

White Supremacy: Implications for Political Program

by David Ranney

(Note: The following is an edited version of a speech presented by the author to a meeting of the leadership of the New American Movement on January 3, 1976 in Pittsburgh. All of the specific arguments against STO's position referred to in the text below have been made by members of NAM. References to names have been edited out since the positions which go with these names are not available in written form. The "expanded remarks" by Noel Ignatin were in reference to the debate which followed Ranney's address.)

I will begin my remarks by outlining some of the practical implications of the position I represent and then go on to develop the theory behind it.

Our political work should have a dual thrust. On the one hand, all of our activities should emphasize equality between the races. There can be no compromise on this. Whatever the subject matter of our work—the economy, utilities, unemployment, education, workplace tactics—we should seek out all instances where inequality based on skin color exists and make the fight against those inequalities a major component of our program. We should never avoid any issue because it is controversial to white workers. We should never compromise issues of importance to Black, Latino or Native American workers for fear that it will "split the class". The fact of the matter is that the class is split and that struggle over racial issues are necessary steps toward real unity.

The second part of the dual thrust that I mentioned is our role relative to Third World organizations. We must see our role as supporting those organizations by: accepting their leadership on questions of race, the political stance that we take and by explaining that stance to white workers. This means that we must enter into our organizing work by placing equality as the key issue. And it means that we must develop a base among white workers so that we are in a position to explain why equality is in the interests of the class as a whole.

Those of you who have argued that this position has no unique tactical implications are simply closing your eyes both to NAM's practice and the practice of much of the white left. To carry through the sort of program implied by our political position on white supremacy means a shift in emphasis in the type of organizing NAM does. It means an overall programmatic emphasis on combatting white supremacy in all of its forms. This will effect not only the content of programs, but also how money is spent, where emphasis is placed in building chapters, and more conscious efforts to work with and support Third World groups.

The theoretical position behind these practical considerations can be briefly summarized as follows. The critical impediment to class struggle and the development of revolutionary consciousness is white supremacy. The material form white supremacy takes is one of a privileged position of white workers relative to Third World workers; while the ideological form of white supremacy is racism -- set of attitudes on the part of white workers that both protects and justifies their relatively privileged status. It is the material

form of white supremacy that must be smashed in order to wipe out racist ideology and unify the class. Thus the key demand in our program must be for equality—wiping away differentials or the relative privileged status of whites in jobs, income health, housing, discriminatory forms of seniority etc.

Some of you have made much of the notion that the "fundamental contradiction" in society is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. We have been accused of "turning Marxism on its head" by focusing our strategic concern on contradictions within the working class. This contention, however, is a false separation. First of all Marxism should not employ the term "fundamental contradiction" in such a static way. Marx noted that the class struggle is one manifestation of the societal contradiction between the forces and relations of production. We contend that white supremacy is a particular aspect of the class struggle and the fight against white supremacy is a crucial aspect of the class struggle itself. If you can agree that white supremacy inhibits the ability of the working class to fight the bourgeoisie, then the struggle against white supremacy is the class struggle. The two can't be separated.

Our position is based on an historical analysis of class struggle in the U.S. and a contemporary analysis of where that struggle is today. It is an analysis which demonstrates that white supremacy began with the categorization of Black people as slave for life in response to Southern proletarian upsurge. It is an analysis which can demonstrate that Black led proletarian movements have been met with the harshest repression and the simultaneous extension of white privilege. It is clearly not a stage theory as some of you have contended because it can show that every blow against white supremacy is a blow against the ruling class.

Philosophically our position rests on the dialectical view that the development of things comes through the interplay of their internal contradictions. Thus the revolutionary development of the working class will come through the interplay of its internal contradictions and race is a critical contradiction within the working class. Lenin argued that the task of revolutionaries is not to fight bourgeois ideas as such, but to fight them as they are spread in the proletariat. And it is this that we propose to do.

One final philosophical point relates to charges that our position represents a petit bourgeois outlook because it rests on personal transformation. This represents a real distortion of our position. What we seek is a class transformation in which the working class as a whole determines in the course of struggle that their emancipation from the ravages of capitalism can not be built on a base of white supremacy. Marx made this very point as applied to slavery in the U.S. and Lenin first used the term privilege to make a similar point with regard to the relationship between Russians and their national groups. We do not advocate exhorting white workers on an individual basis to give up their privileged status. What we do advocate is promoting vigorous struggle with the ruling class with equality at the forefront and to articulate the lessons of these struggles.

Those who have opposed our position have argued that class unity can best be built by finding areas where Black and white workers can unite and avoiding those where they can't. A similar view that I have heard is that we should develop our program in such a way that we emphasize building relations with white workers even if we have to de-emphasize racially touchy issues or make compromises in such areas as seniority and busing.

