

Is There a Role for the Peace, Antiracist and Social Justice Movements in the 2016 Elections?

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In-depth Report: [U.S. Elections](#)

Neither major party offers a program to reverse the present course of militarism and income inequality

These are difficult times in the United States and the world requiring a greater degree of preciseness in our analysis and discipline in the style of work that we pursue.

We have the advantage of 36 years of organizational experience where during the course of this period there have been many changes domestically and internationally. Nonetheless, today we are facing similar problems that plagued the founders of the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR) in 1980.

First of all I want to discuss the recent massacre at the Pulse Club in Orlando, Florida in the early morning hours of June 12. This was a monumental crime against humanity with the killing of 50 people and the wounding of 53 others.

The crime appeared to be motivated by hate and fear. Some have declared that the alleged perpetrator Omar Mateen was mentally deranged. Others say he had pledged allegiance to the so-called Islamic State (IS) and was outraged by LGBTQ community that frequented the establishment where the shooting took place.

Almost half of the people killed in the attack were of Puerto Rican descent. This compounds the tragedy even further considering that Puerto Rico is a colony of a special type of the U.S. For those who have been following the news about the economic crisis in Puerto Rico, the crisis there bears striking resemblance to what we have been subjected to in Detroit.

Puerto Rico is said to be indebted to the banks and bondholders to the tune of \$70 billion. The economic situation on the islands has engendered higher rates of joblessness, austerity and outmigration. More Puerto Ricans now live in the U.S. than reside on the islands. Retired Judge Steven Rhodes who oversaw the massive theft in pensions, healthcare programs, public lands, the regionalization of an entire water system prompting the present calamity in Flint, along with the denial of the fundamental rights of a majority African American city to self-determination and home rule, is now a consultant for the Puerto Rican Commonwealth.

Therefore, we can imagine vividly the type of outcome the Puerto Rican nation will encounter with this type of advice and manipulation from the U.S. government and corporate community. This is the same Rhodes that is now the “transition manager” of the Detroit Public Schools which is slated for dissolution and restructuring once again by the

right-wing dominated state government in Lansing.

The Quest for Peace Domestically and Worldwide

One young friend of mine on Facebook who used to live in Detroit said that their reaction to the massacre in Orlando was one of numbness. They said that there are just too many of these incidents in the U.S. Perhaps many people are becoming anesthetized to interpersonal violence and horror. These shootings are by no means a rarity in the U.S. with mass shooting taking place on average daily.

In an article published by PBS in early January it says, "According to the Tracker's data, which defines a mass shooting as an incident in which at least four people are killed or wounded, there were 372 mass shootings in the U.S. in 2015, killing 475 and wounding 1,870."

No one could effectively argue that the U.S. is not a country with a violent history. The British colonies and the U.S. government were founded on the forced removal and genocide against the indigenous Native American peoples. African people were brought to the Western Hemisphere for the purpose of enslavement suffering for nearly 250 years in bondage. It would take a civil war between the Confederate states and the Union to end slavery in 1865 ushering in yet another century of legalized segregation and institutional racism.

We also must acknowledge the violent wars of the 19th century against the Native people who resisted settler intervention and destruction. A war against Mexico from 1846-1848 resulted in the capturing of at least one-third of its territory now designated as the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, California and Nevada.

In 2016, the descendants of these people are labelled as "illegal immigrants" and "minorities", rationalizing repressive and exploitative policies. Under the present administration of President Barack Obama there have been more deportations than any period in U.S. history.

Corporate media sources often focus on injuries and deaths due to inter-personal violence while far less attention is focused on the direct role of the oppressive state. There have been several high-profile cases over the last four years which have prompted mass demonstrations and rebellions including the vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida in 2012; the police shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014; the police choking of Eric Garner in 2014; we must remember Tamir Rice who was playing with a toy gun in a public park in Cleveland and was gunned down by the police; to only mention a few.

