

MB5R: What Strategy for Black Liberation? Trotskyism vs. Black Nationalism

Key documents and articles 1955-1978

Spartacist League (U.S.)

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Preface to Revised Edition

Any organization which claims a revolutionary perspective for the United States must confront the *special oppression* of black people—the forced segregation of blacks at the bottom of capitalist society and the poisonous racism which divides the working class and cripples its struggles. There will be no social revolution in this country without the united struggle of black and white workers led by their multiracial vanguard party. Moreover, there is no other road to eliminating the special oppression of black people than the victorious conquest of power by the U.S. proletariat.

Against the anti-Marxist theories which posit the existence of a black “nation” in the U.S. to justify some variant of petty-bourgeois black nationalism, the Spartacist League holds that U.S. black people constitute an *oppressed race-color caste*. Against black nationalists and their vicarious supporters on the left who claim an “independent” separatist road to black liberation, we hold that black liberation is inseparable from the proletarian class struggle, although requiring *special modes* of struggle.

Marxist Bulletin No. 5 (Revised) contains selected documents on the black question from the perspective of Trotskyism, the revolutionary Marxism of our time. This perspective was defined in political combat against the Socialist Workers Party’s conscious revision of Trotskyism during its centrist (and then reformist) degeneration, and against black nationalism as a petty-bourgeois radical current predominant on the left and among black activists in the 1960’s.

As originally produced in 1964, *MB* No. 5 consisted solely of “The Materialist Conception of the Negro Question” by R.S. Fraser (reprinted from *SWP Discussion Bulletin* A-30, August 1955). We are now reissuing *MB* No. 5 in much expanded form, including articles from the Spartacist League’s public press as well as two earlier documents from our formative period as the Revolutionary Tendency of the SWP. Readers of this bulletin are also referred to “Black and

Red—Class Struggle Road to Negro Freedom.” Adopted by the SL founding conference in September 1966, this document is reprinted in *MB* No. 9, “Basic Documents of the Spartacist League,” Part I.

The Bankruptcy of Black Nationalism

The documents of *MB* No. 5R span the important period from the rise of the civil rights movement through the dissipation of the black nationalist movement. In 1978, a decade after the height of 1960’s black nationalism, it is obvious that what was touted as a “new vanguard” was an episodic petty-bourgeois current. In its residual forms black nationalism occupies the corners of a declining number of academic institutions or has been absorbed into urban ghetto “street culture.” More insidiously, CORE has become a supporter of Idi Amin and the U.S./South Africa intervention in Angola; the Black Panthers have found their way to the Democratic Party; and Eldridge Cleaver has given himself over to the most repulsive sort of “born again” imperialist hucksterism. The 1971 Black Political Convention, much heralded by the SWP, ushered in nothing except perhaps the Democratic Party’s Black Caucus. Most of yesterday’s leftist cheerleaders of black nationalism are silent on the results of their patronizing tailism: a generation of black activists demoralized and squandered or corrupted and bought off.

There is no more telling demonstration of the bankruptcy of black nationalism than the utter absence of a black nationalist response to the recent assaults on the partial but hard-won gains of the civil rights movement. There is no black nationalist mobilization against the racist mobs that attack black school children, or against the increasingly brazen activities of fascist groups. Last year a public Nazi “bookstore” was set up in the middle of Detroit, once the national center of many black nationalist groups, and closed down only by a long, legalistic eviction battle. There has been no black nationalist outcry against the intensifying poverty of the black masses, the catastrophic deterioration of the “inner cities,” the escalating unemployment especially among black youth, the growing wage differential between black and white workers. There does not now exist a single significant black nationalist organization which is not either a religious cult or a hireling of the domestic analogues of the CIA, with the sole exception of the openly reformist Panthers.

But if the black nationalism of the 1960’s has waned, it has not been politically defeated. A widespread black nationalist mood continues to exist especially among black youth. While broad sections of the black population presently retain some loyalty to the Democratic Party as the “lesser evil” (or are simply alienated from politics), given the pervasive racism of American society and the absence of a mass proletarian class-struggle *alternative* an upturn in significant social struggle among blacks will likely regenerate active identification with black separatist ideology, especially among ghettoized youth. Thus it is not only in the interests of the historical record that we republish these documents, but because the final reckoning with black nationalism is still on the agenda.

American black nationalism was for a time the sharpest *sectoralist* challenge to the Leninist principle of a centralized vanguard party. This series of documents constitutes a reaffirmation of the need for a Leninist party as the “tribune of the people,” the embodiment of the proletarian program which fights on behalf of all the oppressed.

Trotsky on U.S. Blacks

Rivaling the cynicism of the Communist Party’s continued references to Lenin, the SWP has sought to make use of the authority of Trotsky to buttress its capitulation to black nationalism. It has collected fragmentary discussions with Trotsky during the 1930’s in a pamphlet mistitled “Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism.” In these discussions, Trotsky demonstrated a proper concern that American revolutionists, with their correct concentration on building a base in the U.S. trade-union movement, not fall victim to the prejudices of the relatively better off white workers and become insensitive to black oppression.

