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The Baltimore upheaval: On race and class in America

Jerry White

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In the aftermath of the eruption of anger in Baltimore, Maryland over the police killing of Freddie Gray, the media and political establishment are seeking to conceal the real social and political issues at stake.

The killing of 25-year-old Gray last month—only one of the latest in a wave of police murders around the country—triggered clashes with police, demonstrations that spread to other cities and a police-military occupation of the city that was only lifted last week. While Gray’s murder was the catalyst, the scope and magnitude of the social discontent was fueled by the destitute conditions confronting working-class youth in the city’s poorest, largely minority, neighborhoods.

Much of the political elite that runs Baltimore is African American, including the current mayor, police chief and the majority of the city council. Although this fact has seriously undermined the arguments of the proponents of identity politics, it has not stopped them from insisting once again that the essential division in American society is race, not class.

On Sunday, the *New York Times* published a lead editorial, “How Racism Doomed Baltimore.” The newspaper, which sets the tone for what is described as “liberal public opinion” in America, declared that conditions in the city could only be understood within the context of the city’s legacy of racism and segregation.

“Americans might think of Maryland as a Northern state, but it was distinctly Southern in its attitudes toward race,” the *Times* editorialists write before giving a potted history of the state, from efforts to disenfranchise black voters in 1905 to more contemporary examples of racial segregation in public housing.

The desperate condition of young low-income men, the newspaper says, cannot be understood outside of the context of the “century-long assault that Baltimore’s blacks have endured at the hands of local, state and federal policy makers, all of whom worked to quarantine black residents in ghettos, making it difficult even for people of means to move into integrated areas that offered better jobs, schools and lives for their children.”

The “tensions associated with segregation and concentrated poverty place many cities at risk of unrest. But the acute nature of segregation in Baltimore—and the tools that were developed to enforce it over such a long period of time—have left an indelible mark and given that city a singular place in the country’s racial history.”

That Baltimore, like many cities in the north and the south, had a history of racial segregation is of course true. However, if a reader of this column were not familiar with the politics of Baltimore, they might be excused for believing the city is run by the Ku Klux Klan and that its police force is made up of Night Riders covered in white sheets.

The *Times* does not mention that the political establishment in the city is predominantly African American, or that half of the Baltimore Police Department is black. Indeed, three of the six cops indicted for Gray’s killing, including the driver of the police van charged with murder, are African American.

The relentless police violence in Baltimore stems not from racism but from class oppression, which the black politicians defend no less than their white counterparts. Unable to contain her hatred and fear of the city’s youth after sporadic rioting erupted the day of Gray’s funeral, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake declared, “Too many people have spent generations building up the city for it to be destroyed by thugs who are trying to tear down what so many fought for. They are tearing down businesses, destroying property.”

Rawlings-Blake speaks for a whole layer of wealthy African Americans who have a stake in defending their property and wealth and overseeing a system that produces ever-greater poverty for black and white workers alike. This corrupt social layer includes countless academics, politicians, preachers, millionaire “civil rights” leaders and black entrepreneurs who have benefited from government funding for minority-owned businesses and African American university programs.

Alongside the *Times* are various pseudo-left organizations that have long promoted identity politics in order to subordinate the interests of workers and youth to the Democratic Party. They represent the strivings of a segment of the upper middle class that uses the politics of race, gender and sexual identity as part of efforts to gain more of a share of the wealth exploited from the working class.

With angry youth in the streets of Baltimore denouncing the mayor and other black officials, the International Socialist Organization (ISO)—which hailed Obama’s 2008 election as a “transformative event in US politics, as an African American takes the highest office in a country built on slavery”—has suddenly discovered a “black elite” whose interests are at odds with the majority of minority workers and youth.

The problem, however, is that these “black elected officials” defend the “racist system!”

The ISO’s Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor—an assistant professor in Princeton’s African American studies department—tells us, “Black elected officials have largely governed in the same way as their white counterparts, reflecting all of the racism, corruption and policies favoring the wealthy seen throughout mainstream politics.” This “powerful Black political class,” she continues, “helps to deflect a serious interrogation of structural inequality and institutional racism.”

In other words, the problem is, according to Taylor, that the black politicians are simply not aggressive enough in their promotion of identity politics. Never does she suggest that there is a fundamental unity of interests between black and white workers.

The *New York Times*, the ISO—which is essentially an auxiliary agent of the Democratic Party—and the political establishment as a whole are determined to prevent any real examination of the social and economic structure of America because they all defend the capitalist system, which is the source of poverty and police brutality.

It has been 50 years since the Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles, one of the first of a wave of urban uprisings across the United States in the 1960s. The call made in the 1968 Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders for massive government spending to stop the country’s drift towards racial and economic polarization was never realized. Instead, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society” programs gave way to massive outlays for the Vietnam War, with politicians declaring that it was impossible to provide “guns and butter.”

The five decades that have elapsed have seen the deindustrialization of major manufacturing centers like Baltimore, combined with an unrelenting destruction of social programs. At the same time, sections of the African American upper-middle-class have been elevated into positions of privilege and power.

By the time of Bill Clinton’s election in 1992, the Democratic Party had completely repudiated its association with the reforms of the New Deal and Great Society periods. Clinton gutted welfare programs to provide an ample supply of cheap labor for the rich, including a growing layer of black capitalists, and passed the 1994 Federal Crime Bill, with its notorious “three strikes” provision that has helped create the largest prison population in the world.

Since taking office Obama has only escalated these reactionary policies. Today the American ruling class will not even provide “guns and water,” as tens of thousands of low-income residents in Baltimore and Detroit are seeing their water service shut off for unpaid bills. The only “urban policy” Obama and the ruling class have is to try to contain the explosive social tensions with police military repression.

Whatever role racism might play in any particular act of police violence, the events in Baltimore expose the fact that above all class is the determining factor. With nothing to offer masses of people, the political and media representatives of the ruling class, along with the upper-middle-class boosters, are determined to block the development of a politically conscious and united movement of black, white and immigrant workers and youth against the profit system.

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