

## WHITE SUPREMACY AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

### Preface to the 1978 Reprint

Two years ago Don Hamerquist wrote this pamphlet as a discussion paper. As such, it was intended to open a discussion, not to close it, and from the standpoint of Sojourner Truth Organization it served this purpose well. Ten months after this pamphlet first appeared, STO adopted its *Theses on White Supremacy and the National Question*, formally taking a position based on the outcome of that discussion. (See issue two of *Urgent Tasks*, October 1977.)

Because Hamerquist's paper was the first public document in which STO explicitly argued that the Black struggle in the U.S. is a fight for national liberation, some critics have presumed that this was therefore the first time that STO's argument was based on this understanding. That simply isn't so. There always were members who held that position; indeed, Noel Ignatin's *White Blindspot* (March 1967), the earliest public presentation of our line, was informed by that conviction. It is true, however, that *White Supremacy and the National Question* was the first time that the majority of STO was prepared to carry its full argument forward in the left as a whole.

On the other hand, we do not make the pretence of monolithic unity that some Marxist-Leninists do. Not everyone in STO agrees with every aspect of the analysis. For example, Noel Ignatin disagrees with the formulation that Black people constitute a nation everywhere in the U.S., and that the concept of national minority has lost its usefulness when discussing the Black and Puerto Rican nations. I personally reject Hamerquist's statement (earlier argued in Alison Edwards' pamphlet, *Rape, Racism, and the White Women's Movement*) that oppression cannot be measured.

But we agree on the essential point that there is no direct correspondence between degree of oppression and revolutionary potential. What unites all of us is the strategic implication of our line. This is the ground on which we dare our critics to meet our arguments. The theoretical debate is, in the final analysis, a debate over program as well. For this reason we often seem ungracious to those who share a great deal of terminological agreement with us but who arrive at political conclusions we consider unwarranted. As one example, we challenge those who base their strategy on a supposed special revolutionary potential of white working class women to justify their line in theoretical debate. So far they have refused to do this.

Nonetheless our internal debate has brought us to new levels of understanding in a process which is ongoing. Two years after Don Hamerquist wrote his discussion paper, we are far better equipped to appreciate its shortcomings. Overall it has stood up well to the test of the past two years - except for dozens of typographical errors (which are retained here in full).

Much of our argument was fleshed out in my article "Who's Being Dogmatic?" (*Urgent Tasks* number two, October 1977) and need not be repeated here. A great deal of historical research has been done since Hamerquist wrote, and much of its implications will be debated in future issues of *Urgent Tasks*. To the best of my knowledge only one aspect will bear heavily on Hamerquist's argument: the question of land.

Hamerquist never fully confronted the fact that a national liberation struggle is necessarily a struggle for control of a specific territory, and the success of that struggle is measured by its ability to win political sovereignty over that territory. Recent work by historians reveals the extent to which the Black liberation struggle has been a struggle for land and independence since very early times.

Hamerquist neglected to mention one of the leading left critics of STO's line - Staughton Lynd. This was an error, not so much because Lynd's position is a serious threat to ours as the fact that so many people think it is. When Lynd's argument first appeared, the editors of *Liberation* (July 1969) called it "one of the most thoughtful contributions to the ongoing debate." In "Radicals and White Racism," Lynd argued that Noel Ignatin's article "Learn the Lessons of U.S. History" (*The Movement*, February 1968) "provided a rationale for the guilt feelings of white middle-class students."

Though Staughton Lynd has faded in popularity, his argument has persisted as the most stubborn obstacle to ours. True, the people who perpetuate it style themselves Marxist-Leninists, and repudiate Lynd's liberal/pacifist/Utopian leanings, but they all accept his assumptions: people must be organized politically primarily around issues concerning their immediate self-interest. Indeed, it is fashionable among Marxists to use the term *moral* as an epithet; Marxists are supposed to be hard-nosed, cold-blooded political realists, wasting no time debating what is right or wrong in a moral sense.

Just where this notion arose is a mystery, but Don Hamerquist yielded too much ground to it in *White Supremacy and the National Question*. His defensiveness seems to grant some validity to these critics as though revolutionary tradition were on their side. It isn't. Marx wrote that "the proletariat, which will not allow itself

to be treated as rabble, regards its courage, self-confidence, independence, and sense of personal dignity as more necessary than its daily bread." Some will argue that this quote from 1847 reflects a youthful humanism which Marx later outgrew. That isn't true either.

Here is how Marx ended his Inaugural Address launching the First International in 1864:

If the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure? It was not the wisdom of the ruling classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic. The shameless approval, mock sympathy, or idiotic indifference, with which the upper classes of Europe have witnessed the mountain fortress of the Caucasus falling a prey to, and heroic Poland being assassinated by, Russia; the immense and unresisted encroachments of that barbarous power, whose head is at St. Petersburg, and whose hands are in every Cabinet of Europe, have taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective Governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power; when unable to prevent, to combine in simultaneous denunciations, and to *vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations.*

The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes.

Proletarians of all countries, Unite! [My emphasis]

Marx felt so strongly about this that he quoted the lines about proletarian morality in the opening lines of the 1871 pamphlet, *The Civil War in France*, his stirring defense of the Paris Commune.

In September 1865 the International unanimously adopted a resolution addressed "To the People of the United States of America":

Since we have had the honour of expressing sympathy with your sufferings, a word of encouragement for your efforts, and of congratulation for the results, permit us to add a word of counsel for the future.

As injustice to a section of your people has produced such direful results, let that cease. Let your citizens of to-day be declared free and equal, without reserve.

If you fail to give them citizens' rights, while you demand citizens' duties, there will yet remain a struggle for the future which may again stain your country with your people's blood.

The eyes of Europe and of the world are fixed upon your efforts at re-construction, arid enemies are ever ready to sound the knell of the downfall of republican institutions when the slightest chance is given.

We warn you then, as brothers in the common cause, to remove every shackle from freedom's limb, and your victory will be complete.

Finally, in May 1869, Marx wrote the "Address to the National Labour Union of the United States." In it the International urged the NLU to oppose vigorously moves by the U.S. government toward war with England, just as the English workers had prevented the European powers from going to war for slavery in the U.S. The victorious war against slavery "opened a new epoch in the annals of the working class." A war would crush this movement. What follows next is the most explicit statement of our argument to be found in Marx:

*The next palpable effect of the civil war was, of course, to deteriorate the position of the American workman.* In the United States, as in Europe, the monster incubus of a national debt was shifted from hand to hand, to settle down on the shoulders of the working class. The prices of necessaries, says one of your statesmen, have since 1860 risen 78 per cent, while the wages of unskilled labour rose 50 per cent, those of skilled labour 60 per cent only. "Pauperism," he complains, "grows now in America faster than population." Moreover, the sufferings of the working classes set off as a foil the new-fangled luxury of financial aristocrats, shoddy aristocrats, and similar vermin bred by wars. *Yet for all this the civil war did compensate by freeing the slave and the consequent moral impetus it gave to your own class movement.* [My emphasis]

In defending the *simple laws of morals and justice* today, Sojourner Truth Organization proudly stands in the tradition of revolutionary Marxism.

Jasper Collins  
June 6, 1978

The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. - Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

Here was a first halting note. Negroes were welcomed to the labor movement, not because they were laborers but because they might be competitors in the market, and the logical conclusion was either to organize them or guard against their actual competition by other methods. It was to this latter alternative that white American labor almost unanimously turned. - W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America-1860-1880*. (Meridian Books, 1968) pp 354-55.

## I INTRODUCTION

The period of world history which began with the First World War and the October Revolution, and which continues to the present, has been dominated by political features which demand a serious examination of basic Marxist assumptions. Outstanding among these features has been nationalism. Nationalism, of course, has two opposed sides. On the one hand, anti-imperialist nationalism is the main unifying force of the world movement for national liberation from imperialism. This movement has been, and continues to be, the main focus of the world revolutionary process. On the other hand, there is reactionary nationalism - great nation chauvinism, nationally specific forms of white racial supremacy, and all fascist movements. Reactionary nationalism has demonstrated a dismaying capacity to deflect the working people in imperialist states from revolutionary internationalist working class politics.

In no way can the importance of nationalism be passed off as a temporary thing. On the contrary, its role has been so central for such an extended period of time that the basic Marxist premise that the history of society is the history of class struggle is called into question (as the notion of class struggle is generally understood). In fact, we will argue in this paper that it is incorrect to separate the class struggle and anti-imperialist nationalism into two distinct entities with the latter being subordinate to the former. Further, the underlying doctrine of such a perspective - the conception of the subordination of the national question to the interests of the proletariat - must also be subjected to critical scrutiny.

We do not normally approach such issues in terms of debating the correct interpretation of Marx or Lenin. However, such a debate will be important in this paper because we think that mistaken interpretations of various positions of Lenin have become significant political realities in this country - realities which obstruct the development of revolutionary politics. We will be referring to the debate over how to interpret Lenin throughout the paper. However, we would like to sketch the main lines of our position at the beginning.

Following the elaboration of the theory of imperialism, Lenin devoted most of his energy to drawing out the political consequences of this theory. On some questions his efforts had an important impact on world history. For example, the conception of the possibility of a socialist revolution at world capitalism's "weakest link" led directly to the October Revolution. However, on other and equally important questions, Lenin's initial work was obscured in the struggle to defend and consolidate the Soviet revolution. This was the fate of his changed conception of nationalism and the national-colonial question.

We expect argument on this point. It will undoubtedly be noted that contemporary Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy does refer to the "second period of the national question", as an outgrowth of the transformation of competitive capitalism into imperialism. However.

such formulations only maintain the structural shell of Lenin's insights. The strategic essence and most of the political utility is lost in a horrible jumble of these changed positions along with Lenin's and Stalin's earlier arguments about the national question as well as the positions of Luxembour, Baur, and the Bund.

Central to Lenin's conception of imperialism was the dialectic between oppressed and oppressing nations, its consequences for the development of anti-imperialist movements, and its impact on different class forces in the imperialist countries. From 1916 until his death, he constantly emphasized the importance of the "division of the world into oppressor and oppressed nations". This dialectic replaces the earlier Marxist formulations (including those of Lenin) where nations and nationalism were placed as a feature of developing capitalism, a feature which was distinctly subordinate to the class struggle. In this earlier conception, capitalist development itself would erode the importance of nations, both through the logic of economic development and more importantly, through the development of the proletariat, which was inherently an internationalist class. In this rather naive linear conception, nationalism plays a progressive role, but only in a limited context and for a limited period of time. It is superseded by internationalism.

The situation is quite different in the framework of imperialism. The nationalism of oppressed peoples merits the conclusion of Engels about Irish and Polish nationalism in 1882. "They are most internationalistic when they are genuinely nationalistic." (Engels to Kautsky). At the same time, nationalist movements and ideologies within the working class of oppressor nations become major elements preventing the development of revolutionary working class internationalism.

Lenin drew practical implications for this analysis. It was certainly far more than a public relations gesture for the Third International to change the general slogan of the world revolutionary movement from "workers of the world unite" to "workers *and oppressed peoples* of the world unite". This change reflected the understanding that in the epoch of imperialism there are two *co-equal*, though distinct, elements of the revolutionary process, as opposed to one revolutionary force with various wavering and temporary allies. Secondly, Lenin made it clear that the issue of the right of oppressed people to self-determination had attained even greater importance with the development of imperialism (see debate with Kievsky), *not* less importance as a number of contemporary revolutionaries maintained. He extended the principle of struggle for the right to self determination to the demand on the workers of oppressor nations to extend *concrete support* to actual self-determining movements against "their" imperialism.

It is certainly evident that this framework has particular relevance for an interpretation of some of the outstanding political features of this country. We will use it to deal with two questions. First, what is the nature and the potential of the Black national question in the U.S.? Second, what are the roots of the relative backwardness in political consciousness and organization of the multi-national U.S. working class?

This paper makes three main points. It argues that the institution of white supremacy has played a central role in U.S. history, specifically in the formation of the U.S. working class. On the one hand, white supremacy has been the main obstacle to working class solidarity, while on the other hand, it has contributed to the emergence of an oppressed Black nation whose struggles for equality and national liberation are the major challenge to the power of U.S. capitalism. Secondly, the paper characterizes Black people as a nation, based on the national-colonial theory of Lenin. Here we specifically reject the applicability of the earlier theory commonly identified with Stalin and some earlier works of Lenin which list necessary characteristics of nationhood. Finally, the paper draws some implications for the strategic role and for the structure of communist organizations from the history of the institution of white supremacy and of the Black struggle against oppression.

(The necessity to deal with a broad range of topics in a relatively few pages requires some sacrifices in depth of argument and in the use of substantiating material. To the extent possible, more detailed material on major points will be cited.)

The focus of this paper is on the relationships between Black people and white people – on the black national question. However, we recognize the independent significance and the distinctiveness of the Puerto Rican, Mexican and Native American struggles, and the issues and relationships in which these peoples figure. While some elements of our

argument have fairly direct implications for these other political questions, we want to avoid any impression that we believe that they can somehow be subsumed under the Black national question.

## II HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### The Origins of White Supremacy

U.S. slavery was *not a* pre-capitalist social form that constituted a general obstacle to the development of capitalism. To the contrary, the estimated annual expenditure on slave labor of \$15 to \$19 per annum, per capita was a substantial source of surplus capital. Even more importantly, Black slavery served a capitalist political function as the basic mechanism of the institution of white supremacy, through which political control was maintained over both Black *AND* white labor. Certainly the recognition of the essentially capitalist nature of the U.S. slave system doesn't eliminate the necessity for a concrete understanding of the distinctive features of that social structure and of the economic and political contradictions which motivated it. As Marx pointed out, slavery in the U.S. existed within capitalism and as a part of capitalism, but. as an "anomalous" part of it.

However, slavery is then possible there only because it does not exist at other points; and appears as an anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself. (Marx, *Grundrisse*, p 464. Cited in Ken Lawrence, *Marx On American Slavery*. STO, 1976. Marx's argument on this point is developed in Lawrence's pamphlet.)

