

New York University moves to implement racial segregation in student dorms

By Karsten Schneider
24 August 2020

Since late June, the Office of Residential Life and Housing Services at New York University (NYU) has been working closely with a small, student-led task force to make racially segregated housing a reality in undergraduate student dorms.

On July 20, *Washington Square News*, the weekly undergraduate student newspaper of NYU, published an article titled “Student-Led Task Force Calls for Black Housing on Campus,” in which they reported on the university’s willingness to help implement residential communities open solely to “Black-identifying students with Black Resident Assistants.” Since then, the university has officially given the project a green light, aiming to have NYU’s first segregated residential floor established by Fall 2021.

A little over two months ago, a recently-organized advocacy group called Black Violets created an online petition demanding that the university “implement Black student housing on campus in the vein of themed engagement floors across first-year and upperclassmen residence halls.” In their petition, the group argues that “Too often in the classroom and in residential life, black students bear the brunt of educating their uninformed peers about racism.” African American students, they state, desperately require a “safe space” where they can escape from students, staff, and faculty of other races.

At NYU, “themed engagement floors,” also known as “Themed Engagement Communities,” are a network of theme-based floors, located in various undergraduate residence halls, that allow students living on a specific floor to explore a specific subject through various programs and activities planned by a Resident Assistant. There are over twenty Themed Engagement Communities at NYU, with themes ranging from film, literature, and theater to technology, science, and foreign languages. All floors are open to all students, who request residency on a specific floor prior to the start of the academic year.

The approval of a Themed Engagement Community open to students based on their race is new at NYU. However, it is not the first time that the Office of Residential Life and Housing Services has considered such a proposal. In 2002, an NYU senior submitted a plan to develop race-based housing for African American students, claiming that “such a housing program would unite African American students on campus,”

and better combat racial discrimination. This proposal was eventually rejected by the university after a brief review and discussion.

Now, despite signs of minimal support from the undergraduate student body—the online petition has garnered a mere 1,105 signatures out of the 26,733 total undergraduates currently studying at NYU—the proposal for race-based housing has been warmly welcomed by the university administration.

There is nothing progressive about the establishment of racially segregated housing at NYU. It is irrelevant whether the segregation being implemented is voluntary or mandatory. Racial segregation, in all forms, is entirely reactionary.

The vile argument advanced in the proposal is that all non-African American students, staff, and faculty are, to varying degrees, hostile and dangerous towards African American students. Their animosity stems from an inherent antipathy towards individuals of different races. Therefore, to end discrimination and ensure true equality within the university, African Americans must completely separate themselves from the rest of the community and “train” non-African Americans to overcome their intrinsic racism.

This irrational and anti-scientific ideology lies at the heart of similar proposals made at several major academic institutions across the country in recent years. This includes the moves towards racially segregated housing at Syracuse University and the recent calls for the implementation of racial quotas at several elite American universities. These demands do not stem from an egalitarian and progressive desire to make education easily available for everyone and eliminate the real dangers that face the majority of students and youth (massive debt, unemployment, homelessness, hunger, poverty, etc.), but from the desire to advance the interests of a very small, privileged layer of the population.

It is no coincidence that a renewed push for race-based housing at NYU comes at a time of unprecedented social, economic, and political crisis in the United States and throughout the world. This move is an outcome of the ever-intensifying racist campaign being conducted by the sections of the ruling class and affluent middle class politically represented by the Democratic Party and their media mouthpiece, the *New York Times*. For over 50 years, these

oligarchs and their obedient servants in the upper-middle class have relentlessly sought to defend their interests by dividing the working masses through the promotion of racial and identity politics.

Racism cannot be countered with racialism. They are two sides of the same coin. The fundamental division in capitalist society is class, not race. An individual's relationship to the means of production ultimately determines their position in society.

A review of studies on wealth stratification between the richest and poorest members of the African American community alone exposes the class interests behind identity politics. According to statistics from 2017, the top 10 percent of the African American population owns over 75 percent of all wealth owned by African Americans. The bottom 50 percent of the African American population has zero or negative wealth. Under Barack Obama's administration, the top 1 percent of African Americans saw their share of wealth double from 19.4 percent to 40.5 percent. Working-class African Americans are worse off than they were four decades ago, while things have never been better for the rich.

The growth of social inequality and poverty has occurred across all racial groups. White workers, black workers, Latino workers, Asian workers, and Native American workers have all seen their standard of living sharply decrease as that of the top 10 percent has dramatically increased.

Regardless of their race, workers face the same daily struggle to survive, laboring for long hours in horrendous conditions for dismal wages. Now, as a result of the ruling class's ruthless back-to-work campaign, they also face infection with and death from COVID-19 as they are herded back into unsanitary factories and workplaces to pump out the surplus value necessary for the ruling class to pay off its debts.

In the aftermath of the international, multi-racial, mass protests against police brutality, sparked by the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and the outbreak of wildcat protests and strikes across several major industries, the ruling class has pushed racial identity politics in an effort to misdirect growing opposition. Using the *New York Times'* 1619 Project as a basis, they seek to completely erase class consciousness and the progressive content of the two American revolutions in order to stifle movement towards the third.

Identity politics solely serves the interests of the wealthy and privileged layer of society that has profited from the suffering of the working class. Specifically, it is the primary mechanism through which the "next 9 percent," directly below the top 1 percent, seeks to achieve a more equal distribution of wealth within the top 10 percent of society. This layer, the upper-middle class, has no more qualms over exploiting the working masses for personal gain than the corporate, financial oligarchs at the very top of society.

University campuses, dominated by the upper-middle class, have been breeding grounds of anti-Marxism and imperialist

recruitment for many decades. NYU stands at the pinnacle of that section of academia's reactionary position within society. The university's subservience to the profit interests of Wall Street and its extensive ties to US imperialism drive its every decision. Over the last few years, NYU has carried out significant attacks on workers, subordinated student mental health and food insecurity to profit interests, and demonstrated complete contempt for democratic rights. NYU, like all institutions of "higher" education, is first and foremost a business and will do everything in its power to defend the profit system.

This includes full compliance with the ruling class's vicious back-to-work campaign. NYU, against the advice of medical professionals around the world, is one of the many academic institutions that has decided to hold in-person classes. Students from across the country are currently flying into New York City to undergo a mandatory two-week quarantine before the university opens.

The decision to hold in-person classes at NYU will prove to be disastrous. Over the last few weeks, several major US schools, including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Notre Dame, Princeton, and the University of Southern California, were forced to revert to online instruction after explosions of COVID-19 cases amongst their students, staff, and faculty. Despite this, NYU has decided to go ahead with a full reopening; knowingly sacrificing the lives of students, staff, and faculty for profits.

It is imperative that all students realize the danger that they are facing in returning to school. What is needed is not the division of students along identity-based lines, but their unification against the present, barbaric social order. The fight against all forms of exploitation and oppression is inherently linked to the fight against capitalism. Students at NYU and universities around the world who seek to fight for genuine social equality must turn to the international working class, the great, powerful, progressive force in society. It is only by uniting workers of all races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and nationalities behind a clear, socialist program and perspective that capitalist barbarism will be overcome.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are at the forefront of this struggle, striving to provide the working class with the independent, socialist leadership that is necessary to end a social order that prioritizes private profit over social need.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>