

United States: Why Was Martin Luther King Assassinated? - Recalling the Response

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This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968.

This murder of one of the great Black leaders of the time by white racists with the complicity of the U.S. government, most likely the FBI, stunned all African Americans in the country. Immediately violent uprisings broke out in hundreds of cities and towns, the most widespread of uprisings that had marked the era of the civil rights movement and Black Power.

The African American singer Nina Simone swiftly wrote a song titled "Why? The King of Love Is Dead":

*"What's gonna happen now, in all of our cities?
My people are rising, they're living in lies
Even if they have to die, even if they have to die
At the moment they know what life is*

Even at that one moment that ya know what life is
If you have to die, it's all right
'Cause you know what life is
You know what freedom is for one moment of your life"

Scenes of the uprisings were broadcast on TV. One captured the national impact: in largely Black Washington D.C. the Capitol Building was partially obscured by rising smoke from the burning city. The sentiment was that if "they" – in the parlance of the time, the white power structure – could kill Dr. King, the advocate of non-violence, they could do this to any Black person.

The police were not able to contain the massive upsurge, and everywhere the National Guard was called out, 40,000 strong, to suppress it. Forty African Americans were killed, and hundreds more wounded and many more arrested.

One of those arrested was a young man named Andrew Pulley whom I later got to know. He was told by the judge that he faced two choices: prison or the Army. He made the latter choice. Once in the Army, he met up at his base, Fort Jackson, with a group of antiwar soldiers organized by socialist GIs. He became an antiwar fighter and socialist himself, and once out of the military joined the Young Socialist Alliance and Socialist Workers Party, and became a national leader of both.

The racist, anticommunist witch-hunter head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, singled out King to target after the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott that King helped lead. Hoover then set up a secret program called COINTEL to counter the new Black movement with illegal surveillance, disinformation, arrests on trumped up charges and other dirty tricks. In a later memo, Hoover ordered the agency to

seek to prevent the emergence of “a Black messiah”, singling out King and Malcolm X.

Government attention on King became more pronounced when he came out against the Vietnam war in 1967. In doing so he had to break with the rest of the civil right establishment, who didn't want to offend President Johnson who was now leading the war. Recent memoirs by King supporters tell of how he was shunned. By coming out against the war, he did join the more militant youth wing led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who had early come out against the war, as did militant Black nationalists like Malcolm.

In explaining his position, he said that “my country” was “the greatest purveyor of violence” in the world.

It's hard nowadays — when King's name is used in vain by capitalist politicians of all stripes, even by racists who twist King's 1963 “I have a dream speech” to boast they “have a dream” of ending affirmative action (which King strongly supported) — to recall the anti-King statements at the time in the press, by the various federal and local law enforcement authorities, and in Congress after he had spoken against the war.

The FBI was further alarmed when King also sought to broaden the struggle. From the beginning of his entry onto the national stage, in the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott against segregation in public transport, he raised deeper questions about the oppression of Blacks.

After the victories of the civil rights movement in winning Black voting rights in the states of the South, and the beginnings of the dismantling of segregation by law known as the Jim Crow system, King saw the economic supper-exploitation of Blacks would be a more difficult problem to solve.

He had begun to see that the struggle for racial equality was an economic struggle, and the capitalist system as the problem. In 1967, in a speech titled “The Other America,” he talked about “work-starved men searching for jobs that did not exist.”

He described the Black population as living on a “lonely island of poverty surrounded by an ocean of material prosperity,” and living in a “triple ghetto of race, poverty and human misery.”

He said, “The movement must address itself to the restructuring of the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here.

“And one day we must ask the question, ‘Why are there forty million poor people in America?’ And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth.

“When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy.... We've got to begin to asks questions about the whole society....

“It means questions must be raised. ‘Who owns the oil?’ ‘Who owns the iron ore?’ ‘Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?’ “

In 1968, King called for a “revitalized labor movement” to place “economic issues on the highest agenda.”

“The coalition of an energized section of labor, Negroes, unemployed, and welfare recipients may be the source of power that reshapes economic relationships and ushers in a breakthrough to a new level of social reform...”

In an earlier speech, King said, "You can't talk about solving the economic problem of the Negro without talking about billions of dollars. You can't talk about ending the slums without first saying profit must be taken out of slums.

"You're really tampering and getting on dangerous ground because you are messing with folks then. You are messing with captains of industry ...

"Now this means we are treading difficult water, because it really means that we are saying that something is wrong with capitalism ... There must be a better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism."

He was assassinated in 1968 when he was in Memphis, Tennessee, in support of striking sanitation workers. The largely Black workforce became famous in photos of them holding signs reading "I Am A Man."

The U.S. is still the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. It has been at war overtly or covertly since 1941. The anticapitalist alliance of the workers and all the oppressed that King outlined (and today we can add other sectors) is still the road forward.

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