Too few contemporary radicals properly appreciate the significance of the fact that U.S. slavery was Black slavery. Though Black slaves were brought to America by the Spanish shortly after Columbus' landings, slavery did not have a clear racial basis in the English speaking colonies until much later. In these colonies, the slave labor system at first was not clearly defined. It overlapped with the indenture system which affected white labor as well as Black. The process which occurred was one of diluting and finally ending the indenture system for white labor, while extending Black servitude into permanent and hereditary slavery.

This process resulted from the economic and political circumstances facing capitalism in the colonies. The obvious feature of these circumstances was the chronic shortage of labor. But this, in itself, is insufficient to explain why slavery was a Black phenomenon. Most such explanations explicitly or implicitly, impute to Black people, a propensity to being enslaved as the operative factor. In fact, the resistance of Black people to the indenture system was at least as strong as that of white people, and the class struggle waged by Black labor against its enslavement far overmatches any struggle of white labor against capital during the same period.

So why Black slavery? It would not have been an inherently greater police problem to enslave whites rather than Blacks. But the issue for colonial capitalists was who would make reliable police. The evidence indicates that near the end of the 17th century there was a remarkably conscious ruling class decision to respond to the developing class struggle by appealing to white racial solidarity. The dictates of white racial solidarity, plus the general labor shortage, entailed the move to a strictly racial system of slavery. Any other option would have gravely restricted the supply of wage labor from Europe and (or) provided an additional impetus towards labor solidarity at a point when it was becoming more and more of a problem.

The unique feature of white labor was not that it resisted enslavement more effectively than Black labor. It was that white labor was more susceptible to the ideological domination of the white capitalist class, a domination effectuated through the medium of white racial solidarity which is nothing but a different type of slavery. This point deserves stress. The development of racial slavery was one side of a two-sided process. The other side was the development of the practice and the ideology of white supremacy. The primary function of this second side of the process was then, as it still is today, to control white labor. ( See Ted Alien, " 'They Would Have Destroyed Me...': Slavery and the Origins of Racism" *in, Understanding and Fighting White Supremacy: A Collection*, STO,

1976.)

In this fashion the institution of white supremacy emerged from the requirements of the maintenance of capitalist political power. Until the civil war the main "white" privilege was freedom from chattel slavery. Some contemporary labor spokesmen made much of the fact that this was only an exchange of one form of slavery for another - wage slavery. Usually this constituted an argument against placing a priority on the fight against slavery, because "we are all enslaved." It was a clear parallel to contemporary leftists who proclaim that all workers are exploited as an argument against placing a priority on the fight for equality within the working class.

In pre-Civil War U.S. this notion involved a particularly gross evasion of reality. Given the shortage of labor, and the availability of virtually unlimited free land, the privilege of not being subject to chattel slavery was transformed into a real opportunity to rise out of the ranks of the working class. During this period, a wave of white immigration would spend one generation as workers, but the second generation could rise into the ranks of the petty bourgeois and small farmers. Their places in the working class were then taken by the next wave of immigration.

### White Supremacy: An Initial Definition

Since we have argued that the institution of white supremacy came out of the needs of capitalist political maintenance in the pre-civil war period, we digress at this point to provide an initial definition of white supremacy. The concept of white supremacy plays a central role in our entire perspective. Throughout the paper there will be further elaborations of the concept, and in one of the concluding sections, we will review and respond to the most frequent and substantial of the criticisms of it.

One main aspect of white supremacy is cultural genocide directed against Black people. From the earliest colonial times to the present, every effort is made to eradicate by force when necessary, all features of the African cultural heritage and of the culture of resistance which developed in response to oppression in this country. This extends to the deliberate denial of the tools necessary for cultural development, particularly educational facilities controlled by Black people. There is little practical distinction, for example, between the prohibition of Black education during slavery, and the current combination of shameful miseducation in ghetto schools for the masses of Black children with white-determined integrated education for a few. Nor is there a great difference between the deliberate destruction of the Black family unit during slavery, and the intended impact of the welfare system and the massive introduction of drugs into Black communities.

These capitalist policies have not prevented Black people from gaining an understanding of their African heritage and from developing the elements of a Black culture, but they have definitely slowed and, in many cases, distorted the process. However, a more relevant concern for us has been the manner in which this cultural genocide has fit into mass notions of white supremacy, preventing the development of white working class culture. The deliberate ignorance of African history and social structure supports white prejudice about the "savage" "primitive" antecedents of Black people. The normal working of capitalist ghettoization policy supports the white myths of the "lazy" and "criminal" inclinations of Black people.

The other major aspect of white supremacy is the systematic denial of economic, political and social equality for Black people. This denial of equality is also an element of capitalist policy though for obvious political reasons its sources and motivations within the ruling class are masked to the greatest extent possible by the workings of the trade union and the parliamentary-electoral institutions. The denial of equality to people of color is equivalent to the establishment of a system of relative advantages for white people. All white people, specifically white working people, participate in this system of privileges, though clearly all do not participate in an equal manner. These relative advantages, despite their wide variations, provide all white people with a material base for white supremacist practice and outlook, which, in turn, becomes the means through which the relative advantages are rationalized.

The specific shape and content of white privileges are determined through class strug-

gle. The ruling class attempts to shape both reform concessions and the direction of repression in ways which maximize the strategic divisions within the working class. Thus while white supremacy does not eliminate the class struggle, it limits, confines, and channels it into forms that make a conception of group interest based on skin color appear to over-ride class interest for the masses of people.

Since the strategic function of white supremacy is to maintain capitalist hegemony among white workers by obstructing the tendency towards working class solidarity, it is essential that white workers see Black people as a real threat - as actual competition. This entails periodic concessions to Black people, usually concessions of a symbolic character, but sometimes ones which are more substantial. No master plan is required for this process. A judicious response to the struggle of Black people against their oppression dictates some concessions by the ruling class. For our purposes, however, the important point to remember is that these concessions do not, and will not of themselves, alter the qualitative fact of white supremacy. This is demonstrated by the entirety of U.S. history, and by a realistic assessment of the nature and source of U.S. capitalist power.

White supremacy, then, provides the nationally specific elements of bourgeois consciousness in the U.S. working class. In addition, it provides a major context for other aspects of bourgeois world view: individualism, male supremacy, pragmatism. For example, a major aspect of pragmatism like "getting ahead", means in a context of white supremacy, staying ahead of Black people. The narrow conception of class struggle as being confined to trade unions, is often motivated by the fact that many unions will maintain the differentials between white and Black workers. Male supremacy is linked to white supremacy through attitudes about rape. Individualistic decisions about one's life like moving to the suburbs are often motivated by the idea of moving away from Black people. On the other hand, opposition to white supremacy and struggle against it, is a major and essential element in the development of working class consciousness.

Of course we don't argue that white supremacy and the opposition to it is the only determinant of working class behavior. Specifically, we do not maintain that it always is the main determinant of white working class attitudes and actions. On the contrary, our entire strategic approach rests on the premise that white workers can and will (and have in the past though not often) reject the relative advantages based on skin color in favor of class solidarity and joint struggle against a common enemy.

At the heart of the sway of white supremacy over white workers is the view that Black workers are essentially competitors. This attitude is a continuing theme in U.S. working class history. The significance of this point must be grasped. In the citation from the Manifesto at the beginning of this paper, Marx argues that..."the sway of the bourgeois class . . . rests exclusively on competition between the laborers." Marx forecast that the "advance of industry... (would replace) isolation of laborers due to competition...(by their) revolutionary combination due to association." The process, however, is clearly neither simple nor automatic. It depends on the articulation of a working class consciousness which links the class' potential to its actual conditions and illuminates the path for moving from one to the other. In the U.S., white supremacy is central to the complex of factors which have inhibited the articulation of such a genuine working class consciousness. White supremacy represents the development of a bourgeois alternative - white worker's consciousness. Although such consciousness opposes many features of capitalist rule and supports a number of improvements in living and working conditions, it is premised on the denial of equality to workers of color, and thus on the continuation of "competition" among labor. The competition, to be sure, is not atomistic individual competition, but a more invidious and persistent competition between a privileged and an oppressed racial bloc.

We will go into the strategic implications of our conception of the centrality of white supremacy in a separate section of the paper. At this point we would like to resume our general sketch of the historical development of Black oppression and white supremacy.

#### Black and White Labor Before The Civil War

As we have argued, before the Civil War the main feature of white supremacy was the

exemption of white people from chattel slavery and the resultant substantial upward class mobility which they enjoyed. However not all Black people were slaves, and not all slaves were plantation workers. White supremacy, even at this early point in its history, manifested many of its current features in the relative status of white labor and free Black labor, and of white labor and skilled slave artisans.

Black workers in the North were excluded from the initial attempts at labor organizing. They were denied equal access to social services, housing etc., and generally had a more restrictive franchise than whites. Then there were major struggles, often involving armed force between Black people and whites who were animated by a general anti-Black (usually pro-slavery) sentiment. Typical examples of such conflicts resulted in the emigration of the bulk of the Black citizens of Cincinnati to Canada, and in driving the skilled Black workers in Philadelphia out of their trades. In the early 19th century a substantial percentage of the working class in such "Northern" cities as Baltimore and Philadelphia were Black workers.

The conflict between Black and white labor, both in the South and in the North, was based on the use of white racial solidarity to limit competition. The desire to restrict competition did not necessarily mean that white workers were always pro-slavery. It worked in different ways. Many White workers in the South and in the Border States objected to having to compete with Black slave labor. Others, however, particularly in the North, objected to abolition out of the fear that an influx of free Black workers would depress wages and conditions of white workers.

During this period, some elements of a Marxist socialist movement began to develop in the U.S. But it had internal contradictions on the issue of race. Dubois quotes individuals affiliated with the First International arguing in favor of slavery for the reasons mentioned above. On the other hand, socialists like J. Wedemeyer were active abolitionists. Marx and Engels, themselves argued that the abolition of slavery was the central working class objective in the U.S. on which all other advances (for example, the eight hour day) depended.

In the period prior to the Civil War, the major working class issue in the U.S. was the abolition of slavery. This is true for the general reason expressed by Marx that "labor in the white skin cannot be free, while in the Black it is branded." It is true more concretely in that the strength of U.S. capitalism rested in large part on the racial divisions among working people, and the movement to overthrow slavery had the potential to drastically disrupt the social structure while unleashing forces which would undermine the basis of the racial divisions of the working class.

Of course, achieving any major advance was conditional in Dubois' words, on the ability of the "abolition democracy" to win the support of the "labor democracy". But this never came about. To the contrary, the prevailing attitude of white workers that Black people were competitors resulted in the separation of the abolitionist and labor movements and even in hostility between them. Thus a clear working class perspective was denied to the abolitionist movement at a time when the struggle over slavery was shaking the U.S. to its foundations.

The point is not to make a negative moral judgment on the white working class movement of over 100 years ago. The causes of its limitations and for it developing in the way that it did are apparent. Given the absence of an organized and coherent revolutionary center, the outcome was inevitable. And even if such a center had existed, it is not certain that it could have prevailed.

Nevertheless, it is wrong to look at the period in a completely deterministic way. The English working class, including even overtly reformist sectors, for all its weaknesses on the Irish question, stoutly and even heroically supported the cause of abolition of Negro slavery. And the immediate material interest of the English workers in slavery was equal to, if not greater than, any material interest that Northern white workers had in the maintenance of slavery. English workers depended on the cotton imported from the South. Thus it is important to see how the structural weakness in the development of the U.S. labor and socialist movement - its underestimation of the Black struggle, of the national question, of the importance of the struggle for full equality - had its roots in the period of the anti-slavery struggle, but was not somehow pre-ordained.



## Civil War and Reconstruction

The Civil War was part of an inevitable conflict in which the rising industrial capitalists necessarily were going to challenge the political-military dominance of the plantation capitalists. While this struggle necessitated a realignment of forces within the ruling class to bring the political situation into closer correspondence with economic reality, it did not entail the ending of slavery. Only Southern propaganda aimed at maintaining support of Southern poor whites ever argued that the purpose of the war was the ending of slavery. The North indicated often that it did not intend to eliminate slavery, and frequently helped to prevent slaves from leaving their plantations or improving their conditions in the territory which they occupied in the course of the war.

The ending of slavery in the course of the Civil War was the fruit of the slave's struggle for freedom, a struggle which received the aid and sympathy of almost all free Black people and a small minority of white people. White workers did play an indirect role in the ending of slavery, in spite of themselves. Their massive unwillingness to submit to the class-biased military draft to fight for the "union" made the emancipation and arming of the slaves a military and political necessity. Obviously, this kind of "support" for emancipation did not signify a great potential for a more active class unity growing out of the end of chattel slavery. If there were any doubts that such was the case, they would have been dispelled by such developments as the New York draft riots which quickly assumed a pro-slavery and anti-Black character and resulted in the death of hundreds of Black people at the hands of white mobs.

In our view the period bounded by the ending of the Civil War and the reactionary violence around the 1876 Compromise, is pivotal in the history of the U.S. During this period, the validity of the traditional Marxist position - that everything which centralizes capital is progressive - ended. At the same time this period begins the era of U.S. imperialism, where all movements and struggles which undermine the centralized power of metropolitan monopoly capital are in the interests of the working class. (This turning point, not the more common one of the 1898 Spanish-American War is noted by Lenin. See, "Statistics and Sociology", *Collected Works*, Vol. 23.)

More specifically, in this span of a little more than a decade, Black people developed from an oppressed color caste into an oppressed people - a nation. But the period was also one in which white supremacy solidified its hold on the white working class in its modern forms. This period deserves the most intense and detailed study as it contains key lessons for the U.S. revolution. In this paper we will only outline our position. (For a more detailed framework of analysis, see Noel Ignatin, "Two Views of Reconstruction," *Political Discussion Bulletin*, Number 1, Drawer D, Tougaloo Mississippi.)