But the discussions indicate that Trotsky was somewhat ill informed about the reality of racial oppression in the U.S., as demonstrated by his question about a persisting separate black language. His tentative position was that American blacks constituted an embryonic nation analogous to the more backward nations of tsarist Russia, and that it was therefore the responsibility of revolutionists to struggle for their right to self-determination.

This analysis of the American black question had some validity for an earlier period, when black people were overwhelmingly concentrated in the South and on the land. It is conceivable that sixty or seventy years ago, before the great migrations of two world wars, a social catastrophe could have walled off black people from the rest of American society and compacted a black nation in the “black belt” of the South. But the mechanization of southern agriculture and the labor needs of two imperialist wars drove blacks into urban ghettos scattered across the U.S., thereby completely undermining the material foundations for black nationhood.

Trotsky never contemplated any kind of support for black *nationalism* and would have been outraged by the *Bundist* programmatic conclusions (e.g., dual vanguardism, “community control”) the SWP pretends to draw from his hypothesis. To illustrate the fantastical nature of the “black belt” theories and the counterposition between defense of self-determination and support to nationalist ideology, we have included in this volume “The Secret War Between Brother Klonsky and Stalin.” This polemic, originally produced for the June 1969 SDS convention, was directed against New Left/ Maoist Mike Klonsky’s effort to resurrect the long-discredited Third Period Stalinist slogan of “self-determination for the black belt.”

SWP: From Theoretical Weakness to Reformism

Trotsky's misreading of the U.S. black question as a national question was incorporated as a theoretical weakness into the SWP's program. But so long as the SWP remained a revolutionary party, the thrust of its propaganda and work was to fight to break down the barriers of Jim Crow and to pose *revolutionary integration*, the assimilation of black people into an egalitarian socialist society.

Whatever its deficiencies (discussed in the original preface to *MB* No. 5, reprinted here) Fraser's "The Materialist Conception of the Negro Question" was an early attempt to correct the inconsistencies of the SWP's position. It was an able theoretical defense of the view that the black question was one of racial, not national, oppression mandating a program of revolutionary integration as the road to black liberation.

The SWP's earlier theoretical weakness on the black question was in itself not decisive so long as the party was imbued with a revolutionary purpose. When the SWP began to lose that at the end of the 1950's, no *theory* of the black struggle, separatist or integrationist, could save it from an opportunist course. With the upsurge of mass civil rights struggle, the SWP's theoretical disorientation became a point of departure for opportunist accommodation, first to the liberal, pacifistic leadership of the civil rights movement and later to black nationalism and Bundist-type dual vanguardism. The Dobbs/Hansen majority saw the SWP as a "white party" which should not seek to win communist leadership within the black struggle. Instead it transformed itself into a cheering squad for whatever black leaders were most popular at the time.

One of the central issues in the formation of the Revolutionary Tendency in the SWP was the black question. The *abstentionist* opportunism of the SWP, refusing to intervene to challenge the dominance of pacifism and liberalism over the developing civil rights movement, helped pave the way for the more militant wing of the movement to make a hard turn toward black nationalism, falsely identifying multiracial unity with subservience to the liberal bourgeoisie. Included in this bulletin are two documents from the Revolutionary Tendency's struggle to reverse the SWP's abdication of revolutionary leadership: "For Black Trotskyism" (reprinted from *SWP Discussion Bulletin*, Vol. 24, No. 30, July 1963) and "The Negro Struggle and the Crisis of Leadership" (reprinted from *YSA Discussion Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 5, August 1963). The latter document used a formulation on preferential hiring which did not anticipate government-engineered schemes to exploit preferential hiring for union-busting. To such schemes we counterpose preferential recruitment of minority workers by the unions themselves within the context of the fight for the closed shop and the union hiring hall. The call for critical support to "independent Negro candidates. . . who run on principled programs of civil rights" referred to candidates who ran against the capitalist parties. Such breakaways from the Democratic Party as the Lowndes County Black Panther Party in 1964-65 indicate the historically specific opportunities for the intervention of revolutionists through the tactic of critical

support in order to present an independent proletarian-centered perspective.

In the service of hardened reformist appetite, the SWP's earlier muddled theory of black separatism gave way to a hard *anti*-proletarian line pushing poisonous nationalist rhetoric in place of a perspective for united class struggle against racial oppression. Shouting about "community control," the SWP played the role of strikebreaker in the 1968 New York City teachers' strike and adopted "affirmative action"—the capitalist government's scheme for union-busting under the guise of rectifying racial discrimination—as its program.

"Black Power" and Dual Vanguardism

As the liberal-pacifist civil rights movement inevitably began to falter, many young activists turned to the ideology of black nationalism. This change was signaled by the adoption in 1966 of the "Black Power" slogan by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), then the most militant civil rights organization. We have included in this bulletin two articles from 1966, "Black Power and the Fascists" and "Black Power—Class Power," which addressed the contradictory character of the slogan. "Black Power" expressed the desire to organize blacks independently of all white political parties, based on the despairing assumption that most whites were racist and could play no revolutionary role; at best, some whites could be organized in support auxiliaries to the black movement. But by posing the question of social power in contrast to the "moral witness" liberalism of King, "Black Power" could also be filled with a revolutionary working-class content.

