



Fighting the Good Fight: The Achievements of Black Lives Matter

By Nadia Sayed



Two years on from the explosive and exhilarating Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement sparked by the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer, Derek Chauvin. This was the biggest social movement in American history. Millions of people took part in protests, marches and local rallies that spread across every state in the United States (US). In the US and the United Kingdom (UK), where the movement was biggest after the states, it was not just the big cities that answered the BLM rallying cry. Even predominantly white rural towns with little history of anti-racist struggles, such as Bethel, Ohio, a town of 3000 people or Haverford West, a Welsh market town, experienced protest.

Moreover, the international dimension of the movement meant that the banner Black Lives Matter was not only raised in white majority countries but also in the Global South. The biggest [BLM protests in Africa](#) were seen in Kenya and South Africa, while smaller yet significant mobilisations took place in other countries like Ghana and Uganda. So much so did Black Lives Matter resonate in Africa in 2020 that when the chairman of the African Union, Moussa Faki Mahamat spoke out against the murder of George Floyd, he provoked widespread criticism against himself due to the brutality of police forces across the continent.

Despite all of this, two years on, a debate has emerged as to whether BLM achieved anything.

For [Elaine Browne](#), the former head of the Black Panther Party in the US, the movement is barely a movement and certainly isn't worth celebrating as people weren't willing to sacrifice their lives as her generation had in the Black Power movement. [Cedric Johnson, author of The Panthers Can't Save Us Now](#), instead has argued that BLM was a bulwark for neo-liberalism. Others are disheartened at the lack of concrete outcomes the movement produced. I disagree with these positions because BLM has had a massive impact on society.

Black Lives Matter Transformed How We Fight Racism

The movement achieved one of its primary aims - getting Derek Chauvin, the policeman who killed George Floyd, locked up on the charge of murder. While this is only the beginning of challenging police racism, we must remember that there was nothing automatic or inevitable about Chauvin's charge. We know how rare it is to have police officers charged and sentenced for racist violence and murder, both in the US and the UK. Additionally, the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 has radically transformed the terrain in which people understand and talk about racism, as well as making people feel more confident in challenging it. And this is the impact we have continued to see roll out two years on.

Let us remember the powerful response to the [Child Q](#) case. When news spread that a fifteen-year-old black female student was pulled out of an exam to be strip-searched by male police officers in Hackney, London, hundreds from the community, activists and crucially students, marched on two different days to the local police station. Among their demands for justice, they asked for the involved officers to be sacked. The widespread anger at the treatment of Child Q is in part what has forced the Met Police, alongside five other police forces in the UK, to be put under special measures at present.

The radical response to the Child Q case is not unique though. We have seen several spontaneous anti-racist mobilisations since Black Lives Matter that showcase the new layer of society radicalised against racism, as well as a new layer of activists within the movement. From the student protests and walk-outs at Pimlico Academy (South London) and City and Islington College (North London) to the anti-deportation protests in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Hackney and Peckham over the last two years, it's evident there is a new and bigger layer of people confident and prepared to challenge racism. If the movement had no impact - to put it simply, the ruling classes wouldn't be working so hard to undermine Black Lives Matter, something that happened from the very start of the movement and continues today. And we've seen this backlash in two ways: the ideological backlash and the backlash with repression.

Accommodation and Repression of the Movement

In the US, Biden has both openly opposed defunding the police *and* intensified his rhetoric of being tough on law and order, a green light to the right who treat protestors as violent, just as they did with the movement in 2020. This slander goes alongside the repression of Black Lives Matter activists. In the UK, we know that the Tories have been relentless in undermining the movement. They have produced the [Sewell report, which denies the existence of institutional racism](#). Their education secretaries have dismissed calls to decolonise education and instead pushing for the positives of the British Empire to be taught.

As in the US, the UK's Conservative party's (The Tories) ideological attacks on the movement's gains go hand in hand with their drive to ramp up the repression with the increasing of police powers through the expansion of Section 60, which allows police officers to stop and search anyone in a specific area without needing to have reasonable grounds. When we look at the vicious backlash of the ruling class to and since the Black Lives Matter movement, it becomes urgent that we not only

celebrate the movement that threatens them so much, but that we also learn lessons from it to move forward.

The backlash from the ruling class and the other external pressures and challenges BLM faced meant that inevitably, debates emerged within the movement. Many of these debates continue today and are crucial to *how* the movement goes forward. Now, I talk in greater detail about these debates in [my article in the International Socialism Journal](#), which I hope people will read, but I'd like to draw on a few of those debates briefly using the space I have here. While the issue of police violence toward black people was the igniting issue of the Black Lives Matter movement, activists proposed a plethora of solutions for dealing with police racism and brutality.

Firstly, even though 'defund the police' became a mainstream slogan of the movement, most people think we still need the police and so reject getting rid of them. Secondly, the slogan 'defunding the police' has proven to mean different things to different people. For some, it's cutting police budgets or diverting funds away from the police into other areas. For others, the slogan is about abolishing the police. For example, in the wake of the 2020 protests, 77% of Americans understood defunding to mean changing the way the police operate, only 18% saw it as meaning abolishing the police.

Now, in some cities, the movement did succeed in beginning attempts to defund the police. But two years on, most cities that did so have largely reversed this process. More than that, where cities did reduce or divert sections of police budgets, this had no impact on the way the police operated as they were able to mitigate those cuts. In other words, we can see that it is meaningless to cut police budgets without thinking about wider changes to the police as an institution and wider challenges to institutional racism and inequality.

Flowing from that, we must look at the role of the police in society. The police have the function of suppressing ordinary people, working-class people to uphold a system where a tiny minority have privilege over us. That system has racism hardwired into it to divide and rule, that's why it's inseparably embedded into the police, which has the task of upholding that system. That's why we need strategies that confront the police, not reconcile with them.

