

## **Glen Ford on Black and Working-Class Political Independence**

### **The implications of his ideas for supporters of Bernie Sanders**

**by Linda Thompson**

I would like to encourage readers of this website to listen to Glen Ford (of Black Agenda Report) speaking at a Socialist Action Canadian conference on “The Democratic Party, Death Trap for U.S. Blacks—Independent Labour/Black Political Action” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCPVBaO5Cj4>).

His talk is worth the 45 minutes it takes to listen to—in particular for those who are considering their attitude toward the decision by Bernie Sanders to run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. It’s also significant in terms of understanding the question of “white privilege,” which is a perennial sticking point for many self-proclaimed socialists and revolutionaries.

I will try to summarize the highlights for those who cannot take the time to view the entire video, interspersing a few comments of my own about the implications of Ford’s analysis.

On independent labor/Black political action and the issue of white privilege Ford describes a hierarchy of pro-union sentiment that descends proportionally from Black women (most supportive), then Black men, “Hispanic” women, then “Hispanic” men, then white women, and lastly white men. From this he suggests that there is a “deficit” of solidarity—where white men are the most hesitant to unite and find great difficulty working across racial lines due to the fact that it is they who benefit the most from privilege.

Ford suggests that the greatest weakness of the American left and labor has always been the problem of whites failing to act in solidarity with Blacks (and, I might add, of all men failing to act in solidarity with women of all colors). The hierarchy he describes, regarding an understanding of the need to unite tells me that women will be the key to Black/white unity, since they have the least to lose and are already sensitized to the issue of privilege due to their own oppression. They can more readily empathize with issues of discrimination. This can be a key to our strategy on working-class unity.

Ford points out that a dynamic engine of political radicalization in the 1960s was the explosion of independent Black political organizing, which generated a self-determination dialogue on the nature of the system. Once Blacks decided that they should be independent, they then had to determine: independent from what? What is the actual nature of US society? So an extremely radical analysis grew out of Blacks examining the issue of self-determination.

The greatest period of unity among Black and white radicals, according to Ford, came at the end of the sixties, based on the position regarding the nature of imperialism developed by the Black Panther Party. This unity could never have happened if Blacks had not first organized separately. Future unity will have to unfold the same way, with Blacks getting together first and waging their own fight. Unity will arise out of the leadership of the Black struggle. I would add that the same is true for women. Men will support us when we lead our own fight. That is what brings the privileged to the side of the oppressed (unless of course the movements of the oppressed go in a reactionary direction, which is possible depending on a number of factors). I often wish that men would expend more of their own energy in

removing the burden of oppression from women, but unfortunately it usually doesn't work that way—for Black people or for women. But that is a whole other discussion.

In the opening section of his talk Ford explains how the Democratic Party came to have the hold it does on the Black community more clearly than I have ever heard before. It is worth listening to. He notes that immediately after the Civil War the Republican Party was the party of Blacks in the South, while the Democrats were the “white peoples’ party.” But once Reconstruction was turned back, and Blacks effectively disenfranchised, the Republican Party lost its base and essentially disappeared. The South became a “one party state.” During the civil rights era, therefore, the struggle for the franchise by Blacks meant a struggle to be allowed to participate in the only party that existed, the Democrats.

The success of this struggle was seen as a great victory, and voting in a unified manner for Democrats is still viewed by blacks as an act of solidarity. But it also led to the re-establishment of the Republican Party in the South, this time as the new “white peoples’ party.” Today the overwhelming majority of whites in the South are Republicans; the overwhelming majority of Blacks are Democrats.

Ford raises many other aspects of this process, and also talks about the rise of the Democratic Party as the party of Black people in the urban centers of the North. His entire analysis is well worth listening to. Unfortunately Black Agenda Report has remained as isolated, within the Black community, as white radicals are within the left in our critique of the Democratic party.

He then talks about the layer of Blacks that arose during the 1960s who wanted to be capitalists—capitalist aspiring, because they were not really capitalists—who figured it would best serve their own interests to shut down any mass protest movements. He acknowledges the effect of COINTELPRO and repression on the Black struggle, but suggests that the conservative influence and the behavior of this layer was also a key factor that helped to derail the Black movement.

Ford points out that finance capital is to the Democratic Party what big energy is to the Republicans—its most reliable source of political funding and support. Finance capital makes a killing by funding public investments in the urban centers, and therefore found it convenient to forge deep ties to the new, and increasingly Black, Democratic establishment in most of the big cities of the USA.

As a result, during the last several decades, the Black community became infested with stooges of Wall Street, entrenched in the Democratic Party. Ford tells us that it is, therefore, critical for Black labor to take the lead in a struggle to reclaim Black politics, because otherwise finance capital will continue to assert its hegemony. (His talk was presented before the rise of the fast food workers’ movement which is beginning, at least, to play this role today.)

Ford believes that half of progressive America is Black. If progressive sentiment cannot be mobilized in the Black community, therefore, because that community is infested and diverted by Democratic stooges of Wall Street, there will be no hope for any kind of progressive revival.

It’s in this light that we should be analyzing the Sanders campaign. If unregistered people and youth are mobilized to vote for Sanders in the primaries, they will need to be newly registered into the Democratic Party and this will, of necessity, have to become a goal of the Sanders campaign itself. That, in turn, will only serve to increase the grip of the reformists on the Black community. (I think it’s extremely useful to contemplate Ford’s description of the Democratic hold on voters as an

“infestation.”)

During the discussion period Ford also discusses the black vote for Obama in 2008 and 2012, and those who enthusiastically described it as “a movement.” Their political justification was that it doesn't matter what Obama says; its the movement that counts. He explains that this was a movement to the polls, however, not a real movement. There was an election which conjured up a “victory,” but that victory was, in fact, simply enthusiastic voting for a more effective evil. It advanced the interest of the white establishment, which became more secure. For the rest of us it was just an imaginary victory. He points out that this is how they absorb people.

We should be careful, in particular, not to discount the wretched record of Sanders on racism, and consider seriously whether his scoring points on other issues could, in any way, justify even critical support by the Left.

I do not want to maintain that there are not any positive aspects to Sanders's run for President, since any shake up in the Democratic Party or politics as usual usually indicates deeper struggles to come. It cannot hurt to have a prominent senator identify as a socialist. However the key is whether Sanders actually campaigns as a socialist. As many have pointed out, his politics in practice remain within safe Democratic Party limits.

Also during the Q&A, Ford discusses the role of the CP in the 1930's. I will not go into this, but again it's well worth listening to. In the 1930's the CP USA was the biggest party that formally supported integration, asserting that it would expel racist members. Due to the apartheid nature of the USA, however, it was the entire society, not just the south, that limited racial interaction. The CP looked like an oasis due to its position on the national question and the right to self determination. Blacks in the party felt they could not be overruled by whites, since the party declared they had a right to national self determination. They felt they could get into the party and then have their own platform. He explains that at one point 20 percent of the party was Black, but that later this declined when the CP repudiated its previous position on the national question.