

Obama, African Americans and War on the Working Poor

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"So it's time in 1964 to wake up. And when you see them coming up with that kind of conspiracy, let them know your eyes are open. And let them know you — something else that's wide open too. It's got to be the ballot or the bullet. The ballot or the bullet. If you're afraid to use an expression like that, you should get on out of the country; you should get back in the cotton patch; you should get back in the alley. They get all the Negro vote, and after they get it, the Negro gets nothing in return. All they did when they got to Washington was give a few big Negroes big jobs. Those big Negroes didn't need big jobs, they already had jobs. That's camouflage, that's trickery, that's treachery, window-dressing. I'm not trying to knock out the Democrats for the Republicans. We'll get to them in a minute. But it is true; you put the Democrats first and the Democrats put you last." (From Malcolm X's speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet," given in Cleveland, Ohio, April 3, 1964)

MALCOLM X BY 1964 had broken with the Nation of Islam, a religious-centered Black Nationalist group. He remained an orthodox Muslim and Black Nationalist, but advocated a broader strategy to win Black freedom by supporting wider unity of all oppressed ethnic groups. He also, in a shift, supported united front efforts with progressive whites.

Yet his "Ballot or Bullet" speech, where many of these ideas are discussed, has been praised by some and misunderstood by others. Malcolm's main point was that the government could end segregation and grant legal equality if it wanted to. The roadblock was the historic compromise of the Founding Fathers and later the post-Civil War Republicans and Democrats to allow the Southern Dixiecrats (who are now Republicans) to hold civil rights and equality hostage.

The country was founded on slave labor and, after formal freedom, could not give up its super profits from racial discrimination. Blacks had to be kept as second class residents/citizens.

Blacks, explained Malcolm (who would be assassinated less than a year later on February 21, 1965), should not wait to press the fight for total freedom. He explained that Blacks already voted for Democrats who used that vote for their own interest not for African Americans. Black faces in high places did not change that reality.

By "bullet," he explained, African Americans must go beyond the status quo in politics. He was not arguing for armed rebellion, although he strongly supported the right to self-defense.

In 1964, a year before the Voting Rights Act became law, Malcolm was giving a warning to the

ruling class that mass urban rebellions/uprisings could happen if African Americans were not given their full rights: “As they [African Americans] nourish these dissatisfactions, it can only lead to one thing, an explosion; and now we have the type of Black man on the scene in America today ... who just doesn't intend to turn the other cheek any longer.”

He also advocated as a tactic going to the United Nations to press the case that legal civil rights for Blacks was not enough; the issue is one of human rights. The oppression and exploitation of African Americans was an international issue like colonialism. The strategy to win full equality, thus, must go beyond the ballot.

The “New Leaders”

While the speech was given nearly 50 years ago, Malcolm's points remain valid today even in the age of the first African-American president and a sizable Congressional Black Caucus. While much has changed legally and socially — upper-class African Americans can work and live almost anywhere if qualified — much hasn't changed for the working poor who are Black.

In 1964 there were few Black elected officials in cities, states or the federal level. The community leaders came from churches and civil rights organizations. Blacks could vote in Northern and Western cities but were still denied the vote in the South.

Today Black elected officials are the “new leaders” of the Black community. These politicians are careful how they discuss issues of special concern to the Black community. Following President Obama's lead they have become mainstream players in the two-party system, even referring to anti-equality bigots in Congress as “my friends.”

Obama's Conservative Policies

The disconnect of the Black upper class from those they claim to serve is at the greatest level of separation ever. President Obama within that context is in the mainstream of African American leadership.

Obama's politics reflect the rightward evolution of electoral politics (the right is the new “center”) since the Reagan presidency, when the ruling class moved more sharply against unions and the gains of the New Deal and Great Society liberalism.

Obama told a Swedish reporter in September that he would be considered centrist or “maybe center right” in many European countries (reported in the September 4 *The Blaze*). He said, “You know, I have to say that if I were here in Europe, I'd probably be considered right in the middle, maybe center-left, maybe center-right, depending on the country,” Obama said Wednesday in Stockholm. “In the United States sometimes the — the names I'm called are quite different.”

Most of Obama's actual political policies are rooted in mainstream conservatism. The Affordable Care Act (ACA or “Obamacare”) that Republicans and far right commentators call “socialized medicine” is one example. An individual mandate, insurance based health care system was originally a conservative idea in the 1970s, pushed by the Heritage Foundation as an alternative to the “threat” of a single payer health care system.

Prior to 2008 Obama said he supported universal health care. After his election, he made sure supporters of single payer were not invited to the table when the Affordable Care Act was written.

The new law never intended to cover all those without health coverage. Medicaid expansion, which 26 states turned down, was aimed at the poorest of the poor. Even then some would be without insurance.

Some pro-Obama unions are upset too because the new law undermines multi-employer health care plans that many unions have negotiated. Government subsidies given to the health insurance companies and big employers' self-insured plans don't apply to union-based multi employer plans.

Consider the minimum wage that Obama says should be raised. When the Democrats had control of all three branches of government, it was kept on the back burner. Now that it won't be raised by Republicans, Obama argues it should.

