Anti-Racism and Class Struggle

written by John Clarke | August 30, 2020

The sharp disagreement that arose earlier this summer, when the NYC Lower Manhattan branch of the Democratic Socialists of America's (DSA) extended a speaking invitation to Adolph Reed, was both telling and politically significant. According to *The New York Times*, the Black academic was intending to argue that "the left's intense focus on the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on Black people undermined multiracial organizing, which he sees as key to health and economic justice." In an article written in April, Reed had, indeed, challenged the "special focus on black Americans' particular vulnerability to Covid-19, apparently based on a generic presumption that blacks are likely to have it (whatever it is) worse." He linked what he described as the "blacks have it worse" argument' to 19th Century pseudo-scientific "racial medicine." He concluded that "a neoliberal politics of race relations engineering" must be put aside because "the shared danger of pandemic screams of the need for broad solidarity."

The DSA AfroSocialist and Socialists of Color Caucus issued a statement that challenged this 'decision to organize an event that claims it is good socialist politics to ignore the deadly racist impact COVID 19 is having on Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities (BIPOC).' Far from there being any effort 'to silence Professor Reed,' as the *Times* article on the cancellation of the talk suggests, the statement included the clear and, in my view, very reasonable demand that "the event be changed to a debate of Adolph Reed's class reductionist analysis versus our intersectional socialist analysis."

Reed is, in any event, very far from being silenced. He remains an influential participant in the debate on the relationship between the fight for racial justice and the class struggle within capitalist society. This disagreement on the left is a longstanding one that the social upsurge following the racist police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis has only sharpened. The discussion has been taken up here in Canada, where I have supported the view that the fight for racial justice is so vital that no serious class struggle politics can afford to downplay its significance.

Let me say that an anti-capitalist approach differs considerably from what we might describe as a liberal politics of identity. Such a viewpoint sees only racial oppression and disregards the class based exploitation that this society rests upon. As such it is driven to seek solutions within the very

system that created and that perpetuates racism. Some on the left, however, are so determined to keep the focus on class that they end up minimizing the role of racism in this society. I once attended a meeting in Toronto, in which a young Black woman detailed the experiences of her community at the hands of racist employers, landlords, officials and cops. A white trade union activist got up in the discussion that followed and informed her that, while he deplored the things she described, it was wrong to focus on racism. The real issue was that capitalists exploited all workers and a united working class movement would take care of the secondary problem of racism as a matter of course. He jarringly demonstrated "class reductionism" at its worst.

White Privilege

Whenever the respective importance of class and race are debated, it is likely to include a disagreement over the vexed question of "white privilege." There are those who reject this concept and suggest it is an unhelpful or divisive term. In some ways, it seems curious that it should be such a contentious issue on the left. Both Canada and the US were created by way of the genocidal and thoroughly racist dispossession of Indigenous populations and have histories that drip with racism. The racist past, moreover, has given over to a racist present and it is impossible to deny that the two societies operate on the basis of racial hierarchies. A quick internet search would readily produce ample evidence of this. The record on levels of unemployment and poverty, income disparities, health outcomes, rates of incarceration and other key indicators, would all show that racialized people face disadvantage and white people enjoy relative privilege.

However, it is also indisputable that this racial hierarchy exists alongside other forms of oppression. Advantage and disadvantage are also related to such considerations as gender, sexual orientation and disability. Above all else, they are linked to the question of social class and the working class is unquestionably multiracial. I'd be the first to agree that working class people have common interests that run counter to those of their exploiters and that unity among them is entirely necessary. However, I would also suggest that, in order to develop a political approach that corresponds to the realities of this society, we have to acknowledge that racial hierarchy and white privilege also exist within the working class.

Pervasive racism ensures that racialized workers are disproportionately concentrated in the most exploitative forms of employment. The Law Commission of Ontario, for example, found that "Racialized workers also suffer a disproportionate degree of hardship in the labour market." and that the jobs they have to accept are "much more likely to be insecure, temporary and low paying." The impact of racism creates a massive additional level of oppression outside of the workplace as well. In Canada, as well as in the US, the temporary and partial halt to evictions that took place during the pandemic lockdown period is coming to an end and masses of tenants face the loss of their housing. Unsurprisingly, the shadow or racism hangs over this dire situation and deeply effects who is at risk of being put onto the streets. The threat to Black lives that racist policing in the US poses is now known throughout the world but it is not fundamentally different in Canada. In Toronto, Black people are twenty times more likely to be shot dead by the police than white people. Across Canada, Indigenous people are ten times as likely to die from police shootings.

Those on the left who reject the concept of white privilege will often point out that many white people work for low wages, face poverty and experience homelessness. Based on this they ask, rhetorically, "Are they privileged?" Yet, even when we discuss those who face the highest levels of exploitation and the most egregious forms of oppression, the racial hierarchy doesn't disappear. Racism exists within the low wage workplaces. The Law Commission report I mentioned previously doesn't neglect to point out that "…racialized workers commonly experience attitudinal and systemic discrimination in the workplace." Black and Indigenous people are massively overrepresented in the Canadian prison population but they also face tougher sentences, worse treatment while

incarcerated and reduced prospects for being paroled. At every level, the racism of this society imposes an additional burden of oppression that white people don't face and this can't be considered as a "divisive" inconvenience by any serious left analysis.

Working Class Unity

There is, however, one vital difference in the matter of white privilege and how it impacts working class people. For the mainly white capitalist class, the racial hierarchy of the system they draw their profits from is entirely beneficial. It provides them with super exploited workers and weakens the capacity for working class resistance. For those on the other side of the class divide, however, that hierarchy is an enormous impediment. The privileges that white working class people enjoy are, at the same time, a means of furthering their exploitation. A working class united against both class based and racial oppression would be to the great advantage of all within its ranks. A 1980s study of wage disparities between Black and white workers in the US, showed that the wages of white workers were actually the lowest in places where the racial wage gap was greatest.

In my view, far from adapting to liberal politics or introducing a divisive element, making anti-racism front and centre within a strategy of class based resistance corresponds to the realities of the capitalist societies we live in and to the particular features of the present period. As the pandemic struck us and unleashed (I should really say deepened) an economic crisis of huge proportions, George Floyd was murdered by a racist police force in Minneapolis. Who could have imagined the international impact this would have and the resistance it would bring onto the streets? As I write this, the horrible shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha has led to an explosion of rage. The resistance that is presently focused on racist police brutality can spread to other struggles by working class people and, in every one of them, the class issues are interwoven with racial oppression.

In 1948, the Trinidadian socialist C.L.R. James, spoke of the great hatred for capitalism that lived within the Black population of the US:

> "Let us not forget that in the Negro people, there sleep and are now awakening, passions of a violence exceeding perhaps, as far as these things can be compared, anything among the tremendous forces that capitalism has created…the hatred of bourgeois society and the readiness to destroy it when the opportunity should present itself, rests among them to a degree greater than in any other section of the population in the United States."

The class struggle must also be a fight against racism if it is to unite the working class and challenge capitalism.