

# Forging a Black Trotskyist Cadre

## Spartacist League Holds Fifth Conference

Spartacist League (U.S.)

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The Fifth National Conference of the Spartacist League/U.S. was held early this month in an East Coast city. Although only the elected delegates were mandated to attend, a total of close to 300 comrades came to participate in this highest body of the SL/U.S. Attending in addition to North American comrades were seven representatives of European and Australasian sections of the international Spartacist tendency, as well as a delegation from the Los Angeles-based Red Flag Union, a group derived from the homosexual left which is engaged in fusion discussions with the SL. Preceding the three day party conference was a national conference of the SL's youth group, the Spartacus Youth League (SYL).

The survey of SL/SYL members present indicated that 30 percent had joined two years ago or less, while 59 percent had been members for from three to six years. The largest number was concentrated around the five-year mark, testimony to the period of extremely rapid recruitment out of the New Left milieu, including the antiwar, women's and black movements. Some 39 percent were women; 41 percent were union members.

Only 10 percent were non-party SYL members. This figure, taken in conjunction with a substantial rise in the average age of the SL/SYL since the 1974 conference, indicates that the slight membership contraction noted previously in *WV* reflects a certain tailing off of new recruitment by the youth organization reflecting the downturn in campus radicalism, while the party has continued to recruit professional revolutionary cadres out of the youth group. Thus the cohesiveness and maturity which helped make for a comfortable and productive conference reflect not only the revolutionary seriousness of the cadres but also the objective difficulties confronting communist militants in the present period of strangled labor struggles.

Politically, the Conference was in part a continuation of the work of the Active Workers Conference held in the Midwest some six months previously. Along with

supplemental resolutions prepared for the National Conference, the Memorandum presented to the Active Workers Conference constituted the main resolution defining the perspectives and tasks of the organization for the coming period. The documentary basis of the National Conference included the written material preceding the Midwest meeting as well as four more recent internal bulletins produced during the pre-Conference discussion period.

## **The Main Enemy Is at Home!**

At the Conference, the main National Reports stressed the increasingly aggressive attacks on democratic rights such as Supreme Court decisions undermining previous democratic gains (abortion, school busing, etc.), as well as the vicious anti-homosexual backlash spearheaded by Anita Bryant's reactionary fundamentalist campaign. The reporters underscored the centrality of the slogan, "The Main Enemy Is at Home," in opposition to the liberals and New Leftist residues who refurbish U.S. imperialism's "democratic" pretensions by seeking to associate their sectoralist reform demands with Carter's fundamentally anti-Soviet "human rights" rhetoric. The prospects for substantial revolutionary regroupments were noted as quite bleak as the ostensibly revolutionary organizations overwhelmingly pursue a rightist course.

The international report and the fraternal greetings from the Trotskistische Liga Deutschlands, Ligue Trotskyste de France, Spartacist League of Australia and New Zealand and Trotskyist League of Canada testified to the international Spartacist tendency's continuing consolidation as the programmatically united Trotskyist alternative to the United Secretariat rotten bloc. The greetings from the Red Flag Union delegation were grounds for continued optimism about the prospect of a deep and principled fusion between these comrades and the SL.

One session of the conference agenda was devoted to commission meetings under the auspices of the Trade Union Commission, financial department of the Central Office and the legal defense commission. Virtually every other available time slot, including meal breaks, was also utilized for additional commissions, such as press, archives, RFU fusion and Central Committee slate.

The hyperconcentration of important political work into a few agenda sessions was the result of a decision by the outgoing leadership to focus this National Conference overwhelmingly on one subject: the black question. This discussion had been painstakingly prepared through the circulation of roughly a dozen written documents as well as substantial local discussions during the pre-Conference period. At the Conference, eight reporters were given presentation and summary time. More than sixty comrades spoke from the floor. The lengthy and lively discussion reflected the comrades' recognition of the importance of this question to the continuing transformation of the Spartacist League into the nucleus of the vanguard party.

That such a discussion was able to take place at this Conference reflects the organization's acquisition, for the first time since the rise of black nationalism

in the late 1960, of a significant layer of committed black members, some with several years of experience in the party. The priority accorded to this discussion indicated not only a recognition of the importance of the development of black Trotskyist cadre and leaders, but also the party's determination to concentrate the deliberations of its highest body around areas of unclarity and/or differences within the organization.

## **Lumpenism vs. Communist Morality**

The original precipitant of the discussion was a manifestation of some softness on the part of many of the black comrades toward modes of functioning and attitudes characteristic of a lumpenproletarian existence. Beneath a debate over whether the term "lumpen" refers only to hardened criminal elements or can be applied to a broader stratum of the chronically unemployed lay differing estimations of the potential revolutionary role of lumpenized black ghetto youth.