But due in large measure to the abstentionist tailism of the bulk of the "old left," the "Black Power" left wing of the civil rights movement never found the bridge to the program of *workers power*. When the Stokely Carmichael leadership of SNCC raised the "Black Power" slogan, it was used to justify the exclusion of whites from the then-integrated organization.

Black separatism also entailed a subjectivist theory of social oppression, seen in large part as subjective dependence on members of the oppressor (white) population. The creation of exclusionist organizations was seen as a key mechanism for overcoming oppression, independent of whether the material conditions of oppression were altered. Black nationalist exclusionism became a major tenet of New Left politics, the model for other radical nationalist groupings such as the Puerto Rican Young Lords and later for the women's liberation movement and its offshoot, gay liberation.

The Spartacist League stands on the program and tactics of Lenin/Trotsky's Comintern. Basing itself on the experience of the Russian Revolution and the Bolsheviks' struggle against the Jewish Bund and the Austro-Marxists, the Comintern counterposed to multi-vanguardism the *transitional organization*, a mass organization of a specially oppressed stratum (e.g., women, youth, national and racial minorities) expressing both its special needs and its relationship to the broader struggle for proletarian power. Neither a substitute for nor an

opponent of the vanguard party, it is linked to the party both programmatically and through winning over its most conscious cadres to party membership.

“Community Control”

Unable to find the road to a proletarian perspective, many black militants embraced the slogan of “community control,” a route to “Great Society” poverty programs and Democratic Party machine politics. In the aftermath of the mid-1960’s ghetto rebellions, black management of the ghetto became a profitable career for articulate black activists. “Black Power” became the rhetoric for the application to the ghetto of conventional American ethnic politics whereby the petty-bourgeoisie of an oppressed ethnic group pressures the ruling class to allow it greater participation in the government bureaucracy. “Straw boss” exploitation of black nationalism became popular among aspiring black mayors, ghetto police chiefs, welfare administrators and school principals. The ghetto is treated as a permanently depressed fiefdom of these politicians, who have a stake in the continued segregation of black people just as Zionists have always had a stake in anti-Semitism to justify an Israeli garrison state.

The explicitly anti-working-class character of “community control” was dramatized by the 1968 New York teachers’ strike, where almost the entire left and liberal establishment lined up behind the Ford Foundation-financed “community control” confrontation with the United Federation of Teachers. The Spartacist League was unique in defending the UFT strike without blunting its denunciation of the Shanker bureaucracy’s adaptation to racism and its appeals to the cops against ghetto residents. The correctness of the SL’s principled stand was reconfirmed in the 1971 Newark teachers’ strike, when once again a liberal mayor, joined by black nationalist demagogue Imamu Baraka (Leroi Jones), attempted to exploit “community control” rhetoric to break the teachers’ union. But unlike the predominantly white UFT, the Newark Teachers Union—30 percent black and with a black woman as its president—could not be successfully baited as a “racist” union and was able to enlist broader support for its class struggle.

The Black Panthers

During the height of black nationalism, the one organization which struggled, in a contradictory way, to remain independent of the bourgeois establishment was the Black Panther Party. The Panthers’ unique position reflected not only their militant nationalism but also their partial thrust toward a rudimentary *class* opposition to racist, capitalist America. As a consequence they were the only organization of militant black struggle to acquire a national following, attracting many of the most serious black radicals. Their scathing attack upon reactionary black cultural nationalism caused the SWP to attack them *from the right* for not being nationalist enough. In contrast, the SL in its polemics with the Panthers sought to provide the bridge between the Panthers’ independence of (and at times adventurist opposition to) the bourgeois state and the program of proletarian

revolution against that state. Because they were black and militant the Panthers were frequent victims of bourgeois repression. Where it was not precluded by the Panthers' simultaneously sectarian and opportunist defense policies, the SL sought to aggressively intervene in united front defense work on the Panthers' behalf.

"Rise and Fall of the Panthers: End of the Black Power Era" originally appeared in *Workers Vanguard* in January 1972. It analyzed the 1970-71 Panther split and its impact on the U.S. left. Since the article was written, the Cleaver wing of the split has disappeared as an organized grouping, though the politics associated with that tendency—"Third World Marxism-Leninism" justifying small-group armed confrontation with the state—continued to lead a semi-underground existence for a period in such sects as the Black Liberation Army. The predicted reformist degeneration of the Newton wing occurred at an exceedingly rapid pace, highlighted by Bobby Seale's May 1973 campaign for mayor of Oakland as a Democrat. The Panthers have traveled the same path as their one-time opponents, the "porkchop" cultural nationalists, demonstrating once more that black nationalism leads logically to a remerger with ethnic Democratic Party machine politics or to the self-defeating terrorism of the isolated Black Liberation Army.

