

Milwaukee (1967), Half-century of African American Struggle: Urban Rebellion and the Political Imperatives of Social Transformation

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A half-century of African American struggle poses challenges to national oppression

A rebellion erupted on August 13 on the north side of Milwaukee in the aftermath of the police killing of 23-year-old Syville Smith. The outbreak is a clear reflection of the mounting discontent on the part of African American working class youth who are heavily victimized by law-enforcement profiling and state-sponsored violence.

These rebellions have been occurring over the last three years after being triggered by the shooting death of Michael Brown, 18, gunned down on August 9, 2014 by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, right outside St. Louis City. Unrest in Ferguson attracted national and international attention shattering the false notions of the United States having become a “post-racial society.”

Nearly five decades ago, on July 30, 1967, the African American community in Milwaukee had also exploded in rebellion. The unrest prompted the-then local and state officials to deploy the Wisconsin National Guard. Private property was targeted for the acquisition of consumer goods and food as well as arson attacks. There were reports of snipping on the part of African American residents angered over decades of substandard segregated housing, systematic discrimination in the workplace and the persistent harassment by the police.



The rebellion in Milwaukee started after police were summoned to a social establishment ostensibly to break up a fight. It appeared as if it was a tactic that attracted the cops who were pelted with rocks and bottles. The violence against the police and private property quickly spread and after a few hours Mayor Henry W. Maier declared a state of emergency requesting the National Guard and imposing a curfew which lasted for nine days. During the course of the rebellion four people were killed including one police officer and 1,500 were arrested. Property damage was extensive although not on the same level as what occurred in Newark and Detroit earlier that same month.

This city had witnessed an exponential increase in African American migration during and after World War II. Between 1940 and 1960, Wisconsin's African American population skyrocketed by nearly 600 percent, from 12,158 in 1940 to 74,546 in 1960. African Americans from the southern U.S. were drawn to the city in search of jobs which were prevalent in industrial cities during the war.

Consequently, many African Americans made Wisconsin's cities their homes. Many of these migrant residents were born in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee. An expanding demand for labor in manufacturing jobs and the payment of much higher wages than they received in the South, served as a magnet for African American migrants to Milwaukee in the 1940s

and 1950s.

Nonetheless, the newly-arrived Wisconsin residents faced legalized segregation in housing, employment, and quality education. As a result the community organized in various groups to fight the unequal social and exploitative conditions.

The question of housing was a precipitating factor in fueling the unrest of July 1967 and its aftermath. Milwaukee Common Council members refused to pass ordinances guaranteeing open housing despite the signing into law federal civil rights legislation in 1964 by the-then President Lyndon B. Johnson.

According to an article summarizing these developments: "In August 1967, after five years of inaction by city officials, the NAACP Youth Council marched to Kosciuszko Park (in a predominantly white neighborhood) to protest the Common Council's refusal to pass an open housing ordinance. Alderperson Vel Phillips had first introduced open housing legislation in March of 1962 and continued to submit it to the council for approval despite being repeatedly voted down. The August 1967 march expressed the frustration of the Black community but also drew the wrath of three to five thousand white residents, who shouted obscenities and threw objects at the marchers, particularly focusing on the march's leader, Father James Groppi. Groppi, a white Catholic priest, was an important figure in the civil rights movement, playing an instrumental role in dramatizing the segregated housing situation in Milwaukee through his frequent demonstrations and arrests. Daily demonstrations continued throughout the winter of 1967-68." (wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints)

It was not until April 1968 in the aftermath of the assassination of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) co-founder Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee that a Federal Fair Housing Act was passed by the U.S. Congress. Nevertheless, the real estate firms and banks found ways to undermine the legislation which represented the last of a series of such civil rights bills extending from 1957 to 1968. The Milwaukee Common Council then grudgingly passed a local ordinance guaranteeing open housing although the problem of residential segregation and inadequate housing remains up until today.

High Tide of Black Resistance: African Americans in Rebellion During 1967

The situation in Milwaukee in 1967 was by no means isolated. A study issued by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, the so-called Kerner Commission Report, was actually impaneled by President Johnson amid the Detroit rebellion of July 23-28, the largest of such forms of resistance in urban areas in the history of the U.S. up until that time period, indicated that over 160 incidents of civil disorder occurred that year.

This report's finding which called for massive federal spending to address the dual and exploitative character of U.S. society was rejected by the Johnson administration. Since 1968, the social conditions in many African American communities in the U.S. are far worse than what existed when the Kerner Commission was in existence.

James Forman, the former Executive Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the-then Director of International Affairs, described the situation prevailing in 1967 through an essay entitled "High Tide of Black Resistance." SNCC had made the call for Black Power the year before through Chairperson Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) and Field Secretary Willie Ricks (now named Mukasa Dada). By

1967, the mood was shifting strongly in favor of urban rebellion and guerrilla warfare.

