

# Then and now: The issue is racism

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Adam Clayton Powell speaks at student rally in Los Angeles, 1968.

The fascist campaign against congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib is reminiscent of how racists drove Harlem Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. out of Congress 50 years ago.

In the 1930s, the Rev. Powell, minister of New York's Abyssinian Baptist Church, led

mass marches against fascist dictator Benito Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. When he was elected to Congress from Harlem in 1944, Powell was one of only two African Americans in the House of Representatives.

As chair of the Education and Labor Committee, Adam Clayton Powell helped more workers than any other member of Congress. The minimum wage was increased and expanded to include more workers. Millions of workers, including millions of white workers, benefited from Powell's actions.

None of this was to the liking of the wealthy and powerful. To the disgrace of the labor movement, Powell was also hated by then AFL-CIO President George Meany for trying to open up the building trades to Black and Latinx workers. In 1963, Meany's home Local No. 1 of the Plumbers union didn't have a single Black or Puerto Rican apprentice.

There were progressives and even self-styled revolutionaries who didn't want to defend Adam Clayton Powell Jr. then or defend The Squad today. Both actions are cop-outs to racism and reaction.

Below is an editorial written by Vince Copeland, then editor of Workers World newspaper, that appeared in its March 17, 1967, issue. It asked, "If you saw a Black man being lynched, would you ask his political principles before going to his defense?"

The same applies to four congresswomen of color who've received death threats and have been told to go back to Africa and Palestine by a white racist mob. Hands off The Squad!

—*Stephen Millies*



Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and H. Rap Brown (Jamil Al-Amin) speak at protest against Congress's refusal to seat Adam Clayton Powell in January 1967.

### **The issue is racism: an editorial**

The issue of Adam Clayton Powell's seat in Congress is not Powell himself, as every person who has felt the lash of capitalist white supremacy well understands; the issue is racism. The issue is the right of the Black people to have their own representative in Congress.

The issue is not whether Powell is a revolutionary socialist liberation fighter. The issue is whether Powell represents Harlem and whether the racist U.S. Congress has a right to say he does not.

Powell is the legally elected representative overwhelmingly chosen by the people of Harlem — with a plurality higher than [President Lyndon Baines] Johnson's in the last election. And the white supremacists in the House haven't a shred of legal right to throw him out!

Black people are fighting for an elementary democratic right, one which white people won long ago: the right to elect their own representatives and not be disenfranchised.

Congress has hardly ever unseated anybody in a hundred years. And it has never done it at all (since Reconstruction) to the acceptable white servants of the racist ruling class.

It had its chance to unseat Mississippi congressmen two years ago on the constitutional grounds (of the 14th Amendment) that Black people were disenfranchised in that state. But it failed to do so. Legally, Congress should have unseated at least half the Southern congressmen every term for the past 90 years. It has never moved to do so.

But it has unseated Adam Clayton Powell, one of the few representatives in this or any previous Congress whose constituents militantly support him.

Congress, of course, was under pressure — racist pressure. Powell was tried by a racist congressional jury and condemned by a racist congressional majority. His long trial by newspaper, magazine, TV and radio was conducted in a racist atmosphere, with racist overtones by the writers and commentators.

Not only was he singled out for the political slaughter, he was victimized at precisely

the same moment that the super-racist Lester Maddox became governor of Georgia and the accused assassin of an NAACP leader announced his candidacy for lieutenant governor of Mississippi, while a new lynching took place in the same state.

The Congress that expelled Adam Clayton Powell did not even bother to “deplore” these events, must less investigate or reverse them as it should have done. While all the congressmen denied that they were racists or influenced by racism, every single racist extremist voted against Powell.

Clear as the issue is to the oppressed and the revolutionaries, many people less involved, under the barrage of the ruling-class press, misunderstand it as they also misunderstood the issue in the vote on the New York Civilian Police Review Board last fall.

The tokenist, do-nothing review board was not the issue then, as Powell is not the issue now. The issue was racism then, as now. Every fascist, Birchite and bigot knows it. And every fighting Black militant and white progressive knows it and feels it in their bones.

There are those among the radical left who disagree with our support of Powell against the reaction. To them we pose this question:

If you saw a Black man being lynched, would you ask his political principles before going to his defense?

