

USA: Black Activism Surges in Waves of Protest in Polarized Political Atmosphere

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Two large waves of black protest have been rolling across the United States, one made up of demonstrations against continuing police killings of black men and the other responding to discrimination and racist treatment on U.S. college campuses. Almost all of the marches and rallies in cities and colleges across the country identify with the Black Lives Matter network that led the large protests against police violence in 2014.

College Student Protests Spread

In September at the University of Missouri black students began to hold “Racism Lives Here” protests over racist epithets and symbols displayed on campus. Among the protestors were members of the university’s football team who called their coach to ask for his support for their movement. The team said unless University President Tim Wolfe resigned, they would not play.

Coach Gary Pinkel, who is white, said team members talked to him “with tears in their eyes,” and he decided to back their protest. Football in American Colleges is big business—the University of Missouri’s sports revenues were \$83 million in 2014—and coaches often earn more and have greater status than college presidents. So with the football team and the coach against him, President Wolfe resigned—a signal victory for the black students.

The student victory at Missouri sparked protests at public and private colleges across the country from East to West: Princeton in New Jersey, Ithaca College in New York; Smith College in Massachusetts; Yale in Connecticut; the University of Michigan; Arizona State College; the University of California at Los Angeles; and at many others as well. All of this makes clear that a layer of young black activists both in the colleges and in the streets is growing, developing, and radicalizing throughout the country.

Police Killings of Black Men Continue

The movement is growing on the streets too. Since the police shootings in 2014 of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and of Eric Garner in New York City, there have been several other such police killings of black men. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement reports that police or vigilantes kill a black man every 28 hours. The British Guardian newspaper estimates that police will kill 1,000 Americans this year, with blacks twice as likely to die.

One such killing occurred on November 15 when police shot and 24-year old Jamar Clark in what they claimed was an altercation, though the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People said that, his hands cuffed, he was “murdered execution style.” Shouting “Black Lives Matter” black people protested for days at a local police station and over 50 protestors were arrested on various charges, typical of recent protests.

But on November 23, armed men attacked the mostly black demonstrators, shooting into the crowd and wounding five people. Police subsequently arrested four men, three white and one Asian for the shooting, charging them with assault and riot, but not with hate crimes. The man who fired the shots, Allen “Lance” Scarsella is a rightwing conservative whose action was clearly racially motivated. The white men’s armed attack on the black demonstrators may be a unique event so far, but it also represents an escalation in white racist reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement, not surprising given the Republicans’ racist political rhetoric.

Republicans’ Racist Rhetoric

Donald Trump, the leading Republican candidate, has been riling the party’s core conservative constituencies—who are nearly all white—with calls to deport the country’s 12 million undocumented immigrants, to refuse Syrian refugees, and to mobilize against Islam. Trump’s supporters get the coded—but clear—white supremacist message, as do black Americans.

Yet, while Trump launches new attacks on women, immigrants, Muslims and others, at the same time Bernie Sanders, a candidate for the Democratic Party nomination, talks about economic inequality, the need for massive economic assistance to working people for education and health care, speaks out against racism, and talks about ideas about socialism—until now a taboo topic in America.

At the same time, recognizing the significance of the black students’ outcry, President Barack Obama praised the Missouri University protesters while leading Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton said she was sympathetic to students’ concerns and “appreciated” their speaking out.

So far the Black Lives Matter leaders—many of them from the liberal NGO world that overlaps with the Democratic Party—have steered clear of political endorsements. But Obama, Clinton and the Democratic Party will attempt to draw the movement into the party’s orbit and to mobilize it behind Clinton. Black activists on the campuses and in the cities face the challenge of maintaining the independence of their movement or seeing it absorbed by the very forces they are fighting.

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P.S.

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