Reconstruction was the attempt of Black people to win equality within a capitalist framework, but it was more than that. Reconstruction was smashed because Northern capital was unwilling to extend the bourgeois democracy, on which it has based its own development, to Black people; but the forces aligned against it were broader than that. If we were to take these two propositions minus the two qualifying phrases, we would have the essence of the orthodox (Communist Party, J. Alien) interpretation of Reconstruction. Reconstruction was the popular attempt, according to this view, to "complete the bourgeois democratic revolution."<sup>17</sup> And it was an attempt that was sabotaged by big Northern capital. This interpretation is either adopted openly or implied by most U.S. left positions of the "Negro Question". We have a different interpretation which will be spelled out in the next paragraphs. Our position is based on W.E.B. Dubois and more modern Black historians like Lerone Bennett.

It is certainly paradoxical that the U.S. left is able to find revolutionary lessons and features in foreign experience (the French Revolutions, the Taiping Rebellion) and in aspects of our own history which are much less explosive (the 1776 Revolution and the Thirties) but is so blind to the implications of Reconstruction.

The reconstruction governments were not securely within the framework of the capitalism-of the time. The common charge of its critics that Reconstruction was tending towards "anarchy and communism", whatever its "scientific" truth, is closer to the essence of the phenomenon. In our opinion, the avowedly pro-capitalist stance of most

Black Reconstruction leaders is not the main factor to be considered in assessing the period.

In *Black Reconstruction*, Dubois remarks that he had intended to title his chapter on the Reconstruction government in South Carolina, "The Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat in South Carolina". More orthodox Marxists objected to such a title for the predictable reasons and Dubois selected a more restrained version. Nonetheless, in our opinion, Dubois saw the historical significance of his subject, while his doctrinally correct advisors and critics did not.

(We might note that one white supremacist view of the Reconstruction Government in South Carolina, that of Robert Somers in 1870, stated: it was ... "a Proletariat Parliament, the like of which could not be produced under the widest franchise in any part of the world save in some of these Southern cities." Somers might well have excluded Paris of 1871 from his observation, but clearly his position supports Dubois' interpretation. One would think that such a point would draw left historians like flies. And, of course, we would expect even more interest in the "Pure Radical" section of the Louisiana Republican Party which asserted that... "Our basis of labor must now be put on a democratic footing. There is no more room, in the organization of our society for an oligarchy of slaveholders, or property holders.")

Reconstruction heralded the anti-imperialist national liberation fronts of this century. This was apparent in the demand for land reform and land redistribution. It was apparent in the overwhelming organized campaigns for public schools and mass literacy. It was evident in the advance social legislation and in the active role played by women. It was evident in the combination of economic and political concerns in the working of the National Labor Union (Colored). These features determined the tremendous potential of the period.

However, this can only be said in retrospect. At the time, the historical actors saw another factor as the issue, and, this too, is important. Reconstruction marked a sustained attempt to govern a section of the U.S. without recourse to the mechanism of white supremacy. The threat to general capitalist control that this experiment posed is the central reason why Reconstruction was smashed. Reconstruction society stood as an example to white workers throughout the country of the benefits of a struggle for equality and class solidarity, and it was a matter of desperate importance to the ruling class that white workers not grasp this example.

What was the response of the white labor movement to the social ferment and political experimentation of the Reconstruction period? The National Labor Union, led by William Sylvis, was formed immediately after the Civil War. Though the NLU was prodded by the First International through Marx to appreciate that the ending of slavery marked the "new era of the emancipation of labor", and to take advantage of the impulse which it thereby gave your own class movement", the NLU balked. It took a fence-straddling position on the main issues for a while, but quickly tipped over on the wrong side.

In the first place, on the burning issue immediately after the end of the Civil War, the right of Black people to vote, the NLU deliberately took no stand. Nor did it reach agreement on whether Black workers should be allowed into the all-white unions. It tolerated for years the Printers Union's refusal to admit Frederick Douglas' son. When the NLU did recognize the merits of Black unionization (into separate organizations, of course), it was not in the interests of class solidarity, but as a protection against "Black scabs". This marked the beginning of a 50-year period in which, with the exception of the Knights of Labour and the IWW, the labor movement, overwhelmingly consciously all white, argued the question of organizing Black workers between two racist poles - the pole of total exclusion, and the pole of subordinate organizational status to prevent "scabbing". Obviously, neither alternative bode well for the development of class solidarity. The political attitude of the NLU towards Reconstruction was dominated by its alignment with the Democratic Party. In short, it was hostile. In fact, we know of no white labor radical who took part in the major struggles and movements of the post-Civil War South other than Albert Parsons, the Haymarket martyr. Doubtless there were others - but not many of them. Even the First International ignored the vast potential of the Reconstruction South. When it began some independent labor organizing, the work was

concentrated in New York City.

It is not widely understood that the ending of Reconstruction in the South was something close to a series of fascist coups, marked by violent and bloody mass confrontations in addition to the night-riding of the Klu Klux Klan and the White Leagues. White reaction operated under the slogan of an Alabama publicist. "We must render this either a white man's government or convert the land into a Negro man's cemetery."

The immediate object of white reaction was to drive a wedge in the Reconstruction coalition between the poor southern whites who had been involved because of their generally progressive character, and the Black people. This involved the usual range of racist propaganda, economic come-ons, and coercion. The fact that the white labor movement, itself, took a racist stance, and ignored the political consequences of the defeat of Reconstruction, deprived the progressive forces in the South of any substantial base of support in the rest of the country.

The consequence of this for the labor movement was aptly pointed out by Dubois. Labor entered the last quarter of the 19th century, a period of sharp class struggle, in a position of structural weakness - unable and unwilling to speak and fight for all of the working masses.

Beyond the labor movement, populism was another major mass movement in the late 19th century. The radical heart of populism was in the South because, here, for a time, the movement was willing to challenge white supremacy. When Southern populism was organized around Black-white solidarity, the movement had a real mass anti-monopoly constituency. When it succumbed to white supremacy, it was quickly absorbed within the Democratic Party. The whole process is symbolized in the tragic metamorphosis of Tom Watson into a virulent racist, (see C. Van Woodward's biography).

As we come into the 20th century, it is important to focus on the attitudes and perspectives toward Black people held by the various sectors of the white socialist left. Though no present groupings - at least no substantial ones - hold any of these positions in their original form, the assumptions that motivated them are still factors. In addition, the prevalent understanding of left and working class history, fails to appreciate the centrality of the issue of equality and consequently presents a Utopian picture of these groupings. Thus a review of these positions is of more than historical interest.

The overwhelmingly white socialist movement, the S.P., S.L.P., IWW, had three discernable tendencies on the Black question. A large section of overt racists favored deportation, exclusions from unions, etc. and actively worked toward these ends. Such "socialists" argued that the only hope for socialism in the U.S. was a "white man's system." (V. Berger). The S.P. seldom even discussed the issues of racism and equality in terms of Black people. But it is easy to see the line up from the major debates which did take place on the issue of the exclusion of so-called "coolie labor". Marx's call for the "workers of the world" to unite was ridiculed at Socialist Party conventions by prominent members who favored the elimination of Asian immigration.

There were some indications of a parallel official attitude toward Black people. In 1904, the Socialist Party executive sent the following response to the Second International Executive which had inquired about the issue of Ku Klux Klan lynching:

The Socialist Party points out the fact that nothing less than the abolition of the capitalist system and the substitution of the Socialist system can provide conditions under which the hunger maniacs, kleptomaniacs, sexual maniacs and all other offensive and now lynchable human degenerates will cease to be begotten or produced. (Cited in, Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement: 1897-1912*, Monthly Review Press, 1952, page 132.)

It is also significant that socialist organization in the South was formally segregated - where it was not all white.

The second tendency within the socialist movement paralleled a position in the labor movement mentioned earlier. That is, attempts were made to organize Black workers into unions in order to protect white unionists from Black "scabs". W.Z. Foster of the Syndicalist league of North America and later, of course, of the CPUSA, was in this camp. That

is made clear in the approach he advocated to the major union organizing campaigns he led in the Chicago packinghouse and the steel industry. (See Noel Ignatin, "A Golden Bridge: A New Look at William Z. Foster, The Great Steel Strike and the "Boring From Within" Controversy," in *STO, Workplace Papers*, 1975.)

The third position was that of "color blindness". The IWW was the best example of this position and, at points, its position officially was even better than this alternative would entail. The IWW organized all workers; Blacks, Asians, Mexicans, and Indians, as well as whites, without discrimination. The IWW publicly ridiculed the forces in the S.P. and in the AFL that opposed Asian immigration. A major IWW stronghold was the integrated, but Black-led Philadelphia Longshore Local, which was one of the most radical, and most durable sections of the union.

In the South, the IWW-related Timber Workers Union actively organized Black workers, set up integrated locals, and held integrated mass meetings. This, as can be seen from Bill Haywood's Autobiography, was a deliberate policy of the union. In this situation, the IWW carried on the tradition of the Southern Knights of Labor, and specifically of the United Mine Workers of Alabama (not affiliated with the UMW) strike of 1894. It flew directly in the face of the AFL national and regional policy. (Which says something, we would think, about the "boring from within" debate between the IWW and some other socialists.)

Today all of these positions would be regarded as wrong, (though, of course, not equally wrong,) and all but the third would be regarded as racist. Even those socialists who were willing to treat Black workers as equals seldom acknowledged any special significance either to the Black struggle for equality, or to the struggle against white racism. Furthermore, the cross-class character of Black oppression and the consequent potential (and legitimacy) of their struggles as a people was not understood. Though General Sherman had used the term, self determination, in the Civil War, and various Black leaders had raised it as a slogan, that concept was not in the vocabulary of the white socialist left of the period.

The period we are considering, the decades before the formation of the CPUSA, were characterized by lynch terror in the South, by cycles of sharp, often violent, labor struggles and towards the end of the period, by large-scale Black emigration from the South to the Northern industrial centers. This is the context of an issue that was significant for the socialists of that time though it is virtually unthinkable today. The issue was the one of so-called "Black scabs".(It would not be right to continue this section without noting that this issue is placed in a false context by the racial bias of white labor historians and their histories which do not consider any of the examples of white workers scabbing on Black strikers. We are not convinced that the evidence would show that Black workers were any more likely to be strike breakers than whites despite the far greater justification for such a position which Black workers had. Furthermore, in the larger sense, the sense in which Lenin called Zinoviev and Kamenev "strike breakers" when they spilled the plans for the October Revolution in an opposition newspaper in 1917, white workers and the labor movement scabbed in the grossest way on Black people.)

In the first place, the propensity for Blacks to engage in strike breaking depended on the union. Unions that were anti-Black were recognized for what they were and received the appropriate treatment. Remember, that with the only major and lasting exception being IWW, the unions of the time excluded or discriminated against Blacks as a matter of conscious and deliberate policy. Since most unions were limited to workers in the "so-called" skilled trades, and since most Black workers had little opportunity to achieve that exalted status (they did better in the South, though that is little known) the policy seldom had to be applied.

Black people developed some unions of their own, but these were never given a fully equal status in white union federations and councils. In addition, again with the exception of the IWW and the Knights of Labor, unions had either ignored or supported the disenfranchisement of Blacks in the South, had played no role in mobilizing opposition to lynch terror, and in some cases played a complicitory role in fomenting the race riots in Northern cities - most notably in East St. Louis in 1917. To this should be added such unpalatable union practices as offering dead or alive rewards for Black scabs in railroading

(which was unionized on a lily-white basis), and hiring of the KKK in 1914 to drive out Black railroad workers in Mississippi.

This provided the context in which Black strike breakers were used in numbers of strikes, particularly in Northern cities. Many of these strikes led to violence between white strikers and Black strike breakers and in the process, a pseudo-radical basis developed for white workers' hostility towards Black workers.

It was with good reason that Black workers were either hostile or indifferent to the AFL and the Railroad Brotherhoods. These organizations excluded them, were hostile to their interests, and, to the degree possible, prevented them from earning a decent livelihood. A specific grievance was a transparent ruse developed by the AFL. Black workers who formed unions, but who were excluded by racial restrictions from the International with jurisdiction, were chartered directly by the AFL as so-called Federal Locals. These all Black Federal Locals were without money, staff, or negotiating authority. Whenever they ran into a problem, the AFL would refer them to the same all-white locals or internationals which had refused to admit them to membership. Such Federal Locals were to be utilized in the much heralded Chicago Federation of Labor campaigns in meatpacking and steel. The skepticism which these campaigns evoked from Black workers had a good deal to do with their warranted suspicion of the Federal Local set up. (An interesting Black view on this question is in William Tuttle's recent book of the Chicago race riot of 1919).

There is no plausible reason why Black workers should have generally identified their interests with support for white unions, not even if they realized the importance of labor solidarity. In the situation of the period, it is not clear that Black workers who took the opportunity of strikes by white workers to break into jobs from which they were excluded with the complicity of those white workers, were "scabs" at all. Thus it is a real commentary on the racism of the white left of the time that leading figures such as W.Z. Foster, could have warned Black people against becoming a "race of strike breakers", and cautioned them not to play the role of the "U.S. Cossacks".

Significantly, the IWW, which took a much different approach to Black workers, had little trouble with either Black or Asian strike breakers. Attempts were made repeatedly to break the Southern Timber Workers Union with Black strike breakers. But Black workers dramatically refused to participate as soon as they were informed of the issues. Similarly, employer threats to break the IWW's Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee with Black workers never materialized after the IWW announced that it would welcome 30,000 Black workers to its ranks with relish.

#### The CPUSA and the "Black Question"

With the formation of the CPUSA, a new element was introduced into left and socialist attitudes towards the "Black Question". This new element was the theoretical and practical influence and prestige of the Soviet Bolshevik Party. It is hardly possible to overemphasize how different this position was from the home-grown spontaneist white radical approaches. The Bolsheviks demanded solidarity between oppressed peoples and the working class of oppressor nations and resolute opposition to all national chauvinism and national privileges. The Bolshevik appeal to oppressed peoples of the East, and the party's staunch opposition to racialism stood in sharp contrast with Euro-American socialist and working class traditions. These had always been infected with the peculiar notion that their own imperialisms played a progressive "civilizing" role and were a step forward for colonial people.

