

Fifty years since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

By Fred Mazelis
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April 4 marks the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to support the struggle of African-American sanitation workers for decent wages and human dignity. In the days leading up to this anniversary, the media has been filled with articles on the life and legacy of the slain civil rights leader.

The example of King raises questions that have lost none of their urgency in the past five decades. A serious discussion of this period shines a bright light on present-day American society and exposes the lies and hypocrisy of the defenders of the status quo who falsify King's legacy.

In the twelve-plus years between December 1955, when the Montgomery Bus Boycott began, and King's death in April 1968, he became the spokesman and leader of a progressive, democratic and egalitarian movement for racial and social equality in the United States. The words of this Baptist preacher moved many millions, especially working people, and articulated the deepest strivings for equality and against exploitation and oppression.

However, King never broke with the capitalist system. He remained a pacifist, and his appeal for social justice, though courageous and deeply felt, had more in common with Christian socialism than with Marxism. The fatal flaws in King's political orientation found expression in the growing crisis of the movement he led, and to its disintegration after his death.

In the peak years of the civil rights struggle, the mass movement of civil disobedience, marches and voter registration campaigns, conducted in the face of murderous racist violence, led to the landmark civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965. In the remaining three years of his life, King did not preach complacency or contentment with the modest gains that had been achieved. On the contrary, he turned more and more to the economic roots that had been exposed all the more clearly as the barriers of Jim Crow segregation were dismantled.

King described the urban riots, which began in the same year that the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, as the cry of the oppressed. "We have left the realm of constitutional rights and we are entering the arena of human rights," he wrote in his 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* "The Constitution assured the right to vote, but there is no such assurance of the right to adequate housing, or the right to adequate income."

King spoke not only of those whites "who cherish democratic principles above privilege." Even more significantly, he pointed to "another and more substantial group...composed of those having common needs with the Negro and who will benefit equally with him in the achievement of social progress. There are, in fact, more poor white Americans than there are Negro. Their need for a war on poverty is no less desperate than the Negro's."

The shift to the left reflected in these words was accompanied by a denunciation of the US war in Vietnam. King broke with the

administration of Lyndon Johnson, and newspaper editorialists at *the New York Times* and elsewhere bitterly attacked the man whom they had lionized until then as the apostle of gradualism and accommodation.

Turning to the struggle against poverty and inequality, King called for a Poor People's Campaign, to take place in Washington DC. With this initiative, launched only months before he was killed and in the face of the strenuous opposition of many of his colleagues, such as future Atlanta mayor and UN ambassador Andrew Young, King crossed swords with the White House and Congress, which were in the process of abandoning the half-hearted War on Poverty in order to sustain the US intervention in Vietnam.

The Poor People's Campaign was explicitly aimed at building a political coalition across racial lines. At the same time, King responded to the call for support from the sanitation workers in Memphis, where the struggle for union recognition and better wages was bound up with the fight against racism and second-class citizenship.

It was in Memphis that the assassination took place, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, just after 6 p.m. Two months later, James Earl Ray was arrested and charged with the crime. Ray confessed in exchange for a deal to avoid the death penalty, but soon recanted his confession, and for the remaining 29 years of his life he insisted that he had been set up to take the blame.

Coretta Scott King and other members of the family believed Ray's denial of involvement. There is much evidence pointing to a conspiracy in this case. The notorious record of the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover in hounding and targeting the civil rights leader makes such suspicions entirely plausible.

The murder of King cannot be separated from the events of 1968 and earlier in that explosive decade. King's was the third high-profile assassination of those years, coming after the 1963 killing of President John F. Kennedy and the 1965 murder of Malcolm X. Only two months after King died, Robert F. Kennedy was gunned down in Los Angeles, where he had just won the California primary to emerge as the frontrunner in the contest for the Democratic Party presidential nomination.

King's assassination was followed by rioting and unrest in 100 cities around the US. Meanwhile, the antiwar protest movement had assumed a mass character on university and college campuses, and labor militancy was on the rise.

Earlier that year, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam had exposed the disaster facing US imperialism in its war against the Vietnamese people. On March 31, only four days before King's death, Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection.

Behind all of these developments lay the growing crisis of American capitalism. The post-World War II boom was beginning to unravel, and the hegemonic economic position of the US was increasingly challenged by its rivals in Europe and Japan. The upheavals in the US were part of a worldwide crisis that was ushering in a period of revolutionary struggle, spanning the years from 1968 to 1975.

King was beset by a deepening crisis of perspective in the last years before his death, feeling the political ground shift beneath his feet. He recognized the need for a new strategy in the fight for social equality, but was unable to articulate one beyond the bounds of a left-reformist alternative to the “excesses” of American capitalism. Even this was too much for the US political establishment. His erstwhile liberal allies denounced him, while many of his own lieutenants were critical.

King’s death accelerated a process that had been foreshadowed in the previous several years, with the evident exhaustion of the civil rights struggle as a mass movement for democratic rights and social equality. What was required was an orientation to the working class and the adoption of a clear socialist program. This was beyond the capacity of King, an enlightened representative of the middle class.

Even before King’s murder, the American ruling class set in motion a new policy to defend its rule in the face of mounting social opposition. This turn was enunciated in the Kerner Commission report on the urban riots, issued in March 1968, just one month before the assassination.

