

Video: Race, Class and Protest in the United States Today

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American anti-war activist Ajamu Baraka has urged the public to stay vigilant against US "attempts to control the narrative" of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Speaking at an event organised by the Workers' Party, the national organiser of the Black Alliance for Peace and the 2016 Green Party candidate for vice president said that: "The current ongoing capitalist crisis has created the most serious crisis of legitimacy since the collapse of the capitalist economy during the years referred to as the Great Depression. We are now seeing, within the economy, the genocidal implications of economic conditions in which young black workers have more value as human generators of profit locked up in prisons than as participants in the economy as low wage workers."

Founded in 2017, the Black Alliance for Peace (BAP) seeks to recapture and redevelop the historic anti-war, anti-imperialist, and pro-peace positions of the radical black movement. Framing the current wave of protests across America as an unarticulated rebellion against "the dehumanisation and degradation of late stage capitalism, known as neoliberalism", Baraka outlined attempts by the authorities to co-opt the Black Lives Matter movement with photo opportunities and stories of white agitators.

Full transcript below.

America's Political Prisoners

I made a pledge that in all of my public presentations that I will acknowledge the existence of political prisoners in the US. We just had Delbert Africa - who had been incarcerated for 42 years - up until January when he was released. He passed the day before yesterday. We believe it is important that people in the US - but even more importantly that people outside of the US - be made aware that inside the US we have the longest serving political prisoners on the planet. People who are approaching their fifth decade in prison. Men - and, up until recently, women - who have been in the dungeons of the US for decades.

The Black Alliance of Peace

The motivation for launching the Alliance was based on the fact that on April 4th, 1967 Dr Martin Luther King reconnected with the radical black tradition by adding his voice of opposition to the murderous US war machine unleashed on the people of Vietnam. For Dr King his silence on the war in Vietnam had become an irreconcilable moral contradiction.

He declared that it was hypocritical for him to proclaim the superiority of values of nonviolence as a life principle while the US remained the greatest purveyor of violence on the planet. He thought it was a contradiction for him to remain silent as the US government engaged in genocidal violence against the people of Vietnam. We say Dr King reconciled and reconnected with the black radical tradition because, in fact, Dr King was lat.

In 1967, when he embraced an oppositional position on Vietnam, it was years after other formations – including the Revolutionary Action Movement, Malcolm X, SNCC (the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee), and the Black Panthers – had taken a resolute stance against the war in Vietnam.

The Black liberation movement that those organisations represented are worker based. They are anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and international. On April 4th, 2017, 50 years after that very famous speech in which Dr King broke with the US government, we launched the Black Alliance for Peace.

We saw that after more than three decades of pro-war commissioning by both corporate parties and the corporate media, coupled with cultural desensitisation from almost decades of unrelenting war, opposition to militarism and war was something that had almost disappeared in the US among the general population. The black public was not immune to those cultural and political changes. And with the ascendance of the corporatist President Barack Obama – during whose tenure the US continued on a militaristic bent unabated and, in fact, ratcheted up – that lack of opposition to and awareness of US militarism deepened even more.

What we saw was an absolute necessity for us to attempt to recapture anti-war and anti-imperialist traditions. The black community, the black people, the black working class have been consistently – up until recently – the most anti-war and anti-imperialist communities in the US. And so the Black Alliance for Peace was launched to try to revive that spirit of opposition. But we have to make sure that people understand that the Black Alliance for Peace is a fighting organisation. We are clear. We say: no justice; no peace.

The Alliance is what we call a people-centred human rights project against war, repression and imperialism that, again, seeks to recapture, seeks to redevelop the anti-war, anti-imperialist spirit.

We see our work as part of a broader effort. A broader effort to not only revive our antiwar traditions but to revive a broader anti-war, anti imperialist, pro-peace movement in the United States. We make the connections between domestic violence and repression and the global war machine.

We see, for example, the pivot to Asia. NATO and the rotating of NATO troops on the borders of Russia. The expansion of the US Africa command. Continued support for apartheid Israel. Police executions and impunity in the US. The carceral state with the mass incarceration of black and other colonised workers and poor people are elements and policies of one oppressive global system of colonial, capitalist, white supremacist power. So the context of struggle in the US must begin with a structural analysis.