There could be absolutely no doubt that the Bolsheviks, and specifically, Lenin, viewed Black people in the U.S. as an oppressed nation, whose struggles and aspirations as a people were bound to require the absolute support of all genuine working class revolutionaries. The main components of the newly formed CPUSA were not the most receptive ground for such a radically changed position. The Language Groups, the breakaway sections of the SP, Foster's SNLA group did not have good records on these issues. So although John Reed argued strongly for solidarity with, and support to, the struggles of the Black people in the U.S. South at the First Comintern Congress, it was a period of some years (until 1928) before the full force of the Bolshevik policy on the national colonial

question was focused on the situation of Black people in the United States.

However, at the urging of the Comintern and the Red Federation of Trade Unions, (which proposed a focus on organizing among the "politically and economically disenfranchized Negro people") the CPUSA did begin to give serious attention to organizing Black people. It formed one organization, the American Negro Labor Congress, totally devoted to organizing Black workers; and another, the International Labor Defense, which devoted a growing amount of attention to political and legal defense of Black people

Some of the leading Black Communists, particularly those who had come into the party from radical nationalist groupings like the African Blood Brotherhood, were anxious to apply the full Lenin-Stalin theory of the national question to Black people in the U.S. The overwhelmingly white U.S. party - particularly its leadership - were resistant. However, in 1928, at the 6th Comintern Congress, the international movement decided that this was the proper perspective, and the U.S. party accepted the decision, as well as the famous thesis that the Negro people constituted a nation in the Black Belt with the right of self-determination.

The main documents of this period have been used in a number of left debates in recent years. We will assume that most readers will be familiar with their general content or will be easily able to check them out, so no inclusive summary will be made here. It is important, however, to stress the tremendous advance that this position signified for the white U.S. left. Three points merit special note. This was the first clear acknowledgement of the potential revolutionary significance of the Black *national* struggle. The most advanced positions in the white left had previously only gone as far as to recognize the potential anti-capitalist force of Black labor. Secondly, it was the first categorical statement that revolutionaries must aim to win the white working class to solidarity with Black demands and struggles for equality. Thirdly, it was the first time that a (predominantly) white organization committed itself to the position that white supremacist attitudes and behavior were incompatible with organizational membership. These important positive features must not be lost either through differences with the main Black Belt nation thesis, or through criticisms of the way the policy was put into practice.

After this policy was adopted, the CPUSA assumed an even clearer contrast with U.S. left tradition. We think of the demand for integrated union meetings during the Gastonia, North Carolina textile strike of the Trade Union Unity League and of the international campaign against lynching, focusing around the Scottsboro Boys defense. The stress on the Black question affected the internal life of the party. The outstanding example is the Yokinen trial. At a public trial in Harlem, the party suspended a Finnish worker who had committed a relatively minor act of white chauvinism. (A symbolic gesture, perhaps, but Black people had seen little of such symbolism from the white left.)

We don't want to romanticize the CPUSA during this period, but it is necessary to counter the prevalent picture of this period, and specifically of this policy, as an absurd, sectarian, foreign-imposed ultra-leftism. In fact, Soviet influence on the CPUSA has not been so beneficial since. It contributed to taking the wire down in Gastonia which separated Black workers from white.

Self determination for the Black Belt, and a priority on the struggle for full equality did not stay in the forefront of the CPUSA's work for long. By the mid-thirties, both points had been subordinated to new strategic priorities - the development of an anti-fascist popular front, and mobilization to support the defense of the Soviet Union. We do not subscribe to the often heard moralistic complaints that the CPUSA "sold out" to the Roosevelt New Deal etc. etc. - particularly when the criticisms come from the same mouths that argue for strategically identical popular front politics. We believe that the popular front was a mistaken strategy, then, and more clearly, now, and that the estimates made of the way to defend the Soviet Union were wrong. But these are judgments made far after the fact, that would have been much more difficult at the time. Given that policy and the imperatives of applying it in the existing political situation, there is no mystery why the Black Question lost but to the movement to organize the basic industries into the CIO, and the attempt to force the U.S. government into an anti-fascist posture. The "center-left" alliance which was (probably correctly) considered vital to the development of the CIO, would not have survived a clear split with the Democratic Party,

and such a split would have been provoked without doubt by revolutionary nationalist organizing drives among Black people in the South. It is only logical to fault the CPUSA for following the dictates of a central line, if that line is believed to be mistaken. This logic is not followed by most of the current Marxist-Leninist groups who advocate one or another variant of popular fronts, and yet glibly attack the CPUSA for being guilty of reformism and revisionism at a point in history when such a front was no idle dream.

While it is true that the CP lost its strategic emphasis on the Black question, it did not simply revert back to earlier left approaches. In general, the Party continued to wage a principled struggle for equality in the mass movements until the beginning of the war. But the struggle was not given the priority which it warranted and the priority is the essence of the issue.

The war period pushed the CPUSA's anti-fascist united front, defense of the Soviet Union position, to its extreme limits, and the difficulties with the position in terms of the approach to Black people became obvious. To cite the best known examples, the CPUSA opposed the March On Washington which was demanding a Fair Employment Practices Commission and they opposed the March On Washington Movement which grew out of the march itself. The party, as it admitted later, opposed pressing the struggle against racial discrimination in the armed forces. The party characterized the heroic Puerto Rican Nationalist Party of Albizu Campos as "fascist", because it refused to serve in the U.S. military, the same armed forces which were persistently shooting down Puerto Rican insurgents. The expulsion of Japanese members was a specifically racist response to the new party priorities.

These major changes in the CPUSA's actual policy occurred without a clear criticism of its formal political position - the 1928-1930 Comintern position. The recognition in formal terms of the actual change occurred in two series of debates, the first following World War II and the second during the liquidationist period of the middle fifties. Understandably, the theoretical position was changed. Essentially the argument was sociological and demographic. Population movements from the South to the North were substantially diluting the contiguous area of Black Majority. This was a long-term process, not a cyclical one. At the same time, the thrust of Black people's struggles was toward integration, not toward the development of a national identity. Thus the essential policy features for the party were to "complete the bourgeois democratic revolution" by gaining full democratic rights for Black people, and to conduct an educational effort against the ideology of white supremacy in the context of unified "Black and white unite and fight" struggles for reform objectives.

To put the argument most starkly: Black people had been following the "classical" path toward nationhood, but the general development of U.S. capitalism aborted this. Thus Black people had exercised the right of self-determination (in actual fact, if not in a conscious political way) by moving North and West to the industrial centers and attempting to integrate themselves into the general population. Having thus exercised their right of self-determination, it was no longer their right, and the Black question was only one among a number of questions of political and economic reform.

Hamstrung by the reformist and assimilationist implications of this position, the CPUSA eliminated itself from a major role in Black upsurge of the sixties. The silly identification of the movements for equality with movements for assimilation; the systematic downgrading of the patently revolutionary aspects of the Black movement of this period, the Party's tendency to defend the indefensible racist official labor structures, and its sectarian opposition to the development of Black nationalism, all contributed to this isolation.

Recently, the CPUSA has recovered somewhat, modifying its position again in response to the tremendous development of Black Nationalism. The change is mainly of cosmetic significance. Although there is a reaffirmation of the importance of self-determination, there is a deliberate agnosticism on the presence or absence of a national character to the struggle which would lend real content to the concept of self-determination.

We have spent this much time on the CPUSA to give current issues and debates a better context. In the remaining sections of this paper we will add to what we have said earlier about the nature and significance of the institution of white supremacy, with a position on the Black National Question, a treatment of some relevant questions of strat-

egy and perspective, and finally, a response to some of the more common and more substantial criticisms of our positions. In short, we will lay out our own position which has only been implied in most of the issues we have discussed up to now.

### III THE BLACK NATIONAL QUESTION

But before this generation has passed away, there will be a grand change. This colored people is going to be a people. Do you think God has had them robbed and scourged all the days of their life for nothing? (Sojourner Truth - Cited in Jacqueline Bernard, *Journey Toward Freedom: The Story of Sojourner Truth*, Dell Paperback, 1969, p 254.)

In the United States, the Negroes (and also the Mulattos and Indians) account for only 11.1 percent. They should be classed as an oppressed nation, for the equality won in the Civil War of 1861-65 and guaranteed by the Constitution of the republic was in many respects increasingly curtailed in the chief Negro area (the South) in connection with the transition from the progressive, pre-monopoly capitalism of 1860-70 to the reactionary, monopoly capitalism (imperialism) of the new era, which in America was especially sharply etched out by the Spanish-American imperialist war of 1898 (i.e., a war between two robbers over the division of the booty). (V.I. Lenin, "Statistics and Sociology," in *Collected Works*, Volume 23, pp. 275-76.)

We are rising  
We are rising  
We are rising  
as a people

(a song sung by Black school children in Mississippi in 1874. Cited in Lerone Bennett Jr. *Black Power U.S.A.*, Pelican Books, 1969, p. 258.

#### Introduction

For a number of years, STO has argued that white revolutionaries in the U.S. should devote their attention to the fight against white supremacy as a basis for building a principled unity between white workers and Black people. The question of whether or not Black people constituted a nation was, we argued, essentially an issue which the Black movement would resolve in the course of struggle. We took this position in reaction against the spectacle of small groupings of overwhelmingly white radicals magnanimously bestowing or denying nationhood to Black people, without showing the slightest evidence of any actual concern for the attempts of Black people to determine the shape and content of their own struggle.

However, supporters and critics alike, have pointed out to us that our position clearly implies a definite stand on the national question. Our conception of white supremacy and the way to struggle against it rests on an understanding of the Black movement as having an intrinsically revolutionary character. Such a character could only follow from that movement being essentially a movement for national liberation, and consequently, from Black people constituting a nation.

While we have never disagreed with this observation, we also have never spelled out in detail a theoretical basis for agreeing with it. This is a necessary task, because, though we regard Black people as an oppressed nation, we do not accept the same theoretical framework for this position that other groups do.

Our position takes Lenin and the Third International literally. The proper strategic approach to world revolution is not simply "workers of the world unite", but "workers and oppressed peoples of the world unite". The international working class and the oppressed peoples are two co-equal components of the struggle against capitalism. While they are inter-related in a thousand ways, they each have distinctive contributions to the revolutionary process. But one is not to be subordinated to the other – particularly not the one which for decades has been the center of the struggle against the power of capital.



Furthermore our position is that Black people are a people - a nation - everywhere in the United States, not just in the Black Belt South. However, they are a nation which does not meet the famous Stalin elements of nationhood - common territory, common economic life, etc. - as these elements should properly be interpreted. A careful examination of current reality points to the national character of Black people. When we consider the distinctive and stable Black community, assess the nature of Black oppression, and consider the direction of the Black struggle, we conclude that obviously Black people are a nation.

### The Theory of the Black National Question

Most of the current Marxist Leninist left would regard our position as a heresy. The dominant view is that the Stalin "elements" are the only scientific basis for determining whether or not a given social group is a nation. The only relevant concerns to them are how or whether, this definition of nationhood applies to Black people. On these points, of course, the left contains dramatic differences. Nevertheless, it is a bit peculiar that even commentators who obviously would consider themselves hostile to Stalinist theory generally, such as Harry Chang, take Stalin's 1912 position on the definition of nationality as a given, (see Harry Chang, *Critique of the Black Nation Thesis*.) Our position is not a scandalous break with Leninism. Indeed, as we will demonstrate, it is no break at all.

The 1912-1914 Lenin-Stalin theory of the national question was developed in a distinct political and theoretical context. Its major conclusions, the demarcation between nations and national minorities, and the subordination of the national question to the interests of the proletariat are fully relevant only within that context. Thus it becomes extremely important to understand the context, and to determine whether it is still operative.

(We have drawn a number of elements of the following argument from published and unpublished material available on the Puerto Rican National Question. Specifically James Blaut, "Are Puerto Ricans A National Minority?" This article was devoted to the question of the status of Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. The conclusions we draw about its applicability to the Black National Question are our responsibility.)

The context of Stalin's criteria for nationhood was established in the first place by the multinational structures of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, and by the political debate within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. This debate had two focal points; the demand of the Jewish Bund for full autonomy, and the tendency of the Polish Social Democrats to liquidate the Polish national question. Most importantly, the entire debate occurred before Lenin had developed the implications of his analysis of the imperialist stage of capitalist development - implications which drastically changed the theoretical context of the national question itself. The early national question position was basically a pre-imperialist phenomenon. However helpful it might have been for the clarification of Bolshevik policies in the situations at which it was directed, it does not constitute a general basis for national-colonial theory.

The elaboration of Lenin's conception of imperialism, and specifically of the imperialist oppression of colonial peoples, supercedes and over-rides the earlier theory of the national question. This was clearly seen by both Lenin and, somewhat surprisingly (since his own unique theoretical contribution was at stake) by Stalin. (See, Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Colonial Question*, p 331) There is a striking change in the conception of nationalism between the earlier documents of Lenin and those after 1916. Consider the quote (well known because of its inclusion in Stalin's ubiquitous *Foundations*) from an early work:

Developing capitalism knows two historical tendencies in the national question. The first is the awakening of national life and national movements, the struggle against all national oppression, and the creation of national states. The second is the development and growing frequency of international intercourse in every form, the breakdown of national barriers, the creation of the international unity of capital, of economic life in general, of politics, science, etc.

Both tendencies are a universal law of capitalism. The former predominates in the beginning of its development, the latter characterises a mature capitalism that is moving towards its transformation into socialist society. (Lenin, "Critical Remarks on the National Question," *Collected Works*, Volume 20, p. 27.)

In later works, *Statistics and Sociology*, (*Collected Works*, Volume 23) and the draft theses for the Second Comintern Congress (*Collected Works*, Volume 31), there is no such reference to two historical tendencies in the national question. The second tendency, characteristic of "mature capitalism" towards the "breakdown of national barriers, the creation of the international unity of capital", is noticeable by its absence. Instead, we find references such as the following:

First, what is the cardinal idea underlying our theses? It is the distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations. Unlike the Second International and bourgeois democracy, we emphasise this distinction. In this age of imperialism, it is particularly important for the proletariat and the Communist International to establish the concrete economic facts and to proceed from concrete realities, not from abstract postulates, in all colonial and national problems.

