

Bill Clinton Administration Continued the Criminalization of Generations of African Americans

Mass incarceration represents modern form of national oppression and social containment

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A demonstration during a speech by Bill Clinton in Philadelphia further exposed the role Democrats played in the mass incarceration and state repression of oppressed people in the United States during the 1990s.

Both ruling class parties, the Republicans and Democrats, have sought to prey on the fear of street crime and public corruption as political tools to win elective office. This tactic extends back to the Reconstruction era in the aftermath of the Civil War where the former planters sought to justify the denial of civil rights to the former enslaved population.

The protest action against Clinton itself prompted comments from the former president which seemed to justify the criminalization of tens of millions of African Americans over the decades.

Clinton's later expression of regret for the confrontation does not absolve the United States ruling class for its persistent targeting of the people of color communities and the utilization of the jailing and imprisonment of 2.2 million as a justification for the maintenance of the legal status-quo. (sentencingproject.org)

In the aftermath of the incident in Philadelphia a plethora of political analysis from African American activists and scholars responded to the allegations against the Clinton administration and its significance in the 2016 elections. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has been confronted repeatedly over the legacy of her husband's administration which signed several bills involving criminal justice that fostered the large-scale recruitment of police and the building of correctional facilities housing African Americans and Latinos disproportionately.

Even during the winter months, Jeff Guo wrote in the Washington Post about the trend towards mass incarceration for the last four decades spanning successive Democratic and Republican administrations saying "Over the past 40 years, the prison population has quintupled. As a consequence of disparities in arrests and sentencing, this eruption has disproportionately affected black communities. Black men are imprisoned at six times the rate of white men. In 2003, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that black men have a 1 in 3 chance of going to federal or state prison in their lifetimes. For some high-risk groups, the economic consequences have been staggering. According to Census data from 2014, there are more young black high school dropouts in prison than have jobs." (Feb. 26)

Social Impact of Imprisonment of the Oppressed

Therefore, what are the implications of an exponentially expanding system of incarceration where since 1980 the prison population in the U.S. has risen overall by 500 percent? Within the federal system alone the increase between 1980 and 2013 was 790 percent.

African Americans and Latinos are profiled, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and sentenced disproportionately far higher than whites. This process is a direct result of the legacy of national oppression, institutional racism and economic exploitation.

Law-enforcement brutality and terrorism along with imprisonment and judicial supervision serves the interests of the capitalist ruling class and their agents. The demonization and criminalization of the nationally oppressed provides a rationale for their disparate treatment by the legal system.

Taking at least 2.2 million people out of society has a profound effect on continuing and enhancing the rates of poverty, labor exploitation within the system and the further marginalization of large segments of the working class and poor by the ruling interests of U.S. society.

Many of those who are imprisoned are also working inside the facilities at slave wages. These policies tend to drive down wages of those outside the system as well.

If these men and women were not incarcerated it would further reveal the incapacity of the capitalist system to provide adequate employment and housing for African Americans and other who have high rates of confinement. Under the existing conditions the same article by Guo suggests that with the declining rates of incarceration could drive wages down even more in the U.S.

Moreover the underdevelopment of the African American community is seriously affected with the absence of a large segment of its population and the long term effects of those who have been released facing tremendous obstacles to their re-integration into the neighborhoods and family life.



Arizona State Prison Cell Block

Guo notes that “mass incarceration’s ill effects are concentrated in places already in distress. Researchers once estimated that, in some inner-city neighborhoods, up to one-fifth of the young black men are behind bars at any given moment.”

Also “[I]n their absence, their communities start to fracture. So when they get out, they find that there are no jobs and no support networks. ‘The impact of incarceration on communities and the impact of communities on reentry together create a pernicious cycle of decline,’ professors Jeffrey Morenoff and David Harding wrote in the Annual Review of Sociology in 2014.”

In recent months some politicians have questioned Federal Reserve chair Janet Yellen over the failure of the administration of President Barack Obama to address the fundamental inherent racial inequality within the U.S. society. These objective conditions are revealed by noting the African American jobless rate — which is approximately 100 percent higher than the white unemployment figures.

In the same above-mentioned report it recognizes that “however bad those numbers seem, the truth, after accounting for incarceration, is even worse. So perhaps the next time the jobs report comes out, there could be an extra chart to recognize the 1.6 million prisoners in America. They don’t show up anywhere in the government’s measurements of economic activity, but their absence is dearly felt.”

State Repression, Mass Incarceration and the 2016 Elections

These issues will inevitably continue to be a focus of the debate interjected from outside the official discourse within both the Republican and Democratic races. Much is at stake in the necessity on the part of the capitalist system to socially contain and economically exploit large segments of the national oppressed most of who are from the working class.

Since at least the 1968 presidential elections the questions of “law and order” have been politicized in a racial fashion. Consequently, how progressive forces and leftists frame discussions around the media construct of “Black on Black Crime” must be viewed within a broader context of the social conditions emanating from the historical development of the U.S. capitalist system.

Bill Clinton’s mere suggestion that African Americans were somehow responsible for the high rates of incarceration derived from racist assumptions. These assertions deliberately ignore the ongoing legacy of slavery and Jim Crow which are pervasive within the labor market, education sector, housing, criminal justice and the corporate media.

Serious crimes committed by the ruling class and its agents are not projected as a principal threat to the broader society. The deaths and displacement of 60 million people in the last quarter century resulting from imperialist wars of regime-change and genocide are not classified as egregious acts warranting tougher laws and stiffer prison sentences.

There are almost no bankers in the jails, prisons, and half-way houses of the U.S. despite the theft of trillions of dollars in wealth of working and poor people nationally and internationally.

Wall Street and the Pentagon attempts to rationalize their criminal actions saying that they are protecting the majority of people from “terrorism and street crime.”

Yet the instability of today’s world finds its expression in the further militarization and privatization of both the industrialized and developing states. Only a categorical break with the dictates of the financial institutions and the transnational corporations will provide billions of the impoverished an opportunity to live in peace and genuine security.

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