

Like David Duke before him, Trump's goal is to reverse hard-won rights

written by Sam Marcy
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Following is a piece by U.S. Marxist leader Sam Marcy on the 1991 gubernatorial campaign of neo-Nazi David Duke in Louisiana. We have already re-published Marcy's "[Message to the workers of Louisiana](#)" and argued that the movement against Duke provides lessons in combating fascist Trump.

In the present piece, Marcy explains what was truly *new* about Duke's campaign. He argued that even if the racism was the same old, same old espoused by segregationists George Wallace and Lester Maddox in the Civil Rights era, Duke was more dangerous because the 1960s and '70s were a very different period politically from the early 1990s.

Marcy says:

"In the 1960s, when both Maddox and Wallace were trying to become national figures, their type of all-out, segregationist racism was basically *defensive* [emphasis added]: They were trying to hold onto white supremacy as it had existed for a century; they were trying to retain the status quo of racism. At that time, there was an upward, progressive movement throughout the whole country. ...

"In contrast to the present, it was a progressive era. ...

"The Duke movement is not just a defensive attempt to halt the progress of Civil Rights. It is a wholesale offensive to undo and reverse the historic gains made by the Black and other progressive forces.

"The Duke campaign comes in the midst of an anti-labor offensive. Gains made by the workers have been crumbling; the capitalist recession and the attacks on the living standards of the workers have brought frustration and anger. The labor movement has been forced into concession after concession. Strike breaking and scab herding are on the order of the day.

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In 2025, most of the progressive gains of the past centuries have *already been reversed*. We are in a deeply reactionary period, with economic conditions rapidly deteriorating and staggering inequality being the order of the day. The situation now is truly ripe for fascist demagogues, as Marcy said of 1991.

- Gregory E. Williams

Perspectives on the Duke campaign

By Sam Marcy, Nov. 14, 1991

The gubernatorial election in Louisiana is not just a referendum on racism. Of course, racism is the principal issue. But there is much more to it. To understand this struggle, you have to go beyond the external features of life in this important Southern state.

To many throughout the country, Louisiana is New Orleans, with the exciting nightlife and Old World charms of the French Quarter. It is the colorful Mardi Gras. But there is another Louisiana.

The other Louisiana

It is the Louisiana of the giant oil refineries, the modern petrochemical plants, and the many metal foundries. Thousands of Black and white workers keep these industries going and depend on them for their livelihood. There are many more workers in the sawmills and paper plants. Still others produce salt and sulfur, which

are marketed all over the United States and beyond.

Many thousands of laborers still work in the cotton fields, grow rice and soy beans, raise cattle, and have made Louisiana sweet potatoes a staple throughout the whole country.

But besides being a great producing state, Louisiana is also a vast battlefield between the working class and the absentee millionaires and billionaires who control all the vital arteries that make it so productive. And now, the capitalist recession has sharpened these class antagonisms.

The ruling class, in its effort to avoid taking responsibility for the deteriorating economic conditions of the workers, Black and white, has picked up a demagogue, one of the most venomous in Southern history. They want David Duke to divert the class struggle into reactionary, racist, and anti-labor channels.

Lester Maddox

The earlier racist endeavors of the ruling class have to be taken into account in order to put the Duke adventure into proper historical context.

What are the specific characteristics that distinguish the current campaign of David Duke from those of Lester Maddox of Georgia and George Wallace of Alabama in the 1960s? Both were openly racist candidates supported by and associated with the Ku Klux Klan. And both got elected as governors.

Lester Maddox, elected governor of Georgia in 1966, was regarded in the rest of the country as no more than an oddity, an old-fashioned type of arch-segregationist. He made segregation the centerpiece of his campaign. A restaurant owner, he had achieved national notoriety a few years earlier when he stood in the door of his restaurant with an ax handle and said he'd physically drive away any Black person who tried to enter. He deliberately closed his establishment rather than desegregate

it.

This got him the support of arch-segregationists in the state's ruling circles, who pushed his campaign for governor. However, from a national point of view, Maddox never was a significant political figure outside Georgia and its immediate Southern environs.

Because Maddox couldn't succeed himself as governor, he ran in 1970 for lieutenant governor and was elected along with Jimmy Carter, the new governor. Trying again in 1974, he lost the primary election, thus ending his racist career. An appeal to outright racism was proving inadequate to stop the advance of the Civil Rights movement.

George Wallace

His career bears somewhat of a kinship to that of George C. Wallace, who got even more national attention by defying the order of the federal government to desegregate the public schools of Alabama. This came after the Civil Rights movement had reached a truly massive scale. Wallace, then governor, got widespread publicity when he stood in the door of the University of Alabama to bar the entrance of African-American students. But he finally capitulated in the face of federal troops sent in by President John F. Kennedy.

Wallace created the biggest stir on the national level when he entered the race for president in 1968, again on a program of preserving white supremacy.

It was no accident, then, that David Duke, in a Nov. 2 television debate, managed to interject the names of both Maddox and Wallace. Did he want to show that both men were linked to the Klan but got elected anyway?

What makes Duke different?

However, there are important differences between David Duke and these earlier racist politicians. What most distinguishes their careers from his is that they operated in a very different epoch.

In the 1960s, when both Maddox and Wallace were trying to become national figures, their type of all-out, segregationist racism was basically defensive: They were trying to hold onto white supremacy as it had existed for a century; they were trying to retain the status quo of racism.