This lengthy report closed with a summary warning that the US was moving toward “two societies, one black, one white.” This officially sanctioned racial interpretation of American society, disguised in the language of liberal concern, has guided the policy of the ruling class ever since. According to the Kerner report, it was “white institutions” and “white society” that were responsible for the social crisis in America, and not the capitalist economic system and the capitalist class that controls it.

A bipartisan program, christened “black capitalism” by the reactionary Nixon administration and affirmative action by the Democrats, was designed to cultivate a thin layer of privileged African-Americans as a new base of political support for a system that was no longer capable of granting the reforms associated with the postwar boom and the War on Poverty. For the ruling class, a useful byproduct of the policy was its encouragement of resentments on which racist elements could feed.

Deindustrialization led to the wholesale elimination of decent-paying jobs just as the politics of austerity were becoming the norm during the economic crisis and “stagflation” of the 1970s. Black mayors were elected, in cities like Newark, Detroit and dozens more, just in time to administer the austerity regime.

New methods of divide-and-rule were developed. On the one hand, the Republicans adopted the so-called Southern strategy, based on an appeal to racist elements and disoriented social layers angered by the Democratic Party’s embrace of civil rights legislation. This has remained an integral part of the Republican political arsenal from Nixon to Reagan through Bush and Trump.

The Democrats simultaneously adopted the dogma of identity politics, abandoning even the mildest program of social reform while posing as defenders of racial minorities and “diversity.” This division of labor between Republicans and Democrats—and above all the role of the former liberals who had moved sharply to the right and turned the Democratic Party into the unabashed and open representative of Wall Street—was crucial in shifting the political spectrum sharply to the right in the years after King.

The spokesmen for the ruling elite have long promised that African-American elected officials and police commissioners will usher in a new era of harmony and prosperity. Instead, these officials have presided over record levels of inequality, mass incarceration and escalating police violence, which disproportionately affect black and other minority workers and youth, along with the continuing decay of public education, the growth of homelessness and attacks on health care and all public services.

Identity politics has gone hand in hand with attacks on every section of the working class. Only a thin layer of the upper-middle class has benefited. Statistics show that inequality has grown more rapidly within the African-American population than within American society as a

whole.

Critical in the growth of inequality and reign of political reaction has been the role of the pro-capitalist trade unions over this same period. Reflecting the interests of the wealthy defenders of the status quo who make up the union hierarchy, they have openly adopted a corporatist model, cementing their role within the state apparatus and suppressing the class struggle.

This has been the road map for more than four decades of social counterrevolution, culminating in endless war and a second Gilded Age, with socioeconomic divisions more extreme than before the mass movement that erupted in the struggle against Jim Crow.

With the election of the first black president ten years ago, the ruling class has had to escalate its use of identity politics. There were hosannas over the “first black president” to divert attention from the fact that Obama presided over deepening attacks on African-American workers and every other section of the working class. This was accompanied by the promulgation of an even more malignant version of identity politics, characterized by attacks on the “white working class” as irredeemably racist, as though such claims could explain why workers who voted twice for Obama should, in despair over the results, shift their votes to Donald Trump.

Now we have reached the stage of outright falsification of Martin Luther King’s outlook. Figures such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose views are summed up in his book on the Obama presidency entitled *We Were Eight Years in Power*, are put forward as the successors to the civil rights leader. Coates forecasts and virtually celebrates an America that will forever be divided on racial lines. King’s views are presented as consistent with the current efforts to fuel racialist politics, ignoring and in practice repudiating King’s insistence on the primacy of the fight for social equality.

King, however, fought for integration and opposed the “black power” slogan. Writing in 1967 in the abovementioned *Where Do We Go From Here?* he criticized from the left those like Stokely Carmichael who advanced this reactionary demagoguery.

“The Black Power movement of today,” wrote King, “like the Garvey ‘Back to Africa’ movement of the 1920s, represents a dashing of hope, a conviction of the inability of the Negro to win and a belief in the infinitude of the ghetto.” In words that anticipate the bitter experience with Obama, King wrote, “Black power alone is no more insurance against social injustice than white power. Negro politicians can be as opportunistic as their white counterparts if there is not an informed and determined constituency demanding social reform.”

Those who today distort and falsify King’s role and legacy do so to defend a system of class privilege and domination. King’s struggle makes the advocates of identity politics uncomfortable because, five decades after his death, the issues are posed more sharply than ever in class and not in racial terms.

The 50th anniversary coincides with a new upsurge of the class struggle, signaled by the eruption of rank-and-file teachers’ struggles in the US and strikes and protests by workers across Europe as well as in Iran, Tunisia and other oppressed countries. These struggles explode the lies about the “racist” working class and the claim that the basic division in society is race or gender, rather than class. They pose before millions the urgent need to unite and mobilize workers of all races and nationalities in a common political struggle against a common enemy.

King’s call for a united struggle for social reform illustrates both the strength and the fatal weakness of his outlook. The struggle against poverty, inequality, austerity and the threat of dictatorship and imperialist war requires the building of a revolutionary leadership that bases itself on the progressive foundations of earlier struggles but shows the way forward in the fight for socialism.

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