The Panther split, reflecting the collapse of the attempt to base a revolutionary struggle against black oppression upon black nationalist and lumpen proletarian ideology, signaled the end of old New Leftism among black radicals. Little has emerged in its wake, although a small section of the black movement, in line with a "workerist" turn on the part of most of the U.S. left, sought to enter the working class without abandoning a nationalist approach. "The Rise and Fall of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," written in January 1974, traces the impulses which led such groups as the Dodge Revolutionary Workers Movement (DRUM) and the Black Workers Congress to seek to develop a program based on the contradictory elements of trade-union struggle and black nationalist ideology.

Black Tradition?

An important weakness of the Fraser document, at variance with its main thrust, is treating blacks as an unconscious vanguard with a continuous political expression tending toward revolutionary integrationism. This analytical error is more serious in its effect today than when the document was written in 1955, since it overlaps the black nationalist view that it is the unique revolutionary tradition of black people which determines their present capacity to struggle. In fact, black history is not one of continuous revolt. As radical academic Eugene Genovese has stressed, particularly in his polemics with Stalinist historian Herbert Aptheker (e.g., in *Studies on the Left*, November-December 1966), the objective character of the oppressive chattel system in the U.S. prevented American blacks from conducting the massive uprisings seen in the Caribbean and northeast Brazil. The closure of the slave trade in 1808 and the consequent Americanization of slave society, as well as the military correlation of forces in the American South,

constituted objective conditions making a successful independent slave rebellion close to impossible.

The widespread excitement generated by the 1977 television production of Alex Haley's *Roots* demonstrated more than simply a continuing concern among blacks for "black history." It showed that the black cultural myth has taken its place in the service of liberalism. Therefore we are including in this bulletin "Behind the 'Roots' Craze," originally published in March 1977.

The cultural nationalist concept of "black tradition" is idealist in that it is abstracted from the actual mechanisms and institutions which transmit knowledge and habits of the past to the present generation (the church, educational system, press, political parties, the labor movement). For example, as the civil rights movement showed, even during periods of militant struggle many blacks remained chained to the church, which was for generations the only allowed form of black social organization. It is significant that nearly every important black mass leader has been deeply religious or church-centered. But while the church remains among the most pervasive and effective organizers of the black masses, the religiosity of Nat Turner or Denmark Vesey is hardly comparable to the reactionary godliness of M.L. King.

The Proletarian Road to Black Freedom

Since Roosevelt's New Deal and the mass migrations of blacks into the cities, insofar as black people have not been excluded from the American political process they have been tied to the Democratic Party. In large part due to opportunist betrayal by the American Communist Party, Roosevelt was able to transform the Democrats into a rejuvenated "people's party" embracing Stalinists at one end and Dixiecrats at the other. Even after decades of Democratic administrations have brought nothing but bloody imperialist wars and token amelioration of racial discrimination combined with real deterioration of black living standards, black people still vote Democratic. Their resistance to the assault upon the limited gains of the civil rights movement is channeled into the dead end of liberal Democratic Party politics by black Democrats like Coleman Young and Ron Dellums who cohabit in the same party with George Wallace and "ethnic purity" Carter. It is as much a sign of the times as of the SWP's own degeneration that this champion of black separatism today makes the focal point of its black work the liberal integrationist NAACP.

For all its dislocation and hardships, black urbanization has also meant black proletarianization. Black people are not only segregated at the bottom of U.S. society; they are also integrated into strategic sections of the industrial proletariat in whose hands lies the economic power to shatter this racist, capitalist system. With few exceptions, the black nationalists have willfully ignored this fact—indeed, they have generally posed the drive for black equality as an attack on the trade unions.

In turn, black hostility to the labor movement is the product of a union bu-

reaucracy which has been—at best—indifferent to the needs and aspirations of black people. With their reactionary politics and job-trusting policies, the labor lieutenants of capital have once again proven themselves the worst enemies of the workers they purport to lead, driving the potentially most militant sector of the proletariat into a posture of hostility to the unions which is a godsend to the union-busters. The labor fakers' only active interventions into the black struggle have been to channel struggle into Democratic Party liberalism, as occurred during the 1963 March on Washington.

Unlike chattel slavery, wage slavery has placed in the hands of black workers the objective conditions for successful revolt. But this revolt will be successful only if it takes as its target the system of class exploitation, the common enemy of black and white workers. The struggle to win black activists to a proletarian perspective is intimately linked to the fight for a new, multiracial class-struggle leadership of organized labor which can transform the trade unions into a key weapon in the battle against racial oppression. Such a leadership must break the grip of the Democratic Party upon both organized labor and the black masses through the fight for working-class political independence. As black workers, the most combative element within the U.S. working class, are won to the cause and party of proletarian revolution, they will be in the front ranks of this class-struggle leadership. And it will be these black proletarian fighters who will write the finest pages of “black history”—the struggle to smash racist, imperialist America and open the road to real freedom for all mankind.