The current crisis

The current ongoing capitalist crisis has created the most serious crisis of legitimacy since

the collapse of the capitalist economy during the years referred to as the Great Depression. The economic collapse comes on the heels of a deep crisis of the economy that occurred in 2007, 2008. With economic instability and the increasing competition between capitalist states, divisions have emerged among the nations that those of us in the Black Alliance for Peace refer to as the US/EU/NATO axis of domination.

The US has responded by moving toward a more confrontational posture, not only with its allies in Europe, but it has also elevated China and Russia as national security risks. Domestically, the black working class has never recovered from the collapse of 2007, 2008. The continual restructuring of the US economy to a low wage economy has resulted in the black working class being relegated to the lower rungs of the labour force, joining undocumented migrants, immigrants and other colonised workers.

We are now seeing, within the economy, the genocidal implications of economic conditions in which young black workers have more value as human generators of profit locked up in prisons than as participants in the economy as low wage workers.

This reality is one of the factors driving the obscene phenomenon of black and brown incarceration in the largest prison system on the planet. Astronomical youth employment. Millions of African-Americans and white people without health care. Poisoned environments and crumbling schools make for conditions that, with Covid-19, are ravaging the black communities. This is the reality of the colonial, capitalist system in its neoliberal stage. The Corona pandemic has pulled the ideological curtain away from the system and has exposed the brutal realities of a rapacious system of greed, human exploitation and degradation, social insecurity, corruption, and the normalisation of coercive state violence.

Bipartisan support for neoliberal capitalist policies over the last four decades has had a devastating impact. The closing of public health care facilities. Turning hospitals into giant for-profit hospital chains. Millions of people – disproportionately black people – living precarious lives at the bottom of the labour market as gig workers with no benefits, no sick leave, no vacation, no security – ordered to shutter in place as a consequence of Covid-19.

Hundreds of black people are dying unnecessarily from the virus because of conditions of colonial oppression. Which we say amounts to a situation of state sanctioned murder.

So the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor – who was murdered by police in her bed – and Ahmaud Arbery who was murdered in Brunswick, George by non-state actors; white vigilantes... The whole phenomenon of vicious killer cops is just the tip of the iceberg.

This is the context we have to bring to understand what is happening in the US. Connecting the pandemic and the ongoing structural contradictions of capitalism. The impact of the pandemic, not only on black people, on black workers, but on everyone, particularly the working class in the United States of America.

In some ways George Floyd and the resistance is almost a metaphor for what is unfolding in the US. It's a consequence of this pandemic. It's a consequence of the disproportionate impact of this pandemic on the black working class. It's a consequence of the clear message to workers from racial and ethnic backgrounds that their lives mean very little when it comes to the objective interests of capital.

There has been a process of radicalisation among the people, particularly among the

working class. The clear message from the rulers is that humanity and the safety and the health of workers mean almost nothing in comparison to the needs of capital.

The knee on the neck of George Floyd that we saw became almost a metaphor for what millions of people are experiencing. They are experiencing the knee on their neck from capital.

So while the cry was for justice for George Floyd and so called police reform, what some of us see is an unarticulated – unarticulated until this point – rebellion against the dehumanisation and degradation of late stage capitalism, known as neoliberalism. And that is responsible for bringing people to the streets. There is no other way that one can understand the breadth and intensity of the mobilisations we are seeing. LGBTQ. The unemployed youth from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Downsized petit bourgeois elements. Suburbanites. All sectors of the population have shown up in the streets in hundreds of cities and towns across the country.

What has been the response from the state?

Many of us have seen an evolution take place. First there was clear repression. A heavy handed response from the authorities and from the militarised police. The calling up of what we call the state police and the national guard.

Every state in the US has a national guard. These are civilians who also serve in the military. They do military maneuvers. They serve as active duty soldiers from time to time. During the period when the US was involved in a two-theatre war – in both Iraq and Afghanistan- it was the national guard that played a very important role in those wars. The national guard is one of the foundational elements in allowing the state to carry out two wars simultaneously. We're talking about military personnel.

They were called up to various states and cities across the country. So repression was the first response.

