



« State of Black America »: National Urban League Report Says African Americans Remain ‘Locked Out’

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In its annual report on the “State of Black America”, one of the oldest research organizations in the African American community documents the continuing levels of national oppression and economic exploitation.

This report for 2016 represents the fortieth anniversary of the yearly study with the first issued in 1976. During this period the United States was impacted by a severe recession triggering long-term restructuring of the world economic system.

Released under the title: “Locked Out: Education, Jobs and Justice, A Message to the Next President”, the document provides more than enough evidence to suggest that the African American people remain an oppressed nation within the political and economic clutches of Washington and Wall Street. Despite the advent of the first African American president in the personage of Barack Hussein Obama, the fundamental problems facing this population of at least 45 million are still unresolved some 151 years since the abolition of chattel slavery and the conclusion of the Civil War.

The study utilizes what is called an “equality index”, looking at what percentage of the socio-economic matrix which African Americans have access. Using this method the NUL report says that overall African Americans do not have full equality but only 72 percent of what whites possess.

Although there are potential pitfalls in using such a framework due to the class divisions among African Americans as well as the need to take into account the systematic national discrimination imposed on this population through the denial of economic and social opportunities which could be realized absent of a racist and class dominated society. However, it does provide a form of measurement that acknowledges in real terms the disparity that remain throughout the decades.

Oppression and Exploitation Still Intact

What is striking about the National Urban League (NUL) findings in its current report is the degree to which the overall social conditions of African Americans have remained essentially unchanged. This stagnation has continued through successive Republican administrations, as in 1976, to a Democratic one in 2016.

This conclusion is not to discount or minimize gains that have been made over the four decades particularly in the area of educational achievement. According to the report,

“Eighty-six percent of African Americans are high school completers; the share with a bachelor’s degree or more has more than tripled (from 6.6% to 22.2%); and roughly one-third of 18-24 year-olds are enrolled in college. While whites have increased college enrollment faster than Blacks between 1976 and 2014 (most recent data available), the college completion gap has narrowed 20 percentage points over this time (from 43% in 1976 to 63% in 2014).”

Nevertheless, in essential areas such as job acquisition and retention, unemployment rates among African Americans as in 1976 are twice as high as whites during a period in which the government and business says that there is a recovery. These figures are a reflection of the abolition of millions of jobs in heavy and light industry which has ramifications in the areas education, public services and consumer viability.

The NUL report says “despite notable absolute progress for Black America, there has been much less relative progress towards economic equality with whites, especially when compared to the progress made toward educational equality. This is especially notable when it comes to unemployment. With few exceptions, the Black unemployment rate has consistently remained about twice the white rate across time and at every level of education. Compared to 40 years ago, the income gap has remained basically unchanged (now at 60%), and the homeownership rate gap has actually grown 6 percentage points (now at 59%).”

As mentioned in the above quote, another important area in assessing the quality of life among African Americans is the ownership of residential housing. This NUL report emphasizes that “The foreclosure crisis has left Black homeownership rates at approximately the same point they were in 1976, while the white homeownership rate is now 5 percentage points higher. On the other hand, there has been slow, but ongoing progress in reducing poverty, in spite of the economic challenges presented by the Great Recession. According to the most recent estimates, the Black poverty rate is now 2.4 percentage points lower than in 1976 (down to 27% from 29.4%).”

Taking these statistics related to poverty rates at their face value means that based upon the official low-income measurement indexes well over one-quarter of the African American population is impoverished. Aggravating this quantitative data related to poverty is the high levels of joblessness which could easily imperil the households of those who are designated as not being impoverished.

It is important to recognize that there are other forms of measurement in determining poverty and the subjective outlooks of households within modern U.S. society. In 2014, a survey was published indicating that in general nearly half of people in the U.S. were either in poverty or near this category.

This methodology known as the Census Department’s Relative Poverty Measure is often used in developed countries to designate poverty. The Economic Policy Institute uses the term « economically vulnerable. » With this standard, 18 percent of Americans are below the poverty threshold and 32 percent are below twice the threshold, putting them in the low-income category. (Paul Buchheit, Alternet, March 23, 2014)

The worst state in the U.S. for African American unemployment is Illinois with specific concentrations of poverty, inequality and joblessness being in the Chicago metropolitan area.

In a study conducted by the Economic Policy Institute, it notes that “During the first quarter of 2016, covering January through March, the unemployment rate among Black Illinoisans was 14.1 percent. That’s up from 13.1 percent during the fourth quarter of 2015, when Illinois also had the nation’s worst African-American unemployment rate, according to the liberal think tank’s report. Illinois also tied with Washington for having the highest Hispanic unemployment rate, 7.8 percent, during the first quarter of 2016.” (progressillinois.com, May 20)

Impact of the Obama Administration and the Way Forward

This report provides much hard data which necessitates a critical look at the lack of progress made during two terms of the Obama administration. African Americans voted overwhelmingly for Obama in 2008 and 2012 securing his two terms in office.

Unemployment rates in the area in which he emerged politically from the state and federal senate, Illinois, exposes the futility of an electoral agenda absent of substantive demands based on the concrete conditions facing the working class and poor.

These statistics poses a challenge for mass organizations to continue to put forward a political program for real jobs, decent housing, quality education and economic parity. It would be safe to say that irrespective of who is elected to the White House and Congress for 2017, the oppression and exploitation will not wither away.

In an article published as part of the State of Black America report, Joy-Ann Reid, a national correspondent for MSNBC, predicts that “Whether the next president is a Democrat or Republican, Black leadership will likely be pressed as never before to deliver on the ‘hope floor’ laid by the election of the first Black president...In short, the Age of Hope is poised to give way to the Era of Radical Demands for Change.”

For this era of radical demands for change to be effective it must take on an anti-capitalist character. There is most of all a dramatic need for the redistribution of wealth from the ruling class to the working class and the nationally oppressed. This transferal of wealth can only occur under a socialist system which would guarantee full employment, income equality, housing and education for everyone along with the total liberation of the African American people and all oppressed nations.

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