—Spartacist League/U.S., September 1978

Preface to the First Edition

We are pleased to reprint the present article in accordance with the *Marxist Bulletin's* general policy of publishing educational or information material of interest to sections of the Marxist movement in the United States and internationally, to militants in the Negro and working class struggles, and to radical student youth.

Comrade Fraser's “For the Materialist Conception of the Negro Question” is an early, able, and brief polemical product of the Socialist Workers Party minority on the Negro Question which has for some years stood for the position of *Revolutionary Integration*. The document presents a sharp refutation of the idea that *Black Nationalism*, in any of its variants, is a solution to the American Negro struggle under the specific economic and historical conditions in which this struggle takes place.

In recent years the important theoretical discussion among Marxian revolutionists (see “Documents on the Negro Struggles” on the fundamental character of the Negro Question has been accompanied by the more immediate problem of struggle against revisionism. The leadership of the Socialist Workers Party in the course of its degeneration began to use the erroneous Black Nationalist position as a way of rationalizing its own loss of a working class revolutionary perspective

and consequent platonic attitude toward the need to create a unified Leninist vanguard party.

At the 1963 SWP National Convention our caucus expressed the opinion of the Revolutionary Tendency on these questions in two ways. Our delegates voted for the 1963 resolution, "Revolutionary Integration," springing from the same current of opinion which produced the document we are now reprinting and advanced by Richard Kirk against the nationalist position of the party leadership. Our representatives voted in favor of the Kirk resolution despite a number of important criticisms or reservations held about this later document.

Supplementing the vote of our tendency delegation, we submitted to the convention secretary a "Statement in Voting on the Negro Question" as follows:

"Our support to *the basic line* of the 1963 Kirk resolution, 'Revolutionary Integration,' is centered upon the following propositions:

- I) The Negro people are not a nation, rather they are an oppressed race-color caste, in the main comprising the most exploited layer of the American working class. From this condition the consequence has come that the Negro struggle for freedom has had, historically, the aim of integration into an equalitarian society.
- II) Our minority is most concerned with the political conclusions stemming from the theoretical failures of the Political Committee draft, 'Freedom Now.' This concern found expression in the recent individual discussion article, 'Black Trotskyism.' The systematic abstentionism and the accompanying attitude of acquiescence which accepts as inevitable that 'ours is a white party' are most profound threats to the revolutionary capacity of the party on the American scene."

— 20 July 1963

Additionally, later that summer our supporters in the Young Socialist Alliance submitted to the Labor Day YSA Convention a draft resolution on civil rights, "The Negro Struggle and the Crisis of Leadership."

Possible objections to two points in Comrade Fraser's "For the Materialist Conception..." should be considered. On page 3 Fraser writes of "... the peculiar phenomenon of the Jews: a nation without a territory." The reader's attention should be directed to another view current within the Trotskyist movement, that presented by Abram Leon in his book, "The Jewish Question—A Marxist Interpretation." Leon defines the Jews *not* as a *nation without a territory* but as a "*people class*" indispensable to feudalism but without a secular basis within modern capitalism.

Fraser states on page 5 that in the United States during the period between the Revolutionary and Civil wars there was "a regime of dual power between

slave owners and capitalists.” This is simply a wrong formulation. Dual power in Marxist usage refers to the inevitably brief circumstance of two separate state powers based upon hostile classes of the same nation struggling to vanquish one another, not a conflict extending over decades within a single state—the situation to which Fraser refers.

— *Spartacist* Editorial Board June 1964

For the Materialist Conception of the Negro Struggle

by R. S. Fraser

—Reprinted from SWP *Discussion Bulletin* A-30, August 1955

1. Nationalism and the Negro Struggle

For a number of months both Comrade Breitman and myself have been working toward the opening of this discussion of the Negro question. Both, I believe, with the hope that we could enter it on common ground. But it is obvious that we cannot: we have a difference upon the fundamental question of the relationship between the Negro struggle in the United States and the struggle of oppressed nations, that is, the national question.

I cannot challenge Comrade Breitman’s authority to represent the tradition of the past period, for he has been the spokesman for the party on this question for most of the past fifteen years.

On the other hand I am opposed to the nationalist conception of the Negro question which is contained not only in Comrade Breitman’s article, “On the Negro Struggle, etc.” (September 1954), but is implicit in the resolution on the Negro question of the 1948 Convention.

The Negro question in the U.S. was first introduced into the radical movement as a subject worthy of special consideration during the early years of the Communist International. But it was introduced as an appendage to the colonial and national questions of Europe and Asia.

This is not its proper place. For the Negro question, while bearing the superficial similarity to the colonial and national questions is fundamentally different and requires an independent treatment. In the early congresses of the Communist International, American delegates presented points of view on the Negro question. Their speeches reveal the beginning of an attempt to differentiate this question from the main subject matter of the colonial and national questions.

This beginning did not realize any clear demarcation between these questions, and the Comintern in degeneration went backward in this as in all other respects. Under Stalin the subordination of the American Negro question to the national and colonial questions was crystallized.