The characteristic feature of imperialism consists in the whole world, as we now see, being divided into a large number of oppressed nations and an insignificant number of oppressor nations, the latter possessing colossal wealth and powerful armed forces. The vast majority of the world's population, over a thousand million, perhaps even 1,250 million people, if we take the total population of the world as 1,750 million, in other words, about 70 per cent of the world's population, belong to the oppressed nations, which are either in a state of direct colonial dependence or are semi-colonies, as, for example, Persia, Turkey and China, or else conquered by some big imperialist power, have become greatly dependent on that power by virtue of peace treaties. This idea of distinction, of dividing the nations into oppressor and oppressed, runs through the theses, not only the first theses published earlier over my signature, but also those submitted by Comrade Roy. (Lenin, "Report of the Commission on the National and the Colonial Questions, July 26," *Collected Works*, Volume 31, pp. 240-241.)

When Lenin stopped talking about "mature" capitalism and began talking about "moribund" capitalism, he also realized the historically limited relevance of his earlier conception of the second historical tendency of the national question. Rather than a breakdown of national barriers and nationalism, imperialism gave these additional political significance.

That is why the focal point in the Social-Democratic programme must be that division of nations into oppressor and oppressed which forms the *essence* of imperialism. . . (emphasis in original, Lenin, "The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination," *Collected Works*, Volume 21, p. 409.)

National divisions of a permanent and antagonistic character were the "characteristic feature of imperialism". Only a revolutionary anti-imperialist movement could achieve genuine internationalism, and the essence of anti-imperialism is the national struggles of oppressed peoples.

Clearly, this change is why Lenin and Stalin refer constantly to a "second period" of the national question. On this specific point, Stalin flays the Yugoslavian communist, Semich, for relying on Stalin's own pamphlet.

Semich quotes outside of space and time, without reference to the living historical situation, and thereby violates the most elementary requirements of dialectics, and ignores the fact that what is right for one historical situation may prove to be wrong in another historical situation. (Stalin, *Marxism and the National Colonial Question*, Proletarian Publishers, p. 331.)

Despite such clear warnings that the historical context is of supreme importance in determining the relevance of these particular theoretical points and lines of policy, modern U.S. Leninists jump back and forth citing randomly from documents written in both periods. To read their material, one would think that the change in world context which Lenin and Stalin thought was of tremendous importance, was of no significance at all. The October League's current position on the Black National Question (Class Struggle No. 1) commits this error. A little investigation would almost certainly find a number of additional felons. Of course, the PWOC-Guardian position (Black people are not a nation and self determination is not a "scientific" slogan for the Black movement) is even less accurate. Its entire theoretical argument is based on Lenin's description of the national question under "mature" capitalism, which he completely abandoned. The PWOC combines this ahistorical use of Lenin with a running lecture to its political opponents to use a concrete historical analysis.

What exactly were the implications of this transformation of the national question into a national-colonial question? In his constant references after 1915 to the imperialist dichotomy of oppressed and oppressor nations, and the related phenomena of revolutionary and reactionary nationalism, Lenin never makes use of the concept of "essential elements" of nationhood. Consider for example, the 1917 reference to Black people in the U.S. cited at the beginning of this section. It is the "curtailment of the equality won in the Civil War in connection with the transition to imperialism" that Lenin argues merits their consideration as an oppressed nation. There is no mention of any of the elements of the "only scientific definition of a nation". To put it simply, Lenin recognized that the impact of imperialism on oppressed peoples was such that it would be a purely academic exercise to use such categories as a basis for determining anything at all. Instead, imperialist oppression and a "national liberation movement" against it was the determinant of nationhood.

Prior to the outbreak of World War I, the national question was not seen as having world historic significance since it was assumed that the development of capitalist productive forces, and specifically the proletariat, would inexorably erode the basis of nations and nationalism. World War I showed how weak that assumption was. The bulk of the working class followed Second International leadership into overt social chauvinism. This cast a different light on the issue of the relationship of the national question to the class question. Previously it had been universally assumed that the former was always subordinate to the latter. Now it was becoming clear that this position could actually lead to the subordination of the revolution to the social chauvinist tendencies of the working class in the imperialist countries. The proletariat was in danger, not of losing its revolutionary goals in uncritical support of democratic nationalist movements, but of allying itself with the reactionary nationalism of the various imperialist states.

On the other hand, the revolutionary potential of the anti-imperialist movements, in the Far and Near East, and in Ireland were becoming more evident. Even those movements which had only negligible proletarian participation were being forced by the dialectic of imperialist oppression to strike blows at monopoly capital or to lose their ability to mobilize the working masses of their peoples.

Thus the special meaning of the assertion that the national colonial question is of world historic significance is that it no longer can be regarded as one among a number of questions of democratic reform - a reform which perhaps requires revolutionary methods but a reform nonetheless. Instead, it has become an integral part of the process of the proletarian revolution. In this context, talk about subordinating the national struggle to the class struggle makes little sense. At most it can only mean the obvious. The national liberation movements, just as the class struggle, are subject to misleadership, which must be corrected in terms of the real interests of the world revolution. It cannot mean that the interests of the proletariat are ever in conflict with the development of national liberation movements of oppressed peoples, or with the defeat of nationalism within the working class of oppressor nations.

The distinction between nation and national minority which looms so large in current debates on the various national questions in the U.S. had almost no importance to Lenin which is exactly the status it should have for us. In the current period, this distinction has only one function. It is a mechanism to determine "scientifically" which peoples

may "legitimately" struggle for self determination, and which must confine themselves to the struggle for equality. To Lenin, it would have been ludicrous to suggest that some oppressed peoples had no right to self determination. Within the limitations imposed by their power, or lack of it, only the struggle of the oppressed peoples against their oppression, and not any general criteria, would determine whether or not a specific oppressed group was a nation.

In fact, nations have been born in the struggle against imperialism. During the struggle against Portuguese imperialism, the people of Mozambique, in the striking words of Samora Machel, had to . . . "die as tribes in order to emerge as a nation". The same process occurred in the Algerian struggle against French imperialism. Only a hopeless dogmatist would dare suggest that the struggle for national independence of the people of Mozambique, or of Algeria, was not legitimate because neither satisfied the elements of nationhood before embarking on the struggle.

Beyond this, in Lenin's eyes, the workers of oppressor nations and, a fortiori, the communists of those nations, had to support the struggle of oppressed peoples without respect to any a priori criteria of nationhood. He would have regarded as anathema any hint that communists of the oppressor nation could set the terms and limits for the struggles of the peoples oppressed by "their" ruling class.

Given this discussion, it should be clear why we do not regard the 1928 Black Belt Nation thesis as an adequate basis for a strategically sound position at the present time. The thesis actually makes a point of denying the parallels between the oppressed Black Nation and colonial oppression. But as we have shown, the colonial question under imperialism is always a revolutionary question, always a part of the international struggle against the power of capital. Yet according to current M-L orthodoxy, (which is based on the 1928 thesis) the national question and national movements may have either a predominantly proletarian or a predominantly bourgeois character. This distinction permits a backing away from the right of self determination to be justified with the population of a contradiction with the over-riding requirements of the class struggle. Stalin was a master of this technique:

*It should be borne in mind that in addition to the right of nations to self determination, there is also the right of the working class to consolidate its power, and the right of self determination is subordinate to this latter right. (Stalin, Marxism and the National Colonial Question, p. 246.)*

The 1928 Comintern position, and certainly its contemporary advocates even more so, are mistaken in drawing a sharp distinction between Black people living in the Black Belt area of the South, and those living elsewhere in the country. While there are clear differences between the Black Belt and the large urban ghettos - notably in the forms of struggle which are appropriate and have the greatest military-political potential - the essential national character of the struggle is the same.

The distinction between nation and national minority which is at issue here is even more tenuous when it is applied to the Puerto Rican national question. Regarding Puerto Ricans living in this country as a national minority ignores both the actual impact of imperialist oppression and the historical evidence as to the most effective way to organize against it.

Furthermore, the Comintern position does not sufficiently stress the active and participating role which masses of Black people and their organizations will play in the struggle for self determination, in the development of a mass culture of resistance to oppression foreshadowing the ending of oppression. As is true of many post-Lenin communist positions, the emphasis lies far too heavily, not on these points, but on the leading role of the party. Of course, most U.S. leftists are referring to a *multinational* Leninist party.

One final point about the 1928 Black Belt Nation Thesis is that its application today entails a contorted approach to population statistics and sociological trends, not to mention poor basic logic. These bode poorly for the "concrete analysis of concrete conditions" which is the essence of communist strategic thinking.

## Conclusion

Black people in this country are a nation; parallel to heavily oppressed colonial nations. The Black struggle is essentially the first stages of a revolutionary struggle for national liberation. The main issue for white communists is how do we support this movement, how can working class solidarity with this national liberation struggle be developed. Without the orientation of providing concrete assistance for this anti-imperialist struggle, any talk about support for the right of self determination is, as Lenin said, "a meaningless signpost".

Before ending this section we would like to clarify two points. First, we have some sympathy with certain of the motivations behind the separation of Black people into a nation in the South and a national minority elsewhere. Specifically this applies to the arguments advanced by Harry Haywood and Ted Allen. Second, we do not mean to imply through the rejection of the Stalin definition of a nation that some of the elements of that definition do not have political importance.

There are left groups, the CPUSA is one, which advance an extremely vague notion of self determination. Notably absent from such conceptions are two elements, the idea of national independence, of territorial separation, and of the use of revolutionary methods to gain self determination. It all is reduced to certain types of reforms with "participation". It is widely realized that such advocacy of self determination robs the position of all real meaning. Since this position in the case of both the CPUSA and the Revolutionary Communist Party is combined with a "dispersed nation" theory of the Black National Question, some critics conclude that only when the Southern Black Homeland is accepted can self determination have its essential Leninist character - the right to set up an independent state. Of course, the usual corollary of the Southern Black Homeland, is Black national minority status elsewhere in the country. We do not believe, however, that there is any contradiction between recognizing that Black people are part of one oppressed nation wherever they live, and making true self determination on a definite territory a reality. This is a contradiction only for those afflicted by a partial and doctrinaire understanding of the theory of the national question. Significantly, few revolutionary Black nationalist groups have trouble with this point. They realize that only when national minorities can be assimilated into another nation, can such a sharp demarcation be made between nation and national minority.

None of what we have said should be interpreted as a downgrading of the importance of common territory to the Black movement. All we have done is question the theoretical significance of common territory as the basis for determining the character of the Black liberation struggle. Black people have a common territory in every major urban center, but these territories are isolated from each other, are directly dependent on the encircling metropolitan area economically, and suffer various political and military weaknesses. On the other hand there are substantial areas of Black majority in parts of the South, and current migration patterns could easily expand these areas. These areas are much closer to being potentially self sufficient economically and defensible militarily. This section of the South offers definite opportunities to the nation-building aspects of the Black liberation movement, opportunities of which that movement is quite well aware.

## IV IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGY AND REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATION

STO has written a number of articles and pamphlets on various aspects of revolutionary strategy. These cover the nature and role of the revolutionary party, the relationship between the woman question and the national question, the united front and the path to working class unity as well as other subjects. These all refer at many points to the implications for revolutionary strategy which flow from our estimate of the centrality of white supremacy and of the struggle for Black Liberation. Rather than go into detail on these points in this article, we will mention some conclusions and direct the reader to other material for more extensive argumentation. What we will concentrate on are the strategic implications of the extensions and clarifications of our position which have been presented in this paper, particularly the view of the Black National Question and its relationship

to the international struggle against imperialism.

### Implications For Strategy

One element of our position has been made clear in the course of this paper. A central feature of strategy must be the winning of a substantial section of white workers to solidarity with the struggles of oppressed peoples, specifically with the oppressed Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Native American peoples living and working within the current territorial boundaries of the U.S. This entails a frontal attack on the institution of white supremacy. White supremacy is a major element of capitalist hegemony in this country. Its function is the development of white racial solidarity as a bulwark against and diversion from multi-national working class unity and working class/oppressed peoples solidarity. Thus it is pre-eminently a "class issue".

Although white supremacy is not in the *class* interests of white workers - either in the short or long run - it is based upon a system of relative advantages which are shared, though unequally, by all white people. The significance of these privileges is that they provide the material basis for a perceived racial group interest.

In this country, socialist revolution will not be possible without the development of revolutionary socialist consciousness on a mass scale. As opposed to revolutionary movements earlier in history and elsewhere in the world, we will not be able to seize state power and then use this point of strength to facilitate the development of a socialist working class. Marx's statement that the "emancipation of the working class (and the entire people) must be the work of the working class itself" is literally true in the U.S. The U.S. working class with all its limitations and prejudices must, and will make its own revolution. The working class revolutionary movement will not be a statistical cross-section of the national composition of the class. Workers from the oppressed groups will provide decisive leadership and greater proportional participation. However, given the realities of population in this country, at least a healthy minority of white workers must be involved if it is to have any hope of ultimate success. Clearly this means that until decisive sections of white workers reject the system of white skin privileges, the multi-national working class will not be a revolutionary force. The continued sway of white supremacy will make all major revolutionary advances very difficult to achieve and to maintain.

Overcoming oppressor nation practice and mentality among white workers sets two tasks for revolutionaries and revolutionary organizations. First, they must constantly expose the capitalist essence of racism and white supremacy, criticizing, within the limits of good tactical sense, all movements and struggles which avoid these over-riding class issues. The communist's goal is to sharpen the contradiction between class interest and white group interest in a mass way in order to clarify the practical implications of these two opposed outlooks and find the approaches to struggle within which white workers can opt for consistent class struggle.

Communists have the responsibility to criticize bourgeois ideology and culture as it influences workers and to confront class collaboration of all sorts with class struggle. In our view, the task outlined above is nothing more than the specific form which this communist responsibility must take in the U.S. This can only be done by programmatically confronting the issue of white privilege. As we have said, the denial of equality to oppressed peoples is a two sided phenomenon. The other side is the establishment of relative advantages - privileges - for the population of the oppressor nation. Each denial of equality to Black people has its corresponding privilege for white people. (We would hope that at this point in our argument, no one will take this presentation of an undeniable set of facts as a negative moral judgment on white workers.)