Then there was an attempt to co-opt. Some of you may have seen some of the images of the police kneeling with the protesters; sometimes even joining in with the marchers. We also saw – and it wasn't disseminated as widely – police officers using the kneeling gesture as a way to lure protesters closer to them. And then they would attack. Those images were circulated but not so much in the international press.

After continued attempts to co-opt the resistance we saw a clever move on the part of the state. They began to criminalise the resistance. They began to raise the issue of the violence of some of the protesters. Calling on the protesters to police themselves. To make sure that the resistance would remain what they define as non-violent. Part of that criminalisation process was racial division. They used an interesting device, talking about the so-called outside agitators.

In this case it was the white outside agitator. They said it was the white outside agitators who were responsible for the looting and the escalation of violence. You might recall that President Trump then identified Antifa. The anti-fascist. This amorphous group of individuals – some part of other organisations – who emerged after the election of Donald Trump and who proclaimed that they were going to oppose what they saw as a neofascist movement developing in the country.

Donald Trump said that this amorphous element were in fact domestic terrorists and that they were the ones responsible for the violence taking place across the country. So what we started seeing was suspicion on the part of the march organisers when it came to the participation of some white comrades.

Then came an attempt to colonise the resistance by the Democrats. Over two weeks, there was a move away from a call for justice and police reform. (Policing) is a local issue, remember; we have almost 19,000 police forces in the US. Policing is a local responsibility. The opposition movement ended up being about Trump in some way. It was an anti-Trump movement and Trump played right into to that when he ordered the protesters outside of the White House to be pushed back so that he could engage in a photo op.

Of course his bombastic rhetoric played right along to it too. So after seven days of resistance, it began to look like the resistance was anti-Trump and people started talking about the necessity of voting Trump out of office and started to articulate the talking points of the Democratic Party.

All of these are attempts to control the opposition. I keep referring to so-called racial justice – not to belittle the notion of racial justice – but to suggest that it was in the interests of the state to keep the resistance on the subject of racial justice for an individual. For George Floyd. And for it to be seen to be moving towards police reform.

They were scared to death that the images we all saw: of young black, white and brown people engaged in resistance. That is a nightmare scenario on the part of the rulers. A multinational, multiracial opposition under the leadership of radical black people emerging in the US. So they were desperate to keep the focus away from pivoting toward a critique of the system. And the nature of the state. And they were desperate to break up the emerging coalitions of progressive and radical elements among the people in this country.

What will happen next?

We believe they will continue to attempt to control the narrative. That's what we saw with the so-called yellow vests in France. We all recall that what brought them to the streets in the first place was pension reform. It gradually began to morph into a general anti-neoliberal movement. The US state is concerned with the same kind of trajectory.

There will be an attempt to depoliticise the opposition. They are attempting to make sure there is no class analysis. They don't want us to point to the ongoing plight of the working class. In particular the black and brown working class. The fact that it is workers – black and brown workers who they identify as so-called essential workers – who are attracting the virus and dying.

They don't want us to make a connection with the healthcare system in the US in which 80 million people are without healthcare. They are concerned about the healthcare system being overwhelmed because it is an industrialised system. When the only way to handle a pandemic is to have nationalised healthcare and a coordinated, sustainable system in the hands of the people.

They want to keep the focus on the issue of race. We say we have to make sure a pivot takes place. That there has to be a focus on class and race issues. We need to connect what is unfolding in the US to US militarism and imperialism. We say to people making the cry to

defund the police that if you don't connect that slogan with defunding the military, then it becomes a reactionary slogan that drives the movement into a dead end.

We say it is a moral contradiction to advocate for a kinder, gentler police force domestically while the US is unleashing systematic violence against people around the world.

This situation is very interesting as it is generating international solidarity. The US will never be able, with a straight face, to talk about human rights in other countries. The situation will prevent the US from pretending to be a state that is upholding international law. It is revealing to people around the world the true nature of the US, the plight of the working class and, in particular, the black and brown colonised working classes in the US.

The fundamental collapse of the global capitalist economy is creating a situation in which there is no telling what may unfold over the next few weeks and months.

This is a situation that may be historical in its implications.

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