It is the historical task of Trotskyism to tear the Negro question in the United States away from the national question and to establish it as an independent political problem, that it may be judged on its own merits, and its laws of development discovered.

This process was begun by the founding leaders of American Trotskyism as expressed in the position defended by Swabeck in 1933 in his discussions with Trotsky. It is this tradition which I defend rather than that expressed by Comrade Breitman.

2. The Question of Nationalism

The modern nation is exclusively a product of capitalism. It arose in Europe out of the atomization and dispersal of the productive forces which characterized feudalism.

Nations began to emerge with the growth of trade and formed the framework for the production and distribution of commodities on a capitalist basis.

Nationalism has a contradictory historical development in Europe. Trotsky elaborated this difference as the key to understanding the role of the national question in the Russian revolution. In the first place the nations of western Europe emerged in the unification of petty states around a commercial center. The problem of the bourgeois revolution was to achieve this national unification.

In eastern Europe, Russian nationalism appeared on the scene in the role of the oppressor of many small nations. The problem of national unification in the Russian revolution was the breakup of this oppressive system and to achieve the independence of the small nations.

These were the two basic expressions of the national question in Europe. But these two basic phases of national development, corresponding to different stages in the development of capitalism, each contain a multiplicity of forms and combinations of the two phases [as is] not uncommon.

The national question of Europe reveals problems such as the Scotch rebellions, wherein a nation never emerged; Holland in its revolutionary war against Spain; the peculiarity of the unification of Germany; the rise and breakup of the Austro-Hungarian empire; the revolutionary transformation of the Czarist empire into the USSR; and the many contradictory expressions of national consciousness which were revealed in the October revolution; and lastly, the peculiar phenomenon of the Jews: a nation without a territory.

But even these do not exhaust the national question, for it appears as one of the fundamental problems of the whole colonial revolution, and all the problems of national unification, and national independence, dispersal and unification, of the centrifugal and centripetal forces unleashed by the national questions, reappear in new and different forms.

And we have by no means seen everything. The African struggle, as it assumes its mature form will show us another fascinating and unique expression of the national struggle.

What constitutes the basis for nationalism? A people united by a system of commodity exchange, a language and culture expressing the needs of commodity exchange, a territory to contain these elements: all these are elements of nationalism. Which is fundamental to the concept of the nation?

Language is important but not decisive: the Ukraine was so Russified and the Ukrainian language so close to extinction that Luxemburg could refer contemptuously to it as a novelty of the intelligentsia. Yet this did not prevent Ukrainian nationalism, when awakened by the Bolsheviks, to play a decisive role in the Russian revolution, alongside the other nationalities.

It would be convenient to be able to fasten upon geography as a fundamental to nationalism: a common territory where in relative isolation a nation could develop. This has, indeed, been the condition for the existence of nations generally; still it would not satisfy the Jewish nation which existed for centuries without a territory.

The one quality which is common to all and cannot be dispensed with in consideration of any and all of the nations of Europe, of the colonial world—the one indispensable quality which they all possess, and without which none could exist; including the old nations and the new ones, the large and small, the advanced and the backward, the “classical” and the exceptional—is the quality of *their relation to a system of commodity production and circulation: its capacity to serve as a unit of commodity exchange.*

National oppression arises fundamentally out of the suppression of the right of a commodity to fulfill its normal economic function in the process of technological development and to produce and circulate commodities according to the normal laws of capitalist production.

This is at the foundation of the national oppression of every nation in Europe and the colonial world. This is the groundwork out of which national aspirations develop and from which national revolutions emerge. It is this fundamental economic relation of a people to the forces of production which creates the national question and determines the laws of motion of the national struggle. This is just as true of the cases of obscure nationalities who only achieved national consciousness after the October revolution as it was for the Netherlands, or France, or for Poland.

Comrade Breitman is thoughtful not to put words into my mouth. But I wish he were equally thoughtful in not attributing to me ideas which I think he has had every opportunity to know that I do not hold. For when he contends that I am thinking only of the classical examples of the national question, when I deny that the Negro question is a national question, he is very wrong.

The Negro question is not a national question because it lacks the fundamental

groundwork for the development of nationalism; an independent system of commodity exchange, or to be more precise, a mode of life which would make possible the emergence of such a system.

This differentiates the Negro question from the most obscure of all the European national questions, for at the root of each and every one of them is to be found this fundamental relation to the productive forces.

The Negro question is a racial question: a matter of discrimination because of skin color, and that's all.

Because of the fundamental economic problem which was inherent among the oppressed nations of eastern Europe, Lenin foresaw the revolutionary significance of the idea of the right of self-determination.

He applied this to the national question and to it alone. Women are a doubly exploited group in all society. But Lenin never applied the slogan of self-determination to the woman question. It would not make sense. And it doesn't make very much more sense when applied to the Negro question.