The class struggle in this country typically takes the form of unstable multinational unity within the framework of the tacit acceptance of racial and national differentials. All left positions which stress "Black and white unity to fight the common enemy" and "something for everyone demands" fit, despite the purest of motives, into this pattern. Thus we argue that communists must resolutely and categorically fight against privileges and must be able to recognize them for what they are wherever they exist. This position is hardly original or surprising in the international Communist movement. It is exactly

what Lenin laid out as the responsibility of the proletariat (and specifically communists). The only real questions concern how, and how not, to carry out this task.

The second task for communists is to identify the elements in mass struggles which foreshadow the potential of genuine class unity, and to bring these elements to the front of the struggle. This must be done so that the significance of the elements is not overshadowed by the reform aspects which usually dominate mass struggles under current conditions. This is particularly vital for the educational process among white workers. To the extent possible, the Black movement, and struggles of oppressed people throughout the world, should be posed as an alternative way to live, as a pole of struggle opposed to the class accommodation which characterizes the lives of most white working people. We raise this second task to make it crystal clear that we believe that only in the context of struggle will the mass rejection of privileges be possible. Of course, we want it equally clear that there is absolutely no basis to believe that this rejection will be spontaneous or automatic. On the contrary, it is dependent on the active educative role of conscious communists.

We are sometimes accused of setting up strategic tasks that are only relevant for white communists. That is a foolish accusation. We believe that the body of this paper quite adequately implies the distinctive role which we see for revolutionaries among the oppressed peoples. If it has not done this, we will spell it out here.

Our strategic emphasis on white supremacy is not determined solely by the centrality of its role in U.S. capitalist society. White supremacy/Black oppression is not only an important weapon in the arsenal of capitalism, it is a weapon that is extremely dangerous for those who wield it. Its political utility depends on the national oppression of a people whose labor is vital to the functioning of the metropolitan economy. This is not the case with most colonized peoples and it is a tremendous source of potential power for the revolutionary movement in the U.S. Thus Black oppression is not only the main tool of U.S. capitalist political dominance, it also marks the outstanding weak spot of the capitalist economic structure.

It is important to understand this point in terms of the central strategic role we assign to the struggle against white supremacy relative to other forms of oppression - i.e. women's oppression. We are not arguing that Black people are more oppressed than women (how can one measure such a thing). What we are arguing is that of all the struggles in which a popular victory would fatally weaken U.S. capitalism, the fight against white supremacy is the one with the greatest chance of success.

This vulnerability of U.S. capitalism to the struggle against white supremacy is not just a theoretical and potential one. The distinctiveness of this particular weakness is provided by the strong, clear, and increasingly conscious ties of Black people to the entire anti-imperialist revolutionary movement, a movement which has dramatically changed the map of the world in the past decades and, in the process, has demonstrated the limits of the political-military power of U.S. capital.

U.S. revolutionaries, and particularly white communists, must understand that the national liberation-anti-colonialist struggles that are occurring within the (current) territorial boundaries of this country do not *only* play an important role in the development of a general class polarization. Their revolutionary significance lies not *just* in their potential to detonate the general class struggle - to be the little wheel which starts the big wheel moving — *but in their intrinsic anti-imperialist character*. It is not only on a global scale that the revolutionary movement is composed of two elements -workers and oppressed peoples - it is true specifically and concretely within the U.S. And within this country, any revolutionary who is unable to see which component is the leading one is extremely out of touch.

Clearly, then, in addition to all of the general revolutionary tasks, we would argue that the central responsibility of Black revolutionaries is the leadership of the struggle for Black liberation. In exercising such leadership, they are, in fact, providing the decisive vanguard element for the entire struggle against U.S. capital. The recurring theme in largely white ML groups is that Black revolutionaries should fight for "working class leadership" of the national liberation struggle. This is gratuitous advice on two counts. First, the overwhelmingly working class composition of the Black people means that any gen-

uine mass movement will have a working class content and leadership. Second, the Black national liberation struggle is actually, not just potentially, a struggle in the interests of the entire U.S. working class. Thus all that remains of what presents itself as a very weighty ML proposition, is the suggestion that the Black movement should be well organized and have good leadership. We are sure the Black movement will be most grateful for such a suggestion!

In fact, however, this demand from largely white communists for "working class" leadership of the Black movement is actually an attempt to smuggle in through the back door the notion of the subordination of the national movement to what they perceive as interests of the class struggle. So long as remnants of this pre-imperialist notion retain influence, we will have oppressor nation left organizations which do not accept their responsibility to defend and assist the development of the mass self-determining character of the struggles of oppressed peoples in the U.S. The implication of this is the subordination of the most advanced component of the anti-capitalist struggle to the least advanced components - to the detriment of both. This will be the case whether its strategic form is a mechanical projection of a leading role for a "multi-national" communist party, or the demand for working class leadership of the national struggle with forces outside of that struggle determining what is, and what is not, such leadership. In the U.S. particularly, the responsibility of oppressor nation communists is to make very sure that they meet Lenin's injunction, not just to advocate the right to self determination, but to give concrete support to the actual movements for self determination.

#### Some Strategic Implications For Revolutionary Organization

On the other hand, the socialists of the oppressed nations must, in particular, defend and implement the full and unconditional unity, including organisational unity, of workers of the oppressed nation and those of the oppressor nation. Without this it is impossible to defend the independent policy of the proletariat and their class solidarity with the proletariat of other countries in face of all manner of intrigues, treachery and trickery on the part of the bourgeoisie. (Lenin, "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations To Self Determination," *Collected Works*, Volume 22, p. 148.)

In a case like that of the Irish, true Internationalism must necessarily be based upon a distinct national organisation, and they were under the necessity to state in the preamble to their rules that their first and most pressing duty as Irishmen was to establish their own national independence. (Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, New World Paperback, 1972, p. 411)

We begin this section, the source of the hottest current debates in the U.S. left, with two apparently contradictory citations from Lenin and from Engels. For reasons which we will clarify in the course of this section, we believe that in our particular circumstances, Engels' citation should guide our approach. This does not mean that we reject the operative element of the citation from Lenin - the necessity of defending the "independent policy of the proletariat". On the contrary, this over-riding consideration leads us to an emphasis on what Engels calls "national organization" for revolutionaries.

Engels wrote when the revolutionary credentials of the English working class were distinctly suspect. Lenin wrote under conditions where it was beyond question that the leading force for anti-capitalist revolution were sections of the Euro-American working class. We are living in a period when it is equally beyond question that the most active revolutionary forces are the working masses of the oppressed peoples of the world. The crucial issue is the terms of unity between workers of the oppressor and the oppressed nations. On this issue we are confident that Lenin would agree that there should be no organizational unity which is not based on unconditional opposition to national oppression, or which, at least the forces within the oppressed nations view as a contribution to the development of such unified opposition. We are equally confident that revolutionaries among the oppressed peoples in this country at this time would also favor moves toward organizational unity under such conditions. But in fact, these conditions do not exist on any meaningful basis.



Throughout this paper there have been references to the implications of our position for the role of the party. However, not only the role of the party, but also its structure and the path towards building it are involved. There are two historic precedents for the issue. One, well-known but commonly misused, is the relationship of the Jewish Bund to the RSDLP; the other is the attitude of Engels and Marx to the Irish living in England who were part of the First International.

At the famous Second Congress of the RSDLP, the demand of the Bund that they be an autonomous section of the RSDLP and that all Jews recruited into the party be automatically assigned to a Bund organization, was rejected and the Bund left the Congress. (This, by the way, allowed the Bolsheviks to be the "majority" in the Bolshevik/Menshevik split over elections to the Iskra editorial board which emerged later in the Congress.) It is important to look at this question more deeply, than the usual conclusion that Lenin rejected separate party organization for national minorities. First, politically, the leadership of the Bund were right Mensheviks. This would weigh against any agreement to give the Bund special jurisdiction over all Jewish social democrats. Second, and far more important, Lenin was not nearly so intransigent about the Bund's demands as is commonly supposed. In fact it was the Mensheviks who opposed the Bund most vigorously. At the 1906 Unity Congress, Lenin advocated re-admitting the Bund and within the framework of the general RSDLP program, giving the Bund autonomy on all questions concerning the Jewish people. The Mensheviks opposed this position, although they were much closer to the Bund on general political questions.

Thus, if anything, the unique features of the Bund would have dictated against concessions in the direction of autonomy for it within the RSDLP, but the Bolshevik position was for substantial autonomy. Isn't it obvious, then, that in situations where the national character of a people is much more evident than with Russian Jews, (i.e. North American Black people or Puerto Ricans living in the U.S.) and where the level of consciousness and organization among the working class in these national groups is well advanced over that of white working people, precedent of the Bolshevik attitude towards the Bund would certainly entail a large degree of autonomy and rights to separate organization within the party?

The above discussion suggests the very minimal level of autonomy for Black and other Third World peoples living in the U.S. even if one's vantage point is the Bolshevik national question theory prior to World War I. But we have argued that even this theory is not the appropriate basis for making judgments about revolutionary organization and strategy in the U.S. Rather, it is the national-colonial theory, part of the Leninist concept of imperialism, that we should look to for guidelines on relations between communists of oppressed and oppressor nations.

We can begin with Engels position on Irish workers living in England in the 1870's - a much closer parallel, than Jews in Russia in the 1900's (Thus the quote from Engels at the beginning of this section). In Lenin's writings on the national question (see *Collected Works* Volumes 36, 44, 45.) there are clear implications for the right of organizational autonomy of oppressed people which are implicit criticisms of Stalin's (and the Bolshevik Party's) approach. This difference was highlighted in Lenin's well known "last struggle" (see *Collected Works*, Volume 36), which partly involved differences with Stalin and Ordjonikidze over autonomy of the Georgian CP.

Applying Lenin's changing conception of the anti-imperialist national struggle, we can arrive at some general conclusions relative to party organization. Where the nationalist movement is basically a bourgeois democratic movement (a rare exception at present) autonomous party organization among national minorities should be limited, at least to the extent proposed by the Bolsheviks for the Bund. Where the nationalist movement is part of a revolutionary democratic (anti-imperialist)- struggle, that is an equal partner in the struggle for socialist revolution - (remember "workers and *oppressed peoples of the world* unite") - separate party organization for oppressed peoples living within the territory of the oppressor nation is both theoretically defensible and frequently practically desirable. Specifically, class conscious socialist Puerto Ricans living in this country are not in conflict with Leninism, but in accord with it when they organize separately or as a branch of an organization centered on the island. We would extend the same argument to

Black revolutionaries outside of the South. Such conclusions follow from the rejection of the nation/national minority dichotomy for peoples subjected to imperialist oppression.

This is putting the issue too generally in terms of how a party should be structured. Our problem is how to develop a party or parties. What does this entail for our approach to organization among oppressed peoples?

STO is a mainly white communist group which has had and will continue to have Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican and Native American members. However, we do not see the growth of groups such as ours as the essential feature of the process of party building. To the contrary, revolutionary groups from among the oppressed peoples will be the leading components in the formation of a genuinely revolutionary party. We expect that the dominant form of the party building process will be development of principled relations between Third World and mainly white groupings, characterized - on the part of white groups - by a willingness to recognize the leading role of Third World forces in the revolutionary process and to place a priority on the struggle to win white workers to a class stand.

It seems to us that a realistic assessment of class forces leads necessarily to these conclusions. There is an immense difference between the U.S. and Russia in this regard. The Great Russian working class was far advanced over the working class of the other nations within the Czarist Empire (possibly excepting the Lettish working class). The Great Russian working class provided inspiration and support for the national struggles within the Czarist Empire with their principled advocacy of the right of peoples to self determination, including secession.

In the U.S., on the other hand, it is the working class within the oppressed nations which is far in advance of the white workers in class consciousness and organization. Their struggle for equality and national liberation provides the central element attracting the working class as a whole to a revolutionary stand.

In our view, this reality has clear implications for the position of those Third World communists who choose to function in largely white communist groups. We assume the implications for autonomy are obvious, but the issue should not be seen as what can be tolerated, but rather as what should be encouraged. Since the growth of Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican and Native American revolutionary organizations is likely to have a greater and more positive impact on the class and national struggle than the growth of integrated groupings, such integrated groupings must always be exploring the possibility of assisting the development of the Third World organizations. Thus Third World cadre must be encouraged to participate in such formations and consequently to accept them as their primary political reference. The worst course possible is to develop barriers between Third World groups and Third World cadre in multi-national groups.

This is difficult. It creates many real problems, and runs counter to a normal concern for organizational viability. However, we feel, that it is in the best interests of the class struggle.

We assume that it is obvious that we disagree with the "multi-national party now" position - particularly in the form advanced by the PWOC:

Bundist conceptions of nationally exclusive "communist" organizations have no place in our movement and it is a sign of the growth of our movement that no Marxist Leninists today hold any brief for such notions. (Philadelphia Workers' Organizing Committee, *Black Liberation Today: Against Dogmatism on the National Question*, p. 55.)

We will shortly write a detailed critique of this position and its Kautskian roots.

## V A RESPONSE TO CRITICISMS

Perhaps it will help clarify and provide a workable context for our strategic position, if we spend the rest of the paper responding to the most common and most substantial criticisms of it. Of course, these criticisms generally attack our position on white supremacy, since, as we have said, though our conception of the Black National Question may have been suspected, it has not previously been circulated publicly. On the other hand, our position on the nature and centrality of white supremacy, often characterized in publications like the *Guardian* as the "discredited theory of white privileges", has received more than its share of criticism.

At the risk of causing some confusion, we will use the following procedure. The section will begin with quotations from a number of criticisms of our position from widely varying (politically) sources. It will be apparent that there is a good deal of overlap in these criticisms, and that several common themes are present. We will organize our response around these common themes, and in the process will introduce some additional criticisms which are slightly different from those cited.