In regard to U.S. foreign policy, I have said repeatedly that a nation's domestic program is reflected in its relations with other areas of the world. This has been starkly illustrated over the last quarter century of "permanent war" and occupation of vast regions of the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

On June 9, when the corporate media was filled with reports announcing that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had "clinched" the Democratic Party nomination for president, President Obama issued an executive order expanding the U.S. role in the war against Afghanistan. This is the same Afghanistan war that has been declared over on numerous

occasions yet American troops and resources remain there amid the ongoing fighting.

The Washington Post reported

“The Obama administration has granted American forces in Afghanistan new authorities to assist Afghan troops, a U.S. official said on Thursday. The move signals a return to broader military might against the Taliban and pulls the United States back deeper into the country’s ongoing war. The new measures include authorizing U.S. troops, stationed in Afghanistan on a dual training and counterterrorism mission, to begin accompanying conventional local forces on the battlefield in a way that now occurs only with elite Afghan forces. That, in turn, could mean greater use of U.S. air power to support those American and Afghan forces as they do battle.”

This is also true of Iraq where at least 3,500 Pentagon troops have been deployed over the last year to ostensibly assist in the fight against the Islamic State. In Syria, the U.S. along with at least a dozen other countries is bombing the territory under the guise of combatting terrorism.

In Yemen, the White House is supporting a war against the people though the proxy states of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), among others to purportedly curtail Iranian influence in the least developed country in the Middle East. The Palestinians, pushed to the background of U.S. foreign policy, remain under occupation and siege in the West Bank and Gaza.

The U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) destroyed Libya five years ago leaving the continent’s once most prosperous state in ruins and poverty becoming a source of instability for the entire region. Libya is a major source of human trafficking where hundreds of thousands today are seeking to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe exacerbating divisions within the European Union (EU) leaving millions of migrants and their descendants subjected to xenophobia and racism.

In Latin America the government of Brazil was overthrown recently without any response from the U.S. making its role quite suspect in the fifth largest state in the world. Venezuela is under threat after being destabilizing by forces funded and coordinated by Washington.

Cuba is still occupied at Guantanamo Bay by the Pentagon naval base and a concentration camp housing so-called “terrorists” who have never been put on trial. Travel bans and the economic embargo against Havana remains despite the supposed efforts to “normalize” relations with the Caribbean island-nation just 90 miles off the coast of Florida.

Another important policy decision from the federal legislature went almost unnoticed as well and that was the recent passage of a defense bill by Congress ignoring a possible veto threat by Obama.

The Associated Press reported on June 14 that

“Defying a White House veto threat, the Senate voted decisively Tuesday to approve a defense policy bill that authorizes \$602 billion in military spending, bars shuttering the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and denies the Pentagon’s bid to start a new round of military base closings. The GOP-led

Senate's version of the National Defense Authorization Act passed 85 to 13, with all but seven members of the Democratic caucus backing the legislation. Six Republicans voted against the bill. The legislation mandates for the first time in history that young women sign up for a potential military draft. The requirement has angered social conservatives, who fear the move is another step toward the blurring of gender lines akin to allowing transgender people to use public lavatories and locker rooms."

The Ongoing Problems of Racism and National Oppression

Recognition of the violent history of the U.S. takes us into the second segment of tonight's presentation that is the failure to eradicate racism and national oppression from U.S. society some 151 years since the conclusion of the civil war. Evidence of this reality is all around us as we speak.

We need to look no further than the ongoing 2016 national elections where racism has been allowed to characterize the Republican Party nominations process. House of Representatives speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin said just last week that presumptive nominee Donald Trump's comments about a Mexican American jurist were racist. However, Ryan went on to say in the next breath that he would support Trump anyway. This is quite revealing along with the reticence of the Democratic Party leadership to thoroughly and unequivocally condemn not only the racism of the Republican Party but within its own ranks.

Bill Clinton, when confronted by African American activists in Philadelphia in April responded by saying that critics of his signing of the ominous crime bill during the mid-1990s were defending drug dealers and murderers. Terms such as "super-predators" came out of the mouths of the Clintons during their tenure in office.