A document submitted to the pre-Conference discussion and adopted by the Conference delegates explained:

"Black criminals are drawn from a broad pool of poor ghetto youth, a social fact which conditions the latter's activities and attitudes. If George Jackson's assertion that all black men over the age of 18 expect to go to prison is an overstatement, it nonetheless expresses a certain reality. Not many black youth living on welfare become professional thieves, but a significant number have robbed stores at one time or another. For most welfare does not provide even a minimal standard of living unless it is supplemented by some form of "hustle." Few ghetto youth will become pimps or pushers, but—as the popularity of black exploitation movies attests—many aspire to those roles which seem like an easy way out of poverty and social degradation. Similar social attitudes were common among immigrant ethnic minorities before WWII. Al Capone was a hero figure for many second-generation Italian youth. An important point for this discussion is that it is common for poor black youth to regard pimping, pushing and committing violent crimes as a legitimate way of life and even as a form of protest against white racist society.

"Except for the incorrigible, hardened, anti-social criminals, we are not hostile toward the lumpenized population. On the contrary, to narrow the term 'lumpen' to these hardened criminal types is to deny the brutal effects of racial oppression on a whole section of black youth who have no future in the economic process under capitalism. For them there is no escape from their grinding poverty under capitalism unless they turn to crime, and therefore they are forced to share many of the values of hardened criminals. We on the other hand, must face this reality squarely if we are to be the best defenders of the rights of the black poor and the best fighters against

conditions which are wasting a whole generation of black youth. For example, when the UAW bureaucracy sought to organize vigilantism against street gangs in Detroit, we resolutely opposed this action, and also demanded an immediate end to Mayor Young's curfew (see 'Cops, Mayor Push "Anti-Crime" Hysteria in Detroit," *WV* No. 127). However, the struggle to forge a communist-led black transitional organization requires an implacable struggle against lumpen activities and attitudes, particularly promiscuous violence. Every organization which has seriously attempted to affect the ghetto—the Communist Party in the 1930's and '40's, the Black Muslims in their way and the Panthers at their best—has resolutely and ruthlessly combated lumpen lifestylism. . . .

"... as communist following in the ghetto (black transitional organization) cannot be built with petty thieves. It can only be built through a ruthless struggle against lumpen lifestylism and lumpen values, by an organized cadre with authority among the black masses who are exemplars of communist morality."

The conference also endorsed the line of the article "Fear and Violence in NYC" (*WV* No. 147, 4 March 1977). The SL's hostility to hustlerist attitudes, inimical to communist consciousness and disciplined functioning, contrasts sharply with the patronizing approach of other avowedly leftist organizations, most notably the Workers League and International Socialists. Unlike these fake-lefts, who orient toward transient recruitment of footloose minority-group youth on a minimum program to provide the appearance of a "mass base," the SL aims at the creation of a hardened cadre of committed black Trotskyists who can become proletarian leaders. These comrades must be prepared to lead white workers as well as blacks, to lead within the party as well as among the masses.

## **Toward a Black Transitional Organization**

Unlike the classic Debsian approach that "Socialism has nothing special to offer the Negroes," the program of the SL recognizes that the special oppression of blacks under capitalism means that black workers will play a vanguard role among the most militant fighters for socialist revolution. "Black and white unite and fight" can be realized only on the basis of a militant, broad attack against capitalism, including a firm commitment to struggle against the special oppression of ghettoized minorities. Our perspective of revolutionary integrationism means the mobilization of the union movement to fight for equality, e.g., the formation of black/labor defense of black schoolchildren against the segregationist anti-busing backlash. The Debsian outlook at bottom reflects the pressure of the "labor aristocracy," whereas the communist based upon a proletarian core—seeks to become the "tribune of the people," the champion of all the oppressed.

The special oppression of blacks demands a struggle by the communist vanguard against "labor aristocratic" parochialism, chauvinist attitudes and backward

consciousness institutionalized in the pro-capitalist labor bureaucracy. And it demands special forms of organization as well, a black transitional organization under communist political leadership. While insisting that only the working class organized at the point of production has the social power to effect revolutionary change, the party involves itself in every significant social struggle, posing a class axis to lead partial struggles in a revolutionary direction.

Our program toward the doubly oppressed ghetto masses is not one of social welfare schemes, but rather of working-class struggle against lumpenization of the black population. Our perspective is counterposed to that of the ghetto-oriented black radical groups, such as the Panthers, whose program centers around minimal demands for slightly improving the conditions of the lumpenproletariat and defending them against victimization. While struggles against racist frame-ups and police brutality, around welfare and rent and community health care, are supportable, they are not the main focus of our program, which aims at delumpenizing the lumpenproletariat through jobs and educational opportunities. Struggles for a shorter workweek, for massive government public works at union wages, for free higher education with stipend, for union-controlled training programs cannot be conducted essentially from a ghetto base, but require the mobilization of the social power of the workers movement. Lumpenization is not only the most vicious oppression to which blacks are subjected. It constitutes also a real danger to the future existence of black masses. Racism is so central to American political reaction that black lumpens—in contrast to the lumpenproletariat in ethnically homogeneous societies—cannot become the shock troops of an American fascist movement. But a black population which is of no economic use to the ruling class stands doubly defenseless against a fascist onslaught. The only defense of these “wretched of the earth” resides in a class-conscious proletariat. The unionized black worker, who frequently has a mother on welfare and a friend in prison, is the living bridge to and necessary leader of the ghetto masses.