### Some Citations of Common Criticisms

... it is not any particular "deal" that is the *main reason* why whites (and Blacks and other Third World people) help the bourgeoisie enslave the non-white majority of the earth's laboring forces, but it is the coercive force of state power that forces the whites and Blacks and Third World people to do this, *against their wills*.

... Flowing from the principle error, (it) places the principle contradiction as a contradiction among the people, the contradiction between white and Black workers, and not the contradiction between the people and the enemy, the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and its allies. Conversely, (it) does not understand that contained within the struggle to unite the people, to combat white supremacy, is the struggle against the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system because it is from these that white supremacy and racism spring.

... White racist ideology reacts back on the material production relations in many ways. One way is for the bourgeoisie to extend privileges (petty privileges of favoritism such as overtime, good jobs etc.) to some white workers. (However, this is not always the case. Sometimes some Black workers are extended privileges (though far less often) with the same result — racial antagonism. Sometimes, though not often, there is a semblance of fairness in the extension of favors.) Another way is for white workers in an advantageous position to jealously guard this position against Black workers. Then there are some white workers who hold virtually the same position as Black workers but are nevertheless racist in many of their ways of thinking. This is a result of the general racist ideology that is part of the peculiar American scene. Of course there is the racism of the state officials, tied to the bourgeoisie, that results in ghettos, etc. either as a plan consciously understood, or as an attitude, not consciously understood but resulting in the same thing. These are only a few examples.

(The above citations are from Alan Sawyer, "A Critique of 'White Blindspot': A Contribution to the Struggle Against a Petty-Bourgeois Line on the Question of Working Class Unity.")

We must also be clear that our struggle in the U.S. is not one against "white skin privilege", a position that had much support during the 1960's and appears to be gaining support again today. Our struggle is not against the "privileges" of white people not to be shot down by police as readily as we are, or to have an education that is relatively better than the education Black people receive. Nor is it a struggle to make whites want to guiltily move into the health-hazards, euphemistically called the

Black Community or lose their jobs in preference to Black people who are traditionally "last hired, first fired".

OUR STRUGGLE IS ABOUT TAKING THE POWER over our lives away from those 'who would force us to exist as we do. Our struggle is for the political power to rectify the problems we have and protect us from the enemies who would give us more. This must be made perfectly clear. We cannot march against a "Backward Idea" nor make war on "white skin privilege" without marching and warring against the entire U.S. white population. But we can march against colonialism and we can make war for political independence, and if our struggle is designed to end colonialism as opposed to a metaphysical concept called "racism", we will be joined by many who will begin to understand as we already do, that our struggle is aimed at the imperialist enemy of all the peoples of the world.

(The above citation is from Joseph Waller, "Colonialism: The Major Problem Confronting Africans in the U.S." Printed by the Education Committee of the African Peoples Socialist Party.)

...The inexorable logic of this is best expressed by the Sojourner Truth Organization which describes these "white skin privileges" as "the main pillar of capitalist rule in the U.S. As such," it goes on, "it dooms every struggle of the working class to be split by white people's narrow group interest. Small victories are in jeopardy, ultimate victory impossible."

But communists take a different view of their class. They do not idealize the backwardness of the workers, especially the white workers. Nor do they echo the line of the bosses that the white workers indeed do have a stake in the system of white supremacy.

(The above citation is from Irwin Silber, "Fan The Flames," *The Guardian*, 6/30/76.)

The biggest theoretical problem with the white skin privilege approach, however, is its treatment of those relative advantages as "privileges" in the first place. The theory suggests that these advantages are permanent features of the capitalist division of labor, that they are "natural" under capitalism. But this is only part of the truth. They were not handed to white workers on a silver platter by clever capitalists who schemed to divide whites from non-whites. Many were won through long and bitter struggle against a vindictive capitalist class: the right to unionize, job security (seniority), decent wages, political enfranchisement and so forth. For any socialist to suggest that these are anything other than fundamental workers' rights is foolish. (As is any attempt to divide those advantages that are "natural" to the capitalist division of labor from those that had to be won. This because that division of labor is not "natural", but the product of centuries of class struggle.)

(The above citation is from Nick Rabkin, "Racism, The National Question and White Skin Privilege" *New American Movement Discussion Bulletin*, No. 11, pp. 57-58)

The second is that the revolution is seen in two stages. First you unify the working class by smashing white supremacy, then you fight the bourgeoisie...First, revolutionaries get white workers to repudiate white skin privilege, then unify the working class, then fight the bourgeoisie.

It focuses its attack on a symptom - white workers' racism • rather than on the disease of capitalism itself. It calls on revolutionaries to give more priority to the struggle against the "privileges" of white workers than to the struggle against the bourgeoisie. Thus it places the contradiction of race (or to be more exact, an aspect of the contradiction of race which is internal to the working class), above the contradiction of class. This is standing Marxism on its head. Marxism is based on the

recognition that the fundamental contradiction in the epoch of capitalism is the contradiction between the socialized process of production and the private mode of appropriation, and this contradiction manifests itself in the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This contradiction must be resolved through class struggle leading to socialist revolution before other contradictions (such as race or sex) can be fully resolved.

The WSP position is not effective in practice because it looks at all problems in society through the prism of white supremacy rather than a class analysis. White workers are not seen primarily as workers exploited by capitalism, but as racists. In practice the WSP strategy guilt trips white workers about their "privileges" rather than urging them to struggle with workers of all nationalities against the class enemy towards the ultimate working class rule of society. Rather than furthering the class struggle, the result of the WSP strategy is to fail in the struggle against white chauvinism, encouraging narrow Black nationalism, and thereby further divide and weaken the class.

The White Skin Privilege position reflects a petty-bourgeois class outlook. It sees personal transformation, in the form of the "repudiation of white skin privilege", as the key strategy. While repudiation of privileges is an important process for petty bourgeois revolutionaries in proletarianizing themselves, it makes no sense to demand that a white male textile worker with brown lung "repudiate his white skin privileges". The WSP reflects bourgeois ideology in that it focuses the struggle against racism on the "ignorant rednecks" rather than on the bourgeoisie. It relies on an "education" of workers about their racism which typifies the relationship of the petty bourgeoisie to workers.

(These selections are cited from The Durham Organizing Collective, "Notes on NAM and Race, Sex and Class," *NAM Discussion Bulletin*, No. 12, December 1975.

## Terminology

There is a lot of objection to our terminology. There are critics who object to reference to "privileges"- for white workers, to our assertions that white workers "enjoy" these privileges, to our claims that white workers "participate in" or "acquiesce in" national oppression. Most of these critics are particularly outraged at our position that white workers must be organized on the basis of "repudiation of privileges". Such critics fall into two camps. One group says they disagree with the substance of our position, but they focus their attack on the terminology, asserting that it provides clear evidence of the essentially petty bourgeois character of our political position. Our advice to such critics is to center their criticism on matters of substance. We are not married to our language.

There are people, however, who maintain that our position is essentially correct, but that our terminology "turns off" potential supporters. In such cases we are fully prepared to accept any alternative formulations which will better convey our meaning. We admit that the language which we have drawn from Dubois and Lenin does tend to impart a moralizing air and may prevent our position from being understood, or contribute to it being misunderstood. But, to be frank, we usually find that substantive differences lurk behind the complaints about language from our 'friends'. For example, we have made few converts by substituting "relative advantages" and "material differentials" as more neutral synonyms for privileges. And, when we have accepted the criticism that our position should be formally integrated into the overall conceptual framework of Lenin's theory of imperialism, an integration which this paper has attempted, we find such critics anxious to define a white North American oppressor nation which is uniquely absent a working class.

## Moralism

A common criticism that is related to the issue of terminology is that our approach is moralistic/that it emphasizes the repudiation of privileges by individual white workers in a process akin to the emergence of "born-again" Christians. We admit that initial formulations of our position were susceptible to this interpretation, and this is the way that they were interpreted in the student movement of the late sixties. That was a problem, of course, but it was a problem that fades into insignificance in comparison with its opposite. The historical tendency of the white left to capitulate to white racism and national chauvinism. U.S. history has hardly been oversupplied with John Browns, but it has had more than enough leftists who approached the race question from the stance of what would sell best to the white worker.

Neither is our approach uniquely susceptible to moralism in its approach to fighting racism. For example, consider the imperatives which Irwin Silber of the Guardian, no advocate of the white skin privilege line, lays on communists:

The communists - the white communists in particular - must be prepared to tell £ the white workers that they are a pack of fools for swallowing the racist garbage that only benefits monopoly capital? that in jeopardizing class unity they are their own worst enemy and that only unity between Black and white based on unequivocal support for the democratic rights and special demands of the Black workers can forge the kind of unity which the working class as a whole requires in its struggle with capital. (Guardian, June 6, 1976.)

Revolutionaries must see that a large part of the work of revolution consists in the promotion of a cultural revolution within the working class. Many leftists are so taken with the obvious truth that this work can only be successfully concluded after the seizure of state power (see DOC cites), that they neglect the more relevant truth that it must be well begun as a condition for the seizure of power. While it is certainly absurd to view this work in the framework of individual conversions, rather than as an aspect of mass struggle, the cultural revolution - the sloughing off of capitalist attitudes, ideas, and patterns of behavior, and the development of a full proletarian world view, is nothing other than the transformation of the operative values of the working class. As such, it has a definite, necessary, and quite legitimate, moral tone.

## The significance of privileges

It is apparent from the critical citations that much of the attack on our position centers on the concept of privilege. We will respond to a number of aspects of this attack by answering the following questions: do we exaggerate the material significance of these privileges; do we confuse privileges with the legitimate gains of militant class struggles; does the concept of white privileges contradict the Leninist notion of the aristocracy of labor; is our conception of a priority on the struggle against privileges a viable approach to struggle?

The citations from Sawyer (and DOC) - e.g. "petty privileges of favoritism" - reflect a common criticism that we exaggerate the material significance of white privileges. We think that such a criticism is ridiculous. Any statistical index of living conditions; real income, unemployment, prison population percentage, educational level, welfare percentages infant mortality, drug addiction percentage, will disclose a substantial, and a stable, differential between Black people and white people. Any knowledge of relative working, living, and schooling conditions of Black and white people demonstrates this differential. Those who think that it is materially insignificant should come up with some evidence. For our part, we continue to believe that it is one of the outstanding features of North American life. Of course, we are not confusing the political consequences of this differential, which are open to legitimate disagreement, with the economic and sociological facts of its existence and magnitude.

## Fruits of Struggle?

A common mode of argument is to combine the assertion that white skin privileges are not really significant with the assertion that what we term 'privileges' are actually the fruits of working class struggle. In short, they don't mean so much, and even if they do, the white workers have 'earned' them. The Rabkin selections take the second half of this position, arguing that these relative advantages are not privileges but "fundamental workers rights" which should be extended to all workers, not taken away from white workers.

This argument contains a tiny element of validity mixed up with some very basic confusions and errors. First, the valid: only very foolish people would expect much success in organizing white workers purely on the basis of convincing them to give up benefits. Since our position does not automatically repel foolish people, to some extent we might deserve such a criticism. However, our actual approach to organizing white workers to which we have referred earlier bares little resemblance to this caricature.

But let us look more closely at the argument typified by the Rabkin selections. It admits of no possible interpretation other than that white workers are relatively better off in this country because they have struggled more persistently and courageously. A more insidiously racist and patently untrue notion would be difficult to devise. It implies that Black people, themselves, are responsible for their unequal position because they haven't fought sufficiently hard. In its bald form this position could only be maintained by an overt racist. In its more subtle manifestations, it is important stock in trade of the white North American left. When we stand the struggles which have been waged by various sections of the people against the manner in which improvements in working and living conditions have been distributed, it is apparent that a consistent element of capitalist policy has been to make differential concessions to white people - white working people included.

On the other hand, this position also slanders white workers. We can be quite categorical in saying that the racist exclusion of Black workers from the AFL and the Railroad Brotherhoods, won no victories for any sector of the working class. The major concessions won from the ruling class - the franchise, the shorter working day, the right to organize unions and strike - were not seen as white prerogatives by those who fought for them. For example, the struggle for unionization of basic industry was undoubtedly a major militant class confrontation, and it is beyond question that the demand for seniority protection played a major role in this struggle. The principle of seniority rights was fought for by Black workers as well as white workers. No significant number of the participants in this struggle thought that they were fighting for the principle that Black workers would be the last hired and the first fired. Many of them thought they were fighting for the opposite.

As we have pointed out earlier, the actual process which takes place is that working class victories are interpreted and modified over time into new obstacles to working class advance - in the cases which concern us in this paper, into racial privileges. Nevertheless, the seniority system has become an important mechanism of discrimination, insuring that only the sons, nephews, and male neighbors of those who struggled for the demand and were "fortunate" in their skin color, enjoy its benefits. This is not an obscure process for Marxists. It affects all struggles for bourgeois democracy. It is paradoxical that competent Marxists become so unable to comprehend this process when it impinges on the issues of racial and national oppression. Our name, thanks to W.E. B. Dubois, for this paradox is "white blindspot". Of course, the proper response to the deformation of reform victories is not to demand a return to the status quo ante. It is to struggle for the extension of gain in order that it does not constitute an obstacle to what Marx called the "ever growing union of the working class". Any "reform" which institutionalizes class disunity can never be accepted by a revolutionary communist.

## White Supremacy and the Labor Aristocracy

Many critics, including the October League and Sawyer argue that we completely muddle the classical Leninist conception of the labor aristocracy with our position on white supremacy. The heart of this criticism is that Lenin argued that the labor aristoc-

racy was a relatively small minority, while we maintain that all white people have privileges. We could avoid the thrust of this criticism by pointing out that Lenin undoubtedly thought that all Russians were privileged relative to the oppressed nations in the Czarist empire, and that he constantly called for the absolute opposition to any national privileges whatsoever. (Actually, he did not quite do this. In his very last letters and memos he argued that it was proper to accord formerly oppressed peoples concessions which went beyond equality. See *Collected Works*, Volume 36.) However, since, in fact, we do not regard the role of the labor aristocracy as particularly significant in this country - particularly when compared with the role of the institution of white supremacy - we will respond to the substance of the criticism.