The tenuousness of these ideas can be demonstrated historically. So long as there is inequality, Third World people will band together and confront white supremacy and whites will tend to pull back - wiping out any unity that is not firmly grounded in equality. Contemporary struggles over housing integration, equal education, layoffs, discriminatory job classifications are examples. While white workers may agree to work with other Third World workers on things of mutual interest, they have tended in the past to cast these things aside when struggle over issues involving equality are raised.

In this context, many white leftists have argued that it is incorrect to use the term privilege to describe the relative position of whites to Third World people. There have been two arguments put forth. One is that privilege is a metaphysical concept because it fails to examine the relationship of race and class. Similarly it has been argued that Black demands are not necessarily class demands. Since 95% of Black people are proletarians, it is hard to understand the point. Demands that will benefit the masses of Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Native American and Asian peoples who are living in the U.S. are proletarian demands. And there is nothing metaphysical about the fact that Third World peoples have the worst jobs, lowest incomes, poorest housing, education and health care. Further, this argument overlooks something noted earlier - that the struggle against white supremacy is an integral part of the class struggle generally.

Another argument along the same lines is that such things as the right to unionize, seniority, decent wages are the product of class struggle and thus can't be termed privileges. The refusal to admit that the status of white workers relative to Third World workers is a privileged status represents a white blindspot. Such things as the right to unionize, seniority, and decent wages have a dialectical property in the context of white supremacy. When these things were won, they were at the same time *both* advances in the class struggle and fetters on that struggle. They were fetters because they failed to deal with or even reinforced white supremacy. Our position would contend that this fetter side of the contradiction has been the dominant one historically.

To illustrate further what I mean by a fetter, let's look at these "products of class struggle" from the dominant side of the contradiction - which is the side most Third World people look at it from. The right to unionize becomes the right to exclude Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Native Americans and Asians from certain unions. The right to seniority becomes the right to use seniority to maintain Third World people in the worst and lowest paying jobs or to condemn them to no job at all. The right to decent wages becomes the right of white workers to have higher wages and better living standards than people who are not white. The failure to look at the development of the working class from this perspective has historically been the most glaring weakness in much of the white left which stems from a white chauvinist perspective.

The fact that white workers have hegemony in unions can use seniority to keep their jobs when Third World people lose theirs, have higher wages, better housing, school and health care, encompasses a privileged status. The use of the term privilege is a recognition that the Third World side of the contradiction is dominant. And so long as this is the case there can be no unified class struggle. Why is this? Because white workers rightfully see that equality means losing their relative advantage and their relative advantage is the essence of white supremacy. It gives whites an edge over Third World people in terms of material advantage and social status - an edge that will not be given up without a struggle.

This does not mean that we are out to smash seniority per se. What we do seek are policies that will make seniority work equally for all workers. Nor are we out to force white workers to accept indecent wages. Rather we seek to destroy wage differentials based on race - *whatever that takes*.

To assume that whites will give up their privileged status without a struggle is incorrect. The Boston and Louisville Busing struggles demonstrate that. On the other hand, to assume that in the course of a struggle, whites will always be recalcitrant or submit only through bribes or trickery is an anti-working class stance in the sense that it assumes that white workers are incapable of seeing the gains of equality in terms of class solidarity, class confrontation, and the isolation of reactionary elements in the class. Of course, our program is not an easy one to follow, but that is the nature of a revolutionary movement. Third World workers will confront white workers as they have in the past and are doing right now. For our part, we should actively encourage that confrontation and at the same time work to be in the best position to support the demands and needs of Third World workers to the white workers we are relating to.

I want to stress that our position is *a* positive program for class struggle capable of striking a critical blow to bourgeois hegemony. It is not (as it has often been characterized) a moralistic position that exhorts white workers to stop being racist. It assumes that the resolution of this critical contradiction within the working class can best be dealt with as that contradiction is heightened. It assumes that a resolution in favor of equality is a critical blow to the ruling class and hence is a crucial strategic dimension of class struggle generally. Strategies that seek to minimize this contradiction are self defeating because only through a program that is firmly grounded in equality can a stable working class unity be achieved. Such strategies are ultimately anti-working class because they hinder rather than advance the class struggle.

Expanded Remarks

by Noel Ignatin

It was raised that our position as expressed by Dave means attacking the white workers. We believe that the fight against white supremacy is in the interests of the working class, including white workers. If anyone disagrees, that person should speak up.

The principle reason the bourgeoisie upholds white supremacy is not the quest for maximum profit in an immediate and direct sense. If it were, the employers would give job preference to the cheapest labor available, Black