It would if the Negroes were a nation. Or the embryo of a "nation within a nation" or a precapitalist people living in an isolated territory which might become the framework for a national system of commodity exchange and capitalist production. Negroes, however, are not victims of national oppression but of racial discrimination. *The right of self-determination is not the question which is at stake in their struggle.* It is, however, fundamental to the national struggle.

Despite his protestation to the contrary, Comrade Breitman holds to a basically nationalist conception of the Negro struggle.

This is contrary to the fundamental course of the Negro struggle and a vital danger to the party. Comrade Breitman's conception of the unique quality of the Negro movement is explained by him on page 9. In comparison to the nationalist movements of Europe, Asia and Africa he says, "Fraser sees one similarity and many differences between them; we see many similarities and one big difference."

Of what does this one big difference consist? According to Comrade Breitman, the only difference between the movement of the Polish nationalists under Czarism and the American Negro today is that the Negro movement "thus far aims solely at acquiring enough force and momentum to break down the barriers that exclude Negroes from American society, showing few signs of aiming at national separatism."

Therefore, the only difference between the Poles and the Negroes is one of consciousness. But this proposition makes a theoretical shambles not only of the Negro question but of the national question too. According to this analysis, any especially oppressed group which expressed group solidarity is automatically a nation. Or an embryo of a nation. Or an embryo of a nation within a nation. This would apply equally to the women throughout the world and the untouchables of the caste system of India.

If we must ignore the fundamental economic differences in the oppression of the Polish nation and the Negro people, and conclude that the only difference between them is one of consciousness, then we have not only discarded Lenin's and Trotsky's theses on the national question, but we have completely departed from the materialist conception of history.

It is one thing for Trotsky to say that the fact that there are no cultural barriers between the Negro people and the rest of the residents of the U.S. would not be decisive if the Negroes should actually develop a movement of a separatist nature. But it is an altogether different matter for Breitman to assume that the fundamental economic and cultural conditions which form the groundwork of nationalism have no significance whatever in the consideration of the Negroes as a nation.

The basic error in Negro nationalism in the U.S. is the failure to deal with the material foundation of nationalism in general. This results in the conception that nationalism is only a matter of consciousness without material foundation. The other subordinate arguments which buttress the nationalism conception of the Negro question clearly demonstrate this error.

3. The Negro Struggle and the Russian Revolution

Comrade Breitman's point of view is most clearly revealed in the section of his article entitled "What Can Change Present Trends?"

He proposes that we consider seriously the variant that upon being awakened by the beginning of the proletarian revolution the Negroes will develop a new consciousness which will (or may) impel them along the path of a separatist struggle. He uses Trotsky as his authority both in his specific reference to this possibility in the published conversations of 1939 and also by reference to Trotsky's treatment of the problem of nationalities in the third volume of the *History of the Russian Revolution*.

The thesis of this trend of thought is as follows: In the Russian revolution a large number of important oppressed minorities were either so oppressed or so culturally backward that they had no national consciousness. Among some, the process of forced assimilation into the Great Russian imperial orbit was so overwhelming that it was inconceivable to them that they might aspire to be anything but servants of the Great Russian bureaucracy until the revolution opened their eyes to the possibility of self-determination.

Other minorities, such as the Ukrainians and many of the eastern nations, had been overcome by the Great Russians while they were a precapitalist tribal community. They never had become nations. History never afforded them the opportunity to develop a system of commodity production and distribution of their own. Because of the uneven tempo of capitalist development in eastern Europe they were prematurely swept into the entanglements of Russian imperialism before either the production, the consciousness, or the apparatus of nationalism

could develop.

Nevertheless, national self-determination was a fundamental condition of their liberation. In some cases this new-found national consciousness took form in the early stages of the revolution. But in others, it was so submerged by the national chauvinism of Great Russia that it was only after the revolution that a genuine nationalism asserted itself.

It is to these nations that we are referred by Comrade Breitman as a historical justification for his conception of the Negro question.

Comrade Breitman says, in effect: There is a sufficient element of identity between these peoples and the Negroes to warrant our using them as examples of what the direction of motion of the Negro struggle might be under revolutionary conditions.

Of course, if we are even to discuss such a possibility we would have to leave aside the fundamental difference between the American Negroes and these nations; that is, the relations of these peoples to the production and distribution of commodities, the type of cultural development which this function reflected, and the geographical homeland which they occupied.

Leaving aside these, we have the question of consciousness again. But in this respect, the Negroes have just as different a problem and history from these peoples as they have in every other respect.

We are dealing principally with those nationalities in the Czarist Empire to whom national consciousness came late. The characteristic of this group was that before the Russian revolution they had had little opportunity for unified struggle, and hence no means of arriving at a fundamental political tendency. That is why their desire for self-determination did not manifest itself in the pre-revolutionary period. In order to find out the ultimate goals for which they are struggling, an oppressed people must first go through a series of elementary struggles. After that they are in a position to go to another stage in which it is possible, under favorable conditions, for them to discover the historic road which truly corresponds to their economic, political, and social development and their relation to the rest of society. In this way the consciousness of the most oppressed nationalities of Czarism seemed to all but the Bolsheviks to be the consciousness of the dominant nation: Great Russia.