Over the last three-and-a-half decades when MCHR was founded, the prison population in the U.S. has increased by at least 500 percent. African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately impacted by police violence and mass incarceration. These policies have been continuous through successive Republican and Democratic administrations.

Moreover, there are other forms of racism which take on a different character that are equally if not more so debilitating and deadly. In the realm of socio-economic equality the U.S. has not made substantial progress within the last 40 years.

A recent annual report issued by the National Urban League entitled "The State of Black America, Locked Out: Jobs, Education, Justice," documents the continuing disparities between African Americans and whites. This lack of progress over four decades was not altered as a result of two terms of an Obama presidency.

In regard to the NUL study I wrote in early June that

"This report provides much hard data which necessitates a critical look at the lack of progress made during two terms of the Obama administration. African Americans voted overwhelmingly for Obama in 2008 and 2012 securing his two terms in office. Unemployment rates in the area in which he emerged politically from, the state and federal senates representing Illinois, exposes the futility of an electoral agenda absent of substantive demands based on the concrete conditions facing the working class and poor."

Illinois has the highest rate of unemployment for African Americans than any other state in the Union. The Chicago area, where many African Americans and Latinos live, is a center for mass poverty and violence. Just last weekend in the Windy City there were 42 different shootings during the course of three days resulting in 7 deaths, one of which was a five-year-old.

In the same article cited above, I also noted that

“These statistics pose a challenge for mass organizations to continue to put forward a political program for real jobs, decent housing, quality education and economic parity. It would be safe to say that irrespective of who is elected to the White House and Congress for 2017, the oppression and exploitation will not wither away.”

Social Justice and the Economic Crisis

One issue that the Senator Bernie Sanders campaign raised to millions across the U.S. was the growing income gap. Leading up to the 2008-2009 bail out of the banks, insurance companies and automobile firms, this phenomenon took on grotesque characteristics. This has continued into the present period.

Earlier this year it was announced that General Motors reaped \$8.7 billion in profits during 2015. GM was founded in Flint, Michigan over 100 years ago. Yet Flint is suffering from contaminated water, a deteriorating infrastructure and mass unemployment.

At a demonstration in the spring calling for the rebuilding of Flint, it was quite striking to look at the space previously known as “Buick City” which was abandoned and razed by the city. Much of the contamination in the Flint River is directly due to the industrial abandonment of this majority African American municipality.

Despite all of this there has been no commitment on the part of GM, the State of Michigan, the U.S. government or others with immense resources to provide the assistance and redevelopment aid needed to reconstruct Flint. This is true not only of Flint but also Detroit, Highland Park, Inkster, Benton Harbor and other cities across Michigan.

These are issues that should be at the forefront of any program of a political party that garners the support of working people and the oppressed. An absence of these demands represents an abdication of the obligations we share as human beings seeking to liberate ourselves and humanity from exploitation and repression.

Conclusion

These are just some of the specific questions that we need to grapple with in the next few weeks and months. The Republican National Convention in Cleveland and the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia will be the scene of demonstrations against the policies of both political parties which quite frankly represent the same class interests.

Even though both parties have different constituencies, the leadership clearly does not represent the social and economic interests of the majority of people in the U.S. whether they are Black, Brown, Red, Arab, Asian, Gay, Straight, disabled or able-bodied, etc. What are we getting for our taxes and votes?

Are we to determine our own destiny through a democratic process or are we to be engulfed into other more violent and disruptive tactics in response to injustice and inequality? We are still human beings and will respond to oppression and exploitation as a liberation force.

These are the challenges we are up against in 2016. Let us move forward to address them in an urgent and creative manner leading us towards the world we want to see and live in.

Note: *This address was delivered at the annual meeting of the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR) on June 16, 2016. The event took place at the Our Lady of Fatima church in Oak Park, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Azikiwe's talk was followed by responses from Kezia Curtis, a MCHR board member and Wayne Curtis, a community activist on the eastside of Detroit. The meeting was facilitated by Atty. Carey McGehee, Chair of the MCHR Board of Directors.*

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