In this essay published as a pamphlet by Forman, which was originally delivered before an United Nations conference on the liberation of Southern Africa in Zambia in July 1967, says of the period that: "The year 1967 marked a historic milestone in the struggle for the liberation of Black people in the United States, the year that revolutionaries throughout the world began to understand more fully the impact of the Black movement. Our liberation will only come when there is final destruction of this mad octopus—the capitalistic system of the United States with all its life-sucking tentacles of exploitation and racism that choke the people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. To work, to fight, and to die for the liberation of our people in the United States means, therefore, to work for the liberation of all oppressed people around the world.

Liberation movements in many parts of the world are now aware that, when they begin to fight colonialism, it becomes imperative that we in this country try to neutralize the possibilities of full-scale United States intervention as occurred in Santa Domingo, as is occurring in Vietnam, and as may occur in Haiti, Venezuela, South Africa or wherever. While such a task may well be beyond our capacity, an aroused, motivated, and rebelling Black American population nevertheless helps in our indivisible struggles against racism, colonialism and apartheid."

This timely contribution by Forman makes the case for the internationalization of the African American struggle. In the 1960s, figures such as Malcolm X, Queen Mother Audley Moore, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Stokely Carmichael, among others, articulated the position that not only were African Americans in solidarity with the liberation struggles and revolutionary governments in Africa and throughout the world but that Africans in America were part and parcel of the African Revolution which is interwoven with the global movement for socialism.

Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister and president of the West African state of Ghana, who served as the chief strategist and tactician of the African Revolution from the late 1940s through the early 1970s, said in the book entitled "Class Struggle in Africa", that: "Each historical situation develops its own dynamics. The close links between class and race developed in Africa alongside capitalist exploitation. Slavery, the master-servant relationship, and cheap labor were basic to it. The classic example is South Africa, where Africans experienced a double exploitation- -both on the grounds of color and of class. Similar conditions exist in the USA, the Caribbean, in Latin America, and in other parts of the world where the nature of the development of productive forces has resulted in a racist class structure. In these areas, shades of color count—the degree of blackness being a yardstick by which social status is measured." (panafbooks, 1970)

Therefore, in its most revolutionary form, the African American movement for self-determination and social transformation is consistent with all progressive struggles for national liberation and socialism. These principles of the ideological orientation of the masses of workers and youth must be continued into the present period of globalized capitalist production, divisions of labor and political power.

Will Liberation Still "Come From a Black Thing"?

SNCC, the Black Panther Party (BPP), the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) and other organizations which emerged from the 1960s and 1970s, viewed the African American struggle as being in the vanguard of social transformation in the U.S. The LRBW

advanced the notion of the African American role as being related to their strategic position at the point of capitalist production. Hence, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), a key element of the LRBW, was able to shut down one of the main auto plants for Chrysler Corporation in 1968 through a wild cat strike due to the fact that so many African American workers were employed at the facility.

Since the mid-1970s there has been a major re-structuring of industrial production within the capitalist world. Large-scale structural unemployment and poverty has been institutionalized within this economic framework. The “recovery” from the Great Recession of 2008 has been carried out utilizing low-wage labor even within the auto industry which in the post-bankruptcy period imposed two and three tier wage scales designed to maximize profit and undermine solidarity between younger workers and their veteran counterparts. African Americans communities in urban centers have been devastated through the razing of public housing complexes, the loss of meaningful employment and business opportunities, and the disproportionate impact of the foreclosure and eviction crisis caused by the major banks emanating from their predatory lending practices in housing and municipal finance.

The labor participation rate remains at its lowest level in four decades meaning that the monthly jobless statistics are skewed to advance the propagandistic aims of the ruling class in the U.S. This has been aggravated by the failure of the Obama administration and its predecessors to develop policy initiatives that address the special oppression of the African American and Latino communities. African American labor power has been incarcerated where people are forced to work for free producing goods and services that are exported around the world.

Despite these changes it is still the African American masses that are taking the lead in the struggle against racism, national oppression and economic exploitation. The African American working class although suffering from super-exploitation, remains a force to be reckoned with. The millions in prison and under judicial and law-enforcement supervision are no lesser workers than those punching a clock for the enemy every morning, afternoon and night.

The anti-racist movement often self-identified and misidentified as “Black Lives Matter” has shaken up the image of U.S. imperialism in the present epoch. Many within the African American community realize that there is no future for them under the capitalist and imperialist systems. People under normal circumstances do not take militant action against the state and private property. It appears that the African American people are moving into a renewed era of revolutionary resistance, mobilization and organization.

A rejuvenated movement must not only develop a political program in line with the contemporary crises but also build organizations that speak directly to the needs and aspirations of the people. No other sectors of the working class are in a better position today than African Americans to set the stage for a broader struggle to overturn capitalist exploitation and relations of production.

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