At that time, there was an upward, progressive movement throughout the whole country. The Civil Rights and liberation struggles had started in the 1950s. They picked up speed with the 1954 Supreme Court decision desegregating the schools, and then galloped ahead with the freedom marches in the South and the rebellions that broke out in Watts, Detroit, Harlem, Newark and dozens of other cities when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

Wallace attempted to make his campaign a national one. But it faltered. Some thought that the assassination attempt which left him partially paralyzed was his undoing, but that wasn't it. The real reason was that the Black liberation movement was on the rise and neither Maddox nor Wallace could overcome it. Eventually, Wallace did get back in the Alabama state house, but only because he moderated his program.

The all-out racism of the Maddox-Wallace type proved altogether inadequate to stop the inevitable development and considerable victories of the Black and Latino movements. Segregation eventually had to be abandoned.

Tried to hold back a progressive tide

The 1960s and '70s were years of upsurge not only of the oppressed nationalities but also of other progressive movements. The anti-war movement was particularly

youthful and dynamic. The women's movement was beginning to broaden into a mass awakening. Lesbians and gays were asserting their rights and adopting militant tactics.

The anti-imperialist movement was making gains everywhere. The very existence of China and the Soviet Union provided support to the national liberation struggles and the progressive and anti-imperialist forces.

In contrast to the present, it was a progressive era. Even someone like George Shultz, best known as Reagan's Secretary of State, mediated on behalf of hospital union Local 1199 in the South when he was Nixon's Secretary of Labor. And the union won a victory.

Up until the recession of 1974-76, the labor movement was on the rise. Black and white workers were making gains in the South. Rank-and-file workers often rebelled against union leaders who were too moderate.

Fascists on the offensive

The present racism of David Duke differs in style and tone from that of Maddox and Wallace, even if in essence it's the same old stuff. However, he is much more dangerous because this is a very different epoch.

The Duke movement is not just a defensive attempt to halt the progress of Civil Rights. It is a wholesale offensive to undo and reverse the historic gains made by the Black and other progressive forces.

The Duke campaign comes in the midst of an anti-labor offensive. Gains made by the workers have been crumbling; the capitalist recession and the attacks on the living standards of the workers have brought frustration and anger. The labor movement has been forced into concession after concession. Strike breaking and scab herding are on the order of the day.

The situation is ripe for a fascist demagogue to prey upon these frustrations, especially among the middle class who are losing their moorings to the bourgeoisie.

Duke is utilizing the economic situation in Louisiana, where the bust began some years ago with the collapse of the oil industry, to foment racism. But what is happening there is part and parcel of a national phenomenon — serious unemployment, wage cuts, and budget cuts which lead to more layoffs of state and municipal workers.

His two rivals in the gubernatorial race, Edwin Edwards and, in the primary, Buddy Roemer, have not addressed these questions at all. They've exacerbated the situation with their policies. They have no more answers than James Florio, the governor of New Jersey, who carries out the same policies but without the racist demagogery.

Racism alone could not win in the Louisiana of today, were it not for the economic disaster produced by capitalist decline. Of course, those really responsible for this crisis are not the Black people or the poor, but the bankers and businessmen, especially the oil companies.

Depression spawned Hitler

They are the ones supporting Duke behind the scenes, in the same way the bankers and industrialists supported Hitler — one of Duke's idols. Hitler started off as a local phenomenon in Munich who would never have attained national stature had it not been for the severe and unprecedented capitalist breakdown that began with the stock market crash of 1929 and lasted through the 1930s.

Hitler served the German capitalists by breaking the back of the strong workers' movement there. He used both violence and demagogery to divert popular anger over the economic crisis into antisemitism, making Jews the scapegoats for everything

that had gone wrong while diverting attention away from the real capitalist rulers of Germany.

While he did the dirty work of the capitalists by breaking up the workers' organizations and decimating their socialist and communist leaders, he demagogically called his party the National Socialist Workers Party.

Racist scapegoating

The Duke campaign is still in its embryonic stage. Nevertheless, it is clearly a fascist movement that is attempting to utilize the disastrous economic situation in Louisiana, made particularly severe by the slump in oil and gas there, to break into national politics.

The ruling class in Louisiana doesn't want another populist of the Huey Long type, who actually did carry out economic reforms that aided the working class. They want an out-and-out demagogue who can utilize racism and make promises and yet be totally controlled by big business.

The danger of the Duke campaign goes beyond being an attack against Black people. It's an attack against the whole working class. It's an attempt to reverse historical gains made by Black, white, and Latin people, women, gays, and others. It's a real fascist threat and has profound national and international significance.

It is already public knowledge that Duke's financial contributions come not only from sources in Louisiana but from New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. The Maddox-Wallace segregationists had no international connections. Maddox was regarded as an oddity, a curiosity, who represented the past. Wallace had a broader movement, but it, too, foundered on the basis that it really had no national base, let alone international support. It was strictly a Southern racist movement.

The Duke candidacy, however, represents an international phenomenon. Duke finds

kinship not only in New York City's racist elements but as far away as Switzerland, France, Germany, and England. Many eyes on the global front are carefully watching what happens in Louisiana.

Even A.M. Rosenthal, a conservative columnist for the New York Times, is greatly alarmed at the prospect of "a Nazi governor" being elected for the first time in the U.S. However, he leaves out the fundamental causes for the rise of the Duke movement — the capitalist economic crisis — just as bourgeois historians leave out what was the basis for the rise of Nazism in Germany.

All the more is it necessary to tender the greatest support to the anti-Duke, anti-racist, pro-labor, progressive movement that is arising in response to this very significant threat. As has been seen so many times before, it is the whip of political reaction that stimulates and brings to the fore the vital forces and inexhaustible energy of a working-class resurgence.

