race at the center of politics takes place against the backdrop of a world capitalist crisis that has been accompanied by a wholesale attack on the jobs and living conditions of the entire working class. Workers in every country, and of every race and nationality, face the same conditions.

The year 2011 saw the eruption of major social struggles on a world scale that raised the fundamental issue of social inequality. Mass working class demonstrations and strikes in Egypt and other countries initially eclipsed religious and sectarian differences and focused on the basic questions of unemployment, poverty and political repression.

In its initial stages, the Occupy Wall Street protests attracted widespread support because they centered on social inequality and the domination of the political and economic system by a financial aristocracy. They pointed, if only in an initial manner, to class issues, rather than the various forms of identity politics that have been promoted for decades by middle-class protest groups. In so doing, they reflected a growth of anti-capitalist sentiment.

Organizations that promote identity politics such as the ISO responded initially to the emergence of the anti-Wall Street protests with distrust and hostility. They then concentrated their efforts on injecting the politics of race and gender into the movement, while subordinating it to the trade unions and the Democratic Party.

The crisis of capitalism cuts across the racial and identity politics that have been promoted for decades as a basis of ideological and social support for capitalist rule in the United States. Since the ghetto uprisings of the late 1960s in particular, the ruling class has sought to divide the working class while cultivating a small layer of African Americans and other minorities to police the cities and provide a new base of support for the status quo.

As a result, there has been an extraordinary growth of social inequality within minority populations. Figures like Jackson (net worth \$10 million) and Sharpton (net worth \$5 million) speak for a highly privileged social layer. A substantial group of black executives and politicians has emerged as a principal constituency for the Democratic Party, even as conditions for the vast majority of African Americans have worsened.

This process culminated in the election of Barack Obama. The elevation of the first African-American to the highest political office marked a “historic turning point,” it was claimed. However, his administration has pursued a right-wing policy all down the line—from the bailout of the banks and refusal to provide jobs or social relief, to the expansion of war, to the attack on democratic rights. Under Obama’s “recovery,” 93 percent of income gains have gone to the top one percent.

This has created problems for the promoters of racial and identity politics, which in part explains why they have seized so ferociously on the Trayvon Martin case in an attempt to revive these conceptions.

The politics of Jackson, Sharpton, the ISO and the entire coterie of “left” supporters of the Democratic Party represents the interests of a layer of the upper-middle class that is deeply worried that it is beginning to lose political control over the working class.

They are seeking to establish the political conditions for once again subordinating the working class to the election of Obama. More fundamentally, their aim is to undermine and preempt any development of independent class consciousness, which poses a threat to the capitalist system. They are exploiting the killing of Trayvon Martin for this deeply reactionary purpose.

Joseph Kishore

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>