## **Lumpen Radicalism**

During the heyday of the New Left, all shades of radical opinion tended to view ghetto youth as the most politically advanced section of American society, as “natural revolutionaries.” Derived from that period of left-wing upsurge, a section of the SL membership, including many of the black comrades, has tended to carry over that attitude. The alienation of young blacks from aspects of capitalist ideology will be an important factor in their disproportionate representation in any radical upsurge. But spontaneous ghetto radicalism has sharp ideological limitations as well as material ones. As another document submitted to the pre-Conference discussion and adopted by the Conference delegates explained:

“Many of the decisive ideological attitudes which bind white workers to the American bourgeois order are necessarily much weaker among blacks of all social classes. Great American chauvinism, closely identified with white Anglo-Saxon supremacy, is certainly weaker

in black ghettos than in white working-class suburbs. For obvious reasons, blacks are far more disposed to sympathize with the struggles of colonial peoples against the Western imperialist powers, including the U.S. This attitude can produce among blacks a broad-based tolerance for ‘communism’ when associated with national liberation struggles (e.g. Cuba, Vietnam). Muhammad Ali’s famous remark, ‘the Viet Cong never did me any harm,’ expressed the attitude of a large fraction of black draft-age youth.

“Blacks are naturally less prone to illusions about the democratic, class neutral character of the state apparatus. Ghetto high school students hate cops in a way few white workers do. . . .

“As victims of racist oppression by a white ruling class, black lumpens easily accept some of the negative conditions for communist consciousness. They are comparatively freer from chauvinist and bourgeois-democratic illusions in the American state than are white workers at the present time.

“However, lumpenized black youth lack those positive elements of communist consciousness derived from participation in the labor process and organized workers movement. . . .

“... the black lumpenproletariat (like its counterpart in other countries) is alienated from and potentially hostile to the organized working class, which it views as a socially privileged group; this view is strengthened by the fact that the top trade-union leadership (though not the middle-level) is overwhelmingly white. Black lumpen hostility to the working class (black as well as white) can find a *political* expression. If black lumpens cannot be won to fascist bonapartism, they can be won to bourgeois *liberal* union-busting on a populist-leveling program. Sonny Carson’s actions on behalf of Lindsay in the 1968 NYC teachers’ strike and Baraka’s on behalf of Gibson in the 1971 Newark teachers’ strike conform to one of the central elements of classic fascism—the mobilization of lumpen violence against the workers movement in the name of plebeian-nationalist ideology.

“The political aspirations of the lumpenproletariat can express themselves in forms other than fascism. Lumpen radicalism can also take an ostensibly revolutionary form, posing as a left-wing alternative to Marxian proletarian socialism. In *The ABC of Communism*, Bukharin and Preobrazhensky characterize anarchism, with its hostility to all social authority and emphasis on the leveling redistribution of consumption, as ‘lumpenproletarian socialism’ . . .”

## **“You Can’t Lead a Party You Don’t Trust”**

The deforming effects of lumpen existence are far from solely ideological. The observation that “being determines consciousness” is true not only in the mass but among subjectively revolutionary elements. The communist vanguard, defined by its commonality of program, must exert its conscious will to transform its lumpen-derived members into disciplined Leninist cadres. Subjectively revolutionary militants recruited out of a lumpen background must break from a lumpen proletarian economic existence and reject all vestiges of lumpen lifestylism. Only on the basis of a rough equality between comrades—in living standards, educational skills, etc.—can a truly communist cadre be forged, free from servility, patronizing and pretense.

A break from lumpen existence requires a change in being and in consciousness. A disciplined black communist cadre is forged by transcending a previous experience characterized by degradation and manipulation. The fake-left organizations and their front groups (e.g., the International Socialists’ “Red Ride”) recruit politically raw minority-group youth who sit on the sidelines of the party, passively accepting the dictates of the leadership or suspiciously sniping at the program with guerrilla-warfare methods which can only becloud the issues and corrode the debates. We want to cohere a black cadre component, fully integrated into the leadership of our party as into the ranks. The National Conference, where many black comrades took an active role in the documentary preparation and in the debates, evidenced an increased understanding on the part of the black comrades of their political responsibility to their party.

Especially in this period of relative “labor peace,” a program based on the insistence that the center of gravity of social struggle must reside in the racially integrated workers movement may be seen as abstract. Impulses to elevate work among black ghetto youth to a strategic substitute for a labor orientation, fueled by impatience, can reinforce young black militants’ subjective identification with the sufferings of their “brothers” outside the organization. But trans-class black solidarity, understandable as the spontaneous response of the black masses to their most palpable oppression, can have no place inside the ranks of an authentic communist vanguard. The sectoralist consciousness induced by capitalist society’s divisive inequities is directly counterposed to communist consciousness, which from a core of intransigent programmatic unity seeks to extend its tendrils into every layer of the exploited and oppressed.

The discussion on the black question at the Spartacist League’s Fifth National Conference marked an important step in the still incomplete and reversible process of cohering a black cadre component of the Trotskyist vanguard nucleus. Upon this vital process hinges the SL’s ability to root itself among the advanced layers of the proletariat, particularly the black workers, a key future motor force for socialist revolution.