It is simple to say that the Republicans are worse for the poor, since they essentially want all safety net programs and living wages eliminated. Republicans in the House also sought to cut \$40 billion over 10 years from the food stamps program. The less conservative Senate agreed to \$20 billion in cuts in a program that needs billions more.

Obama said he preferred the Senate's bill. The pain to the poor, disproportionately African Americans, will increase.

Realities of the Working Poor

The working poor barely earn incomes above the official poverty rate of \$23,492 for a family of four (Census Bureau Current Population Survey). The same Survey said 20.4 million people are in "deep poverty" — defined as an income 50% or more below the official poverty line.

The poor who can find low-wage jobs sometimes hold two to pay their bills. African Americans, whose official unemployment is 13%, because of racism have difficult time getting these jobs at Wal-Mart and McDonalds (two of the most profitable companies in the world) and other fast food companies.

Many, including children, only get one or two meals a day. Their well being depends on safety net programs such as earned income credits and subsidized food stamps that far right conservatives want to cut drastically or eliminate.

The 2011 bipartisan sequester (a 10% across the board cut in the federal government) marked a big austerity policy shift, hitting safety net programs and government workers hard. While the government actually grew under the anti-government Bush, it has shrunk under Obama since the Great Recession hit in 2008-09.

Tens of thousands of low- and moderate-paying jobs with benefits, held by African Americans, have been cut.

While the rhetoric of the Democrats and Obama sounds better, he has agreed to or signed laws that weaken the social safety net and hurt poor Americans. (Clinton did the same with welfare in the 1990s.)

Obama's strong support for changing how inflation is calculated for Social Security benefits will severely hit the elderly and disabled. Even the talking points used by Obama and elected Democrats of "defending the middle class" are a way to not discuss issues of special concern to the working class and poor, including the special needs of racially oppressed minorities.

Lessons from Malcolm and King

Obama avoids even talking about racism and discrimination, except in special circumstance like the murder of Florida teen Trayvon Martin and the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington. But he never outlines an action plan using his executive power to bring justice.

Obama knows that civil rights groups will never press the government to take action while he is office. He knows the Black community will support him no matter what he does or doesn't do. The right understands that too, which is why their counteroffensive on voting rights is in full gear.

A clear-eyed look at Obama's policies shows that he is at best a "compassionate right of center liberal." His failures to speak up for the working poor and African Americans' interests are not an accident.

His taskmaster, the ruling class, doesn't care about Obama's skin color. It is concerned that Obama is unable to contain the far right that uses racism to whip up racial hatred. Those rulers with some foresight know that attacks on basic government functioning hurt their short-term and longterm interests. It fears that the widening gap between the haves and have-nots (the deepest in some 90 years) can lead to mass protests and challenges to the system itself.

Malcolm's speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" is prophetically relevant to our current divisions. Less than a year after the massive March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, Malcolm argued that Blacks and those who support full equality and jobs must not wait — the people themselves, he said, had to take their rights and not rely on politicians.

Malcolm represented the Nationalist left wing of the Black community. Martin Luther King, the climactic speaker at the 1963 march, represented the pro-integration wing. But they agreed on that point. King never said that true equality would come by itself, or that Blacks should rely on the political system for change. He understood the need to go beyond laws for equality that were not being enforced.

King was criticized at the time by militant Nationalists. But his vision for a future that included full equality was not electoralist, as would be claimed after his death.

King strongly supported affirmative action and other efforts to overcome historic discrimination. He continued to push on the streets for full equality even after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights laws were adopted in 1964 and 1965.

King was still evolving politically. He came out against the Vietnam War and expressed support for workers on strike. He organized the Poor People's campaign and pressed president Johnson on the war on poverty. King said real equality requires fundamental changes in practice by government, employers and society.

By the time he was assassinated (1968), his fight for full equality and economic justice was radicalizing all segments of society, not just African Americans.

King framed (correctly) the fight for full equality as enforcing the 14th Amendment. Adopted in 1868, the amendment said that African Americans have full citizenship rights and equal protection under the Constitution. King's approach allowed broad coalitions, including with unions and progressive-minded whites, to join the struggle for equality.

Standing Up

Malcolm X and King were both gunned down, but their ideas and tactics remain as relevant as ever for the millions of working poor and discriminated groups.

The new generation of activists is drawing these lessons. The immigrant rights campaign led by the young undocumented is the most daring effort applying the civil disobedience tactic in Washington and border crossings.

These young people and their families face immediate detention and deportation. Their open efforts are winning support.

The environmentalist fight against the Keystone pipeline from Canada is keeping pressure on Congress and the White House. Urban protests against housing evictions, for a raise in the minimal wage and to protect food stamps are signs of rising militancy.

The campaign in North Carolina and other states against voter suppression laws are using civil disobedience and public protests, as King and the Civil Rights Movement did. Once again, the 14th Amendment is the framework of that fight.

The lesson of the Obama era and the Black elites is that they cannot lead a fight against the rightwing, white backlash. They can talk but not mobilize. Independent actions by the victims of the racial and class divisions are necessary to defend their own interests and move society forward.

Malik Miah

P.S.

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