



4.1

The wages of whiteness

Key building blocks

- **Far from being a new idea, the belief that we must join together across racial lines to defend ourselves against powerful elites has deep and radical roots.** We can look to the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King’s Poor People’s Campaign as an example.
- Previous efforts to build cross-racial solidarity haven’t fully succeeded before because **the wages of whiteness (the psychological and material advantages that come from being white) have been too high for most white people to give them up.**
- That is changing now. **Over the last fifty years, the advantages that come from being white or light-skinned have declined and by some measures turned negative.**

RACE-CLASS SOLIDARITY

1. People of different races coming together to fight for a better way of life is actually an old idea. Can you think of examples?

Poor whites and Blacks newly freed from slavery worked together right after the Civil War, calling it “fusion politics.” Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the Poor People’s Campaign in the 1960s. Labor movements have their own examples of when cross-racial solidarity was essential to standing up to the bosses.

2. If people have tried to build race-class solidarity before, why are things still so bad now? Does interest-convergence help us answer this question?

Interest convergence (from video 3.2) cautions that most people join social movements out of a combination of morality and self-interest. That means we need to look at the self-interest of whites in forging race-class solidarity.



For race-class solidarity to take broad hold, the interests of whites in joining with others across racial lines must exceed their interests in maintaining the dominant position of white people in society.

This, in turn, depends on the benefits (or wages) of whiteness.

THE WAGES OF WHITENESS

1. What are the wages of whiteness?

The wages of whiteness refer to the benefits that accrue to people on the basis of being white in a society organized as a racial hierarchy that places white people at the top.

The benefits may be material—advantages that easily translate into economic gains. This includes access to better schools, jobs, and neighborhoods.

The benefits may be psychological: The comfort of believing you belong wherever you go and seeing people like you in positions of power and esteem.

2. (Optional) We often hear the comment that working class voters are “voting against their own interests.” Does thinking about the wages of whiteness help us understand this dynamic?

Very often, those who say that working class voters are voting against their interests are exclusively using a class frame. From that perspective, it’s true that working and indeed middle class voters lose when they support politicians who mainly work for the interests of corporations.

But when we think about the wages of whiteness, we can see that these voters may

	<p>be gaining something else that's important to them.</p>
<p>3. How do the wages of whiteness defeat efforts to build social solidarity?</p>	<p>Consciously or unconsciously, people ask themselves whether fighting for change will be good for them and their families. When we are talking about fighting to end social systems that put white people in dominant positions, this means white people have to evaluate what they gain from the wages of whiteness versus what they might gain from a racially integrated society.</p> <p>Understood this way, it's easier to see why the Civil Rights Movement struggled to build race-class solidarity.</p> <p>Even as recently as the 1960s, the wages of whiteness were simply too high for enough white people to give them up in exchange for building cross-racial solidarity and reaping the benefits of a new racially egalitarian society.</p>
<p>4. The wages of whiteness are relevant within communities of color, too. How so?</p>	<p>Many people of color can seek benefits from being relatively lighter-skinned, and this advantage may impact how they respond to the call to build racial equality.</p> <p>This is true at the group level. Some relatively light-skinned groups can seek to claim a higher social status by "not being Black." We see this dynamic among some Asian American and Hispanic groups.</p> <p>The advantages of being lighter are also often claimed on an individual basis.</p>

5. What calculations do dark-skinned people of color have to make when deciding whether to join an effort for cross-racial solidarity?

They have to ask themselves if they can count on white or lighter-skinned allies. If they believe that others have their own reasons for joining the movement, they can have more confidence in their partners.

DECLINING WAGES

1. How have the wages of whiteness changed over the last half century?

On the psychological side, and on the material side?

It helps to think about this in terms of psychological and material wages.

On the psychological side, the cultural celebration of people of color and of racial differences has changed remarkably since the 1960s. This can be seen in entertainment, sports, education, and even politics—think of the tens of millions who adore Barack and Michelle Obama.

In contrast, consider what has happened to the public image of white pride. Whereas pride in being white was mainstream in the 1960s, now it bears the contorted faces of Donald Trump yelling insults and the protestors in Charlottesville spewing bigotry.

On the material side, some advantages remain in terms of access, connections, better schools, and so on. These should not be discounted.

But at the same time, overall, the material wages of whiteness have turned negative. People have been voting for politicians who promised to protect the dominant position of whites in society, and in return, they've received a government committed to serving corporate interests.

2. Why might this moment be the best opportunity we have had in a long time to build social solidarity?

In the fight against racism, and in the fight to build race-class solidarity, the biggest hurdle has always been wages of whiteness so high most white (and light) people remained committed to defending their supposed racial supremacy.

But those wages have declined and even reversed.

The challenge is to get as many people as possible to recognize that the benefits from building a true multi-racial democracy outweigh whatever benefits they think they're receiving from protecting things the way they are.

This won't be easy. But we can do it, together.