As with previous black liberation struggles, the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 faced enormous pressures to be incorporated into the state and respectable politics, mainly by the Democrats. Because the Black Lives Matter movement began under the Obama administration many looked to Joe Biden, who was a presidential candidate at the time of the protests, with suspicion. This suspicion often underpinned a more confrontational stance with the state and establishment for people within the movement: more protests, more occupations, more street protests.

Despite this, sections of the movement in 2020 did get pulled into throwing their weight toward Joe Biden's election campaign against then-President Donald Trump. Moreover, Biden's making Kamala Harris his vice-president was met with much enthusiasm by many. For that section of the BLM movement, the fact that Kamala Harris could become the first black female vice-president was enough to warrant its support.

However, as mentioned before, lots of people within the movement were wary of the Democrats and their tendency to co-opt and tame movements. And rightly so, people pointed out that Kamala Harris' politics were dangerous to the movement. She failed to support independent investigations for police using deadly force, stood against the use of body cameras on police and recently opposed defunding the police. The divisions between those pulled behind the Democratic party and those wanting to continue confronting the state exacerbated the decline and fragmentation of the street movement. For revolutionary socialists, both here in the UK and in the US the Democrats are no friends to the movement. They are a political party of the ruling class. Their interest is to demobilise

and deradicalise the movement. Any movement pushing forward means resisting this pressure.

The question of co-option versus confrontation with the state and establishment relates to how we organise, which we shall now consider here. In rejection of big parties and organisations, the 'structurelessness' and 'leaderlessness' of the BLM movement are often celebrated as a strength of the movement. And to a large degree, this is fair enough – these qualities helped enable the movement's creativity, which in turn produced a whole new layer of activists.

But, as the writer [Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor discusses in her book From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation](#), strategies that seek to be structureless and non-hierarchical have the limitation of being unable to formulate clear, united demands, nor make decisive moves for the movement at key junctures. This in turn allows for fragmentation, as had happened to some degree in 2020 and an even greater degree in 2016. And while debates can be had on social media, through blogs and so on as to how the movement goes forward – this doesn't mean these are effective ways for conclusions and decisive action to be decided.

I go into more depth in [my article](#) as to the question of how the movement should organise and whether it should be leaderless or structureless, but it's worth noting here that this debate isn't unique to the Black Lives Matter movement – it emerged within the recent climate movement, as well as in previous movements like the anti-capitalist movement.

Multiracial Character of the Movement

Now a big debate that I'll just mention is the debate around the role of white people within the BLM movement. This question has come up in one form or another in every anti-racist movement. What was different about BLM was that the multiracial nature of the movement and its spread (to predominantly white towns) has meant that more people are asking whether white people *can* play more than just a peripheral and passive role in the fight against racism. This is a positive development because the fight against racism can't just be left to black people – if racism is systemic, ending it will take the energy of more than just the people who face racism.

The multiracial character of the movement links to how the question of class featured strongly within the BLM movement. COVID-19 exposed the depth of systemic and structural racism, as well as where the real privilege lies in society – with the 1%. Many people saw for the first time how most of our lives are disposable for the good of profit, but racism puts the lives of black and brown people on the sharp end of that. That is the context that BLM emerged from as a powerful mass multiracial uprising in 2020. Class demands for Personal Protective Equipment and decent housing for all were at the centre of the protests and online discussions surrounding the movement. I was at the protests in London, chanting with thousands of others for '[justice for Belly Mujinga](#)', a black women rail worker who died after being spat at by a man claiming to have coronavirus.

Significantly, the movement highlighted the intersection between race and class. That's an important step towards the recognition that racism does not affect us all the same. The death of the railway worker Belly Mujinga, a Congolese woman working at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, did not just happen because she was black. It happened because she was a black worker, like many others often in frontline work which put them at greater risk of contracting Covid. The disproportionate deaths in general of people who are black and of other global majority backgrounds were not simply down to race, but the intersection between race and class – whether to do with work, overcrowded housing, poorer health rates and so on. Class shapes our experience of oppression, including racism.

As Marxists, we think class ultimately gives us the power to end oppression, including racism.

Racism has been hardwired into capitalism from its infancy. It was born out of the Atlantic slave trade, persisted through the era of empire as a mechanism of dividing and ruling and extracting resources abroad and continues today to scapegoat migrants and refugees as a way of deflecting anger from the ruling classes (that is, the bosses and politicians, who squeeze most of us to make their profits and maintain their privilege in society).

At the same time, the ruling classes' reliance on labour makes it vulnerable. Workers who form most of society are the source of its profits and crucial to the functioning of the capitalist system. So, when workers collectively fight back by using their ability to withdraw labour, they can bring the system to a standstill and the ruling classes to their knees. Being part of the working class gives black and brown people the power to end the system, which maintains itself through racial divisions. With Black Lives Matter in 2020, we witnessed a glimpse of the potential impact that working-class action could have on the scale, breadth and radicalisation of the movement. The high points of that movement included the 2020 [Longshoreman strike on Juneteenth](#), where thousands of dock workers shut down the ports up and down the West Coast to protest police brutality and institutional racism.

We welcome this process. But for the movement to achieve fundamental change and raise a challenge to systemic racism, it must consistently base its strategy for change on the power of the working class. We have a huge opportunity to do this now - the recent railway strike in the UK led by black, migrant, and white workers, was an inspiring example. It has rocked the Tories. We must connect the radicalism of BLM with the power of the organised working class if we are to win fundamental change and stamp out racism across the world.

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Click the link to read Nadia's article online: ["More than a moment: what did Black Lives Matter achieve"](#) International Socialism Journal Issue 175, 2022.

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