

Martin Luther King's Legacy and the Struggle for the Cities

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Global Research, January 13, 2016

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Fifty years ago the focus shifted from non-violent direct action to urban rebellion

This year's national commemoration of the 87th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. comes during a period of renewal in the anti-racist movement.

King was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. The annual official commemoration of his birthday always falls on the third Monday of the month.

Since 1986, the date has been designated as a federal holiday. However, there is almost no information transmitted by the corporate media, the educational system or through numerous organizations that hold events in honor of the holiday, that speak directly about the work that the Civil Rights and anti-war leader was involved in.

It is almost never mentioned over these official channels that King was arrested over thirty times and towards the end of his life he became a staunch opponent of the United States military invasion and occupation of Vietnam. Neither is there any recognition of his desire to eradicate poverty in the U.S. and the call for a guaranteed income as well as mandatory full employment.

Three major campaigns of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), co-founded by King in 1957, during the final two years of his life (1966-1968), have tremendous bearing on the task facing African Americans, the working class and the progressive movement in general today. These efforts center around the SCLC's intervention in the Chicago Freedom Movement of 1966 demanding open housing; the linking of the struggle for Civil Rights with the demand for a unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam; and support for striking African American sanitation workers in Memphis, who were fighting for recognition as a union against the-then racist city administration of Mayor Henry Loeb.

King's Legacy and the Anti-Racist Struggle in 2016

Since the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, a significant amount of media focus has rightly been on the rash of police killings of African Americans in cities, suburbs and small towns across the United States. Myths about the U.S. being a "post-racial" society were gaining currency within certain political circles.

However, actual events would shatter these illusions. A vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida in early 2012 and the subsequent acquittal of his assailant in 2013 reawakened the consciousness of oppressed and anti-racist youth around the country.

Even though President Barack Obama has been elected twice as the first occupant of the

White House by a person of African descent, race relations and the social plight of African Americans had worsened under his tenure. Census data and a series of reports looking at the correlations between poverty and race illustrate clearly that national and class oppression is intensifying under the current period of capitalist downturn and restructuring.

Not only is this rising consciousness taking place in the urban areas, a series of demonstrations at university and college campuses highlighted the symbols of institutional racism and the lack of sensitivity on the part of administrators to the demands of African American students as well. These demonstrations during the fall of 2015 began on some of the most elite higher educational institutions and were led by those African Americans who were deemed by the ruling class as being privileged and destined to find a secure position within bourgeois society.

Within the purported “color-blind” social context, schools and building named after slave owners and ideological racist remained without being challenged. The dreaded Confederate flag was still flying on state capitol buildings and public locations 150 years after the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, which ostensibly ended the legalized enslavement of four million Africans.

These realities were further magnified when Dylan Roof massacred nine African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina at one of the most historic places of worship, the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, which dates back to the antebellum period in one of the most concentrated slave production states in the U.S.

Nevertheless, with all of the mass demonstrations and three significant rebellions in Ferguson and later Baltimore in 2015, no effective action has been taken by the federal government to address the worsening situation. The administration is claiming that the financial crisis of 2008 has been corrected and that the jobless rate stands at only five percent.

The fact that the labor participation rate is at its lowest level in four decades and African American poverty is rising as a direct result of the Great Recession is testament to the failure of the current Democratic White House. The campaign of presidential aspirant Hilary Clinton has not proposed any legislative or executive programs to improve the social conditions of African Americans, leaving the political landscape open for left forces to articulate and organize around a program that speaks directly to the status of the oppressed and workers in the U.S.

Reigniting the Movement in the Cities

Some fifty years ago, Dr. King and the SCLC moved into Chicago to join the Freedom Movement in that urban area. The African American masses in Chicago exploded in anger after the Democratic Mayor Richard Daley refused to seriously consider the demands for the abolition of slums and a policy of open housing.

SCLC in alliance with local organizations exposed the hypocrisy of Democratic Party controlled political machines such as that of Daley in Chicago, which provided lip service to Civil Rights but practiced segregation and therefore facilitating super-exploitation. The Chicago campaign coming in the aftermath of the Watts Rebellion of August 1965 prompted the escalation of tensions between the Chicago authorities and the African American community resulting in mass demonstrations against racism and a full-blown rebellion on

the West Side in late July of that year.

Rebellions had erupted in numerous cities in 1966 including Cleveland, Ohio and Omaha, Nebraska. Chicago would prove to be the most violent and disruptive. Instead of granting the demands of the Chicago Freedom Movement in totality, King and the other organizations were blamed for inciting the rebellions.

There are profound lessons from the Chicago Freedom Movement and the plight of cities today as it relates to the housing question, police brutality, political and economic power.

Although the housing question in 2016 takes on a different character than in 1966, it is still a pressing concern for the oppressed and working people. Millions were driven from their homes during the Great Recession while the administrations of both President George W. Bush and Obama did nothing to alleviate the suffering of the people.

In 1966 de facto segregation was prevalent in cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, Cleveland, Los Angeles and many other municipalities. Five decades later the marginalization and oppression of African Americans through the denial of jobs, decent wages, quality education, access to water and utility services, environmental justice and affordable housing, represents the continuation of institutional racism well into the 21st century.

It will take an even more revolutionary movement than which emerged during the 1950s and 1960s to complete the struggle for absolute equality and national liberation. These efforts, like King's in 1967-1968, must bring together progressive elements from all the oppressed nations, in alliance with the workers and the poor.

Ultimately socialism must become the rallying cry of the majority of the people within capitalist society. A genuine anti-capitalist movement that will upend private property and all exploitative relations of production, is the only solution to the current crisis in the U.S. and globally.

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