There would be general agreement that the U.S. has enjoyed a substantial period in which it was pre-eminent among imperialisms, and when, in addition to its oppression of foreign peoples, it gained immense additional profit from internal national oppression. There is no doubt, then, that the U.S. ruling class has had some extra profits with which to "bribe" a section of the working class and the trade union officialdom. Nor is there any significant disagreement over whether it has been successful in this venture. However, while we think that the aristocracy of labor which has been created through this process has some significance, (for example, in determining political concentration decisions in production and attitudes towards trade unionism) we do not assign it a central strategic role.

The labor aristocracy, those workers enjoying a relative monopoly position with respect to their jobs, played a definite political role in Lenin's time. This was the social base for the national chauvinism of the Second International with all of its related features of reformism and revisionism. Lenin clearly thought that the corruption of the Second International was only a temporary deflection of the development of the working class towards revolutionary internationalism. This same view was also reflected in his frequent reference to the minority character and temporary duration of the labor aristocracy.

However, the closest the working class in Europe and North America have ever come to internationalism occurred in the years immediately following the October Revolution with the passive resistance to the capitalist attempt to crush Soviet power. Since then, not only the Second International parties, but also the communist parties of Europe and North America have amply demonstrated that there is no inherent and over-riding tendency towards proletarian internationalism. In addition, the mass reactionary nationalism (oppressor nation nationalism) which Lenin might have believed was temporary when it was first manifested in its modern form during the First World War, has become distressingly permanent. Consider the phenomenon of fascism in this regard. No, we must look beyond the question of the labor aristocracy to explain these political realities.

In the U.S., the working class has not, as a mass, advanced to the point of classical social democratic opportunism. Not that that means there is no opportunism. On the contrary, there is a surplus of it, and, in both form and content, it is decisively white supremacist. While there is an inter-relationship between imperialist oppression in general, and the oppression of peoples within the (current) borders of the U.S., the relationships and contradictions which arise from the second area have a much more direct and significant impact on the behavior of the U.S. working class. Thus while we do not deny the existence of a classical labor aristocracy in this country, we do not think that its political significance approaches that of the national divisions within the working class, and we do not regard any attempt to further delineate which sectors of the working class constitute the labor aristocracy as having great importance. In short, we do not deny the notion of the labor aristocracy, but are concerned with a different set of conditions and forces, ones which were only beginning to be apparent in Lenin's lifetime

### Political Workability

The final aspect of our response to criticisms focused on the concept of white skin privilege concerns the charge that such an approach, whatever its objective truth, is not politically workable - that white workers can never be organized through such a direct confrontation with their currently-perceived interests. We must distinguish, of course,



between two variants of this criticism, that offered by Black revolutionaries, and that which comes from predominantly white sections of the movement.

The motives behind such Black criticism as that cited from Joseph Waller of the Afrikan People's Socialist Party is the need for meaningful white working class participation in the struggle against U.S. imperialism. Such participation, of course, is the most significant way that the oppressor nation working class can provide "concrete and effective support" to movements for national liberation directed against "its" imperialist ruling class. On the other hand, when the same criticism is raised in the white movement, the motivation is almost always rooted in a desire to avoid dealing with essential features of bourgeois consciousness among white workers. It is seldom a question of a better approach to developing class unity, but a resurrection of some variant of the tired old parallel struggles scheme which is as far removed from class unity as Kool Aid is from ambrosia. The initial impulse for these parallel struggles is defined as the perceived interest of both Black and white workers. What happens when these interests are in conflict with each other? The response is to avoid those areas and issues where interests conflict. In other words, the response is to avoid a forthright demand and struggle for equality. This position has had its chance in this country.

While appreciating the concerns which motivate the criticisms offered by the Afrikan People's Socialist Party, we do not agree with the criticisms or the alternative strategic approach which they imply. No viable revolutionary strategy in the U.S. can avoid dealing with the essential fabric of class collaboration which, in our view, is provided by the institution of white supremacy. Equality and the right to self determination are very tangible things to those who are denied them. They cannot be fought for just as general slogans, instead they entail specific demands and tactics and a priority on these.

Equality will not benefit every worker equally. If Black workers are not automatically the last hired and first fired, other workers will fill this unenviable role. Revolutionaries may console themselves with the knowledge that the entire class and thus, ultimately all workers, benefit from the fight for equality, but this fact is far from self evident to white workers. Of course, if we had complete control over the terrain of struggle, we would find a variety of ways to shape the struggle for equality in order to maximize the immediate benefits which would ensue from it for all workers. In fact, in most cases, we have very little control, and thus must deal with situations when the best alternatives are Utopian dreams. For example, in a layoff situation where the issue is between strict use of seniority and special consideration for Black and women workers, it is seldom the case that a campaign against layoffs in general has any potential. The same is true with most other notions of "making the ruling class pay". To the degree it can be done, it should be done, but such a slogan will never allow us to slip out from under the necessity of choosing between equality and some other considerations.

Thus there are really only two possible approaches. Our position, which is, to repeat, that equality must be fought for as an over-riding priority, and the general alternative of posing a struggle against a "common enemy", or for a set of demands which would benefit everyone without affecting the specific inequities already in existence. This latter approach to the struggle for equality has characterized the white U.S. left throughout its history - or at least the better periods of this history - and has amply demonstrated its fallacies. Fundamentally it rests on a simple reductionism entirely contrary to Leninist politics - that important political and ideological structures will be dissolved through the working out of the economic struggle. In short, our position is that mistakes are inevitable when revolutionaries raise the question, how *can* white workers be organized, without having a clear understanding of how white workers *must* be organized.

This does not mean that there is no significance to the question of how to best win white workers to the struggle for equality. There is no question at all but that it is far preferable to approach equality through a "leveling up" rather than a "leveling down" process. There is also no question but that a context of joint or common struggle against the actual class enemy is extremely important. This follows from our understanding that the political basis for winning white workers is found in both their short and long term class interests, while the obstacle to winning them lies in the fact that this class interest is not clearly articulated and conscious. The process of elaborating the class consciousness of

white workers and making it their operative basis for interpretation and action can only take place in any kind of mass way in the context of struggle against the ruling class. Our point is not that this is not a necessary concern of revolutionaries — it is; but that, in and of itself, is not a sufficient concern.

Given this background, it is possible to see that most criticisms of our position which center on the charge that "white workers can never be won with such a line", are actually saying something a little different. They are saying that white workers cannot develop revolutionary class consciousness until after the revolution. Solidarity with oppressed peoples and a clear stand against privileges and for equality are essential features of revolutionary class consciousness. In our view consolidation of such a position among at least a substantial minority of white workers is a condition for revolution in this country. We do maintain, as the October League notes in some horror (*Class Struggle No. 1*), that workers cannot be revolutionary and racist at the same time - not in this country. Of course, we do not mean by this that all racist attitudes and ideas will be eradicated, even among a minority of the white workers, before the revolution. We mean that the political-ideological structure of white supremacy must be decisively defeated, and class interest must predominate over white racial solidarity as the determinate of the behavior of a significant section of white working people. Those who believe that this is a Utopian requirement must re-examine their agreement with fundamental Marxist premises. Those who believe, after all of our arguments in this paper and elsewhere, that it is an arbitrary requirement, we pledge to bother no further.

### Stage Theory?

There is another feature to these criticisms which should be cleared up. This is the notion that we propose a two stage theory of struggle, first defeat white supremacy, then attack capitalism. We have said it earlier in the paper, but let us repeat it again. The attack on white supremacy is not a distinct stage of struggle. Perhaps that conclusion might have been drawn by people predisposed to it from arbitrary fragments of the very first statements of our position written almost ten years ago. However, in many different articles and pamphlets we have explicitly argued a different position. We argue that white supremacy is an essential feature of capitalist rule and that the process of organizing the working class into a revolutionary force involves an attack on this feature of capitalist rule.

The real difference is not over whether the fight against white supremacy is a separate state of struggle, it concerns the content of the fight. Most critics imply what Sawyer explicitly states: "the main reason why whites...help the bourgeoisie enslave the non-white majority of the earth's laboring forces...is the coercive force of state power." (We butchered the Sawyer citation a bit here, but we are confident that he would accept it as reflecting his views.)

If Sawyer is correct, the focus of the fight against white supremacy should be against the capitalist ruling class. However, he is wrong. The essential root source of white supremacy among white workers is not capitalist police power, but capitalist ideological and cultural hegemony, supported in the last analysis by police power. The police power comes in as the primary method of controlling Black resistance. Since white supremacy isn't forced on white workers by the military power of the state except in the rarest of cases, our strategy is aimed primarily against the ideology of capitalism, not as it is manifested within the ruling class, a matter of only derivative concern, but as it is manifested, developed, and supported within the working class. In short, the fight against white supremacy involves a struggle and polarization within the working class, specifically among white workers.

This struggle within the class is what our critics oppose, at times through the device of accusing us of a two-stage strategy, and at times openly. Of course, the struggle against bourgeois consciousness, against opportunism, is a basic feature of the working class revolutionary process in every stage and phase. The only possible difference is whether or not white supremacy is an essential element of working class false consciousness in the U.S. If it is, it must be fought concretely, not indirectly through some sort of struggle against the racism of the capitalists. We might remember that it was not the social chauvinism of the imperialists which distressed Lenin.

## A Spontaneist Approach?

At one point Sawyer charges us with rejecting "the leading role of the party in uniting the proletariat". This is a common form of another criticism of our position. That is, our emphasis on the leading role, the attracting and mobilizing function of the national liberation struggle in the general struggle against capital, is essentially reliance on spontaneity and a denial of the role of conscious revolutionaries. (The other side of the criticism, of course, is that we exaggerate and idealize Third World revolutionary movements. This is a point of fact which we deny categorically.)

Every political approach must take into account political conditions and processes which are beyond its power to decisively determine. It will take more than the most dedicated work by revolutionaries to arrive at a situation where, in Lenin's phrase, "the masses of people are unwilling to be ruled in the old way". It requires a favorable conjuncture of objective and quasi-objective conditions. In this framework, the existence and development of the national liberation struggle inside the current borders of the U.S. is hardly an unreasonable or arbitrary assumption. This aspect of revolutionary struggle has assumed world historic significance since the Bolshevik Revolution. It is ridiculous to suppose it is a passing phase which can not be counted upon for a revolutionary perspective for this country.

Finally, and most responsive to the thrust of the criticism, the reliance on spontaneity in Lenin's sense, is not just the over-estimation of the spontaneous side of the struggle, it is the abandonment by revolutionaries of their responsibility to "clearly understand and fulfill the tasks" which the mass movement sets before them. We have spent the bulk of this paper detailing how we see the "tasks" of revolutionaries in the U.S. While we most certainly rely on the existence of the national liberation struggle for assistance in fulfilling these tasks, we realize that they will not be fulfilled without a conscious and organized intervention by revolutionaries. If that is not one concrete lesson of the history of the class struggle in the U.S., we are very mistaken about this history.

## Race: A "Secondary" Contradiction?

We conclude this section, and the paper as a whole, with the treatment of one final criticism. Though we have touched on this point a number of times during the paper, it is proper that a response to it be the final section of our argument, because it is the central theoretical misconception on which all other criticisms, in the final analysis rest. The Durham Organizing Collective paper makes the point most directly: "Thus it (our position) places the contradiction of race . . . above the contradiction of class." One way or another almost every criticism of our position accuses us of subordinating the main contradiction (class) to a secondary contradiction (race or nation).

We have already indicated part of our answer to this position in our treatment of the national question, and specifically, of the import of Lenin's observation that the essence of imperialism is national oppression. Here we are concerned with the theoretical and methodological errors in this criticism. What we have is a mechanistic distortion of the Marxist conception of capitalist society. Though we certainly don't regard Althusser with the awe of some radicals, his description of the "main contradiction" is useful.

*. . . the Capital-Labour contradiction is never simple, but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised. It is specified by the forms of the superstructure (the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organized movements and so on); specified by the internal and external historical situation which determines it on the one hand as a function of the national past (completed or 'relapsed' bourgeois revolution, feudal exploitation eliminated wholly, partially or not at all, local 'customs' specific national traditions, even the 'etiquette' of political struggles and behaviour, etc.), and on the other as functions of the existing world context (what dominates it - competition of capitalist nations or 'imperialist internationalism', or competition within imperialism, etc.), many of these phenomena deriving from the 'law of uneven development' in the Leninist sense.*

In short, the idea of a 'pure and simple'<sup>1</sup> non-overdetermined contradiction is, as Engels said of the economist turn of phrase 'meaningless, abstract, senseless'. That it can serve as a pedagogical model, or rather that it did serve as a polemical and pedagogical instrument at a certain point in history does not fix its destiny for all time. (Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Vintage Books, 1970, pp. 106, 113.)

Capitalism is a complex of contradictions, one of which defines the nature of the society. However, it is not possible to understand *a* particular capitalist society, and, certainly, to develop a revolutionary plan to transform it, without grasping the "historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised". That is what we attempt to do, in a most preliminary and tentative way, with our elaboration of the institution of white supremacy as a form and circumstance of U.S. capitalist rule and the internal movements for equality and national liberation as specific historical circumstances of struggle against that rule.

It is elementary Marxism that the class struggle is the basic historical dynamic. The class struggle is not launched by this or that revolutionary group, it is the fabric of the capitalist social process. The task for revolutionaries is to make this struggle a conscious one with the goal of the overthrow of capital and the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship. In this context, the struggle against white supremacy for working class unity and solidarity with oppressed peoples is not something waged independently of the class struggle, it is a strategic approach to revolutionary intervention in that struggle. Those who claim it is elevating a secondary contradiction over the main contradiction, actually oppose it as a specific approach to intervention in the class struggle, whether they realize it or not.

#### One Final Word

This is a working paper, a basis for discussion. We offer it in the hopes of contributing to the process of debate and clarification of differences which is indispensable to the development of the revolutionary movement in this country.

7/25/76