

New York Times surveys the results of 35 years of affirmative action

By Fred Mazelis
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In a front-page lead article over a two-column headline a few weeks ago, the *New York Times* informed its readers that its own detailed analysis had shown that “Black and Hispanic students are more underrepresented at the nation’s top colleges and universities than they were 35 years ago, despite decades of affirmative action efforts.”

What the *Times* presents as the somewhat unexpected result of longstanding social policy was illustrated by an unusually detailed full-page series of graphs for 100 institutions of higher education, broken down into five categories: The Ivy League, Flagship Public Universities, Other Top Universities, Top Liberal Arts Colleges, and the massive University of California system.

The graphs use percentages of white, Asian, Hispanic and black students at each of these schools, compared to their numbers in the college-age population, to depict the degree of “overrepresentation” or “underrepresentation” for each group.

Overall, the survey shows that white and Asian students are more “overrepresented” than ever, and blacks and Hispanics more “underrepresented” today than in 1980. Hispanic students made up 13 percent of the freshman class among these 100 schools, for instance, compared to 22 percent of the population. In 1980, with a far smaller Hispanic population, the “gap” was only 3 points.

Black freshmen were 5 percent of the enrollment in 1980 and 12 percent of the population. Thirty-five years later, the gap has grown to nearly 10 points: the percentage of African-Americans is 15 percent, but the college freshman enrollment is only 6 percent.

The rationale for affirmative action, which has its origins in policies initiated by the Nixon administration more than 45 years ago, was that it would level the playing field and enable broad layers of black and Hispanic youth to enter colleges and universities for the first time.

The failure of affirmative action to meet these promises is not accidental, nor was it unforeseen—certainly not by socialists, who understood the real purpose of this program.

It is obvious that without providing tens of millions of

good-paying jobs, without vastly improved educational opportunities for all youth from pre-kindergarten through high school, and without the provision of free universal health care and child care, there can be no serious expectation that the latest generation of black and Hispanic working class youth will fare any better than its predecessors in obtaining and in making use of a quality higher education.

The decades of affirmative action have coincided with the decades of social counterrevolution, of the shredding of the social safety net that increased under the presidency of Ronald Reagan and that has continued since then, under Democrats and Republicans. The political and corporate establishment demagogically used the suffering of minority workers and youth to promulgate programs that were never designed to help them in the first place.

This does not mean that some aims of affirmative action have not been achieved. They have—but they are for the most part unstated ones.

A small slice of the African-American population, largely from the middle class, has been selected and integrated into the ruling elite, including the corporate and political establishment. These are the men and women who have been elected to high office, who occupy a few more of the top rungs of the corporate ladder, and who are helping to set the agenda in higher education and other spheres of social life. They in turn are presented as role models and representatives for a small but significant upper middle class constituency, in that way serving as a new base of support for the capitalist system.

The image of “progressivism” and diversity is also used to burnish the image of American capitalism as it competes against its rivals internationally. The small layer that has benefited from affirmative action is utilized to showcase the supposed virtues of the market and the endless possibilities for success under the profit system.

At the same time, however, a political division of labor involved in affirmative action has also become ever clearer with the passing years. The program was first backed by

Nixon, who saw no contradiction between affirmative action and his own racist views. For about a decade the programs were largely bipartisan policy, accepted by both major capitalist parties. This began to change, especially in the 1980s. While the Democrats became the program's biggest boosters, the Republicans discovered that Nixon's "Southern strategy" could be expanded throughout the country by utilizing resentment caused by racial preferences.

The two big business parties developed a reactionary and cynical means of magnifying and promoting racial division. Affirmative action was attacked from the right, and challenged up to the US Supreme Court. It continues today, as college administrators are for the most part allowed to take race into account in admissions policies, as long as they do not employ quotas.

Affirmative action was never the demand of the working class. It was the brainchild of the political establishment, of a faction of the ruling class, with the approval of sections of the middle class civil rights leadership. And it has been used for decades to encourage resentment among white workers and youth, among students passed over for college admission, all the while ignoring the conditions and needs of the vast majority of the youth—black, Hispanic and white.

The challenges that black and Hispanic youth face are essentially no different than those facing millions of white working class families. The purpose of the *Times* study, even as it acknowledges part of the truth about affirmative action, is to cover this up so as to continue the effort to divide the working class on racial grounds.

The *New York Times* put its reporters and researchers to work for many hours, if not weeks, to document the racial breakdown of the student body all over the country. No one appears to have been assigned to analyze the class reality underlying the percentages, however. No one looked at the plight for the vast numbers of white working class youth for whom college has become increasingly unaffordable, and who are likewise "underrepresented" as compared to the upper middle class families, of all races. The category of "whiteness," by combining the poor, the unemployed, the underemployed and the victims of deindustrialization and wage-cutting, together with the wealthy, is being used to obscure the reality of class relations.

Sixteen years ago, the *World Socialist Web Site*, in a statement on "Affirmative action and the right to education: a socialist response," contrasted the demands of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, for greater social equality, with affirmative action, part of "the politics produced by [the capitalist] system, which is based on splitting working people along racial, ethnic religious and other lines to cover up the fundamental class divisions of society."

For as long as it has been used, the WSWS explained,

"affirmative action measures have benefited primarily a small section of middle and upper class minorities. ... Affirmative action not only fails to overcome the problem of racism, its discriminatory character inevitably exacerbates racial divisions and pits white and minority workers and youth against each other in the struggle for a completely inadequate number of jobs and educational opportunities."

In 2001, the average tuition at a public university was \$3,500. Today it is \$9,650 for state residents, and more than \$24,000 for those out of state. For private schools, average tuition in 2001 was more than \$15,000. The latest figure is \$33,480, not including \$10,000-\$15,000 in room and board and other expenses. More than ever before, affirmative action has become a means of integrating a very small section of the upper middle class and grooming it for future roles presiding over increasing inequality and repression.

Growing sections of the working class, including African-American and Hispanic families, are coming to recognize that affirmative action is worth no more than any other promise made by any capitalist politician. This recognition must be translated into a complete break with the Democratic Party.

In opposition to the promise of a step up for a select few by trampling on the hopes and futures of the vast majority, the working class must fight for a socialist program of free quality higher education for all. This is part of the struggle to defend and extend the basic rights of the working class and eliminate the social inequality that is the product of the profit system. This fight is taken up only by the Socialist Equality Party.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>