How badly they were mistaken was proved in the October revolution and afterward when each one of the suppressed tribes and nations of the Czarist Empire, under the stimulus of Lenin's program for self-determination for the oppressed minorities, found at last a national consciousness.

We are asked to adopt this perspective (or to "leave the door open" for it) for the Negroes in the U.S. The best that can be said for this request is that it would be unwise for us to grant it, as it is based upon superficial reasoning. The Negro movement in the United States is one of the oldest, most continuous and most experienced movements in the entire arena of the class struggle of the world.

What labor movement has even an episodic history before 1848? Practically, only the British. The American labor movement had no real beginning until after the Civil War. The history of a movement can be somewhat measured in the leaders which it produces. Who among us remembers an important American labor leader before William A. Sylvis? But we easily recall Vesey, Turner, Tubman and Douglass.

There were, of course, labor struggles during the pre-Civil War period. But they were dwarfed in importance beside the anti-slavery struggle, because the national question for the American people had not yet been solved. The revolution against Great Britain had established the independence of the U.S., but had produced a regime of dual power between the slave owners and capitalists, with the slave owners politically ascendant.

The whole future of the working class depended, not so much upon organizational achievements against the capitalists, as upon the solution to the question of the slave power ruling the land.

This is the fundamental reason for the belated character of the development of the stable labor movement in the U.S.

Immediately after the question of the slave power was settled, the modern labor movement arose. Although it required a little experience before it could settle upon stable forms, in a rapid succession, the National Labor Union, the Knights of Labor, the AF of L, the IWW arose. All powerful national labor organizations. It was only 20 years after the Civil War that the AF of L was founded.

It has been different for the Negro movement which has been in almost continuous existence as a genuine movement of national scope, definite objectives, and at many times embracing tremendous masses, since the days of the Nat Turner rebellion. Even before this turning point in the Negro struggle, heroes and episodes are neither few nor far between. The Negro people are the most highly organized section of the population of the country. They have had an infinite variety of experience in struggle, and are extremely conscious of their goals. These are not goals which have been prescribed for them by the ruling class, but on the contrary, the very opposite of everything the ruling class has tried to enforce. They are moreover the most politically advanced section of American society.

How in the name of common sense, much less of dialectical logic, can you propose that we seriously compare the Negroes to the oppressed tribes and obscure peasant nations of Czarist Russia, who never had ten years of continuous struggle, as compared with the centuries of continuous Negro struggle? Peoples who never had an opportunity to find out whether or not they had a basis for nationalism because of the overwhelming force of Great Russian assimilation, compared to the Negroes who have been given every opportunity to discover a basis for nationalism, precisely in forced segregation?

There are a number of historical reasons why the Negroes have never adopted a

nationalist perspective, and why the normal mode of struggle for them has been anti-separatist.

But first it should be understood that it is in keeping with the nature of the Negro movement to regard its history as continuous from the days of slavery. The Negro question appeared upon the scene as a class question: The Negroes were slaves. But alongside of this grew the race question: All slaves were Negroes and the slave was designated as inferior and subhuman. This was the origin of the Negro question.

The abolition of slavery destroyed the property relations of the chattel slave system. But the plantation system survived, fitting the social relations of slavery to capitalist property relations.

Because of these unsolved problems left over from the second American revolution, the Negroes still struggle against the social relations which were in effect a hundred and fifty and more years ago.

The modern Negro movement dates roughly from the era of the cotton gin—approximately 1800. The first answer of the Negroes to the intensification of labor brought on by the extension of the cotton acreage was a series of local and regional revolts.

The slaves learned in these struggles that the slave owners were not merely individual lords of the cotton, but were also enthroned on the high seats of the nation's political capital. They had all the laws, police forces, and the armed might of the country at their disposal.

At the same time the Northern capitalists began to feel the domination of the slave power to be too restricting upon their enterprises. The farmers began to feel the pressure of slave labor and the plantation system. These three social forces, the slaves, and the capitalists and the farmers, had in their hands the key to the whole future of the United States as a nation.

Thus the Negroes were thrust into the center of a great national struggle against the slave power. This was the only road by which any assurance of victory was possible.

Because of their position as the most exploited section of the population, each succeeding vital movement of the masses has found the Negroes in a central and advanced position in great interracial struggles against capitalist exploitation. This was true in the Reconstruction, the Radical Populist movement of the South, and finally in the modern labor movement.

4. Negro Culture and Nationalism

The factor of segregation has had the effect of providing one of the potential elements of nationalism. The segregated life of Negro slaves produced a Negro culture a hundred years ago. But language, custom, ideology and culture generally

do not have an inherent logic of development. They express the socio-economic forces which bring them into being.

In the examination of Negro culture we are forced to examine first the course of development of Negro life in general. The decisive factor in the development of Negro life during the past century derived from their class position in the Civil War. In the position of that class whose liberation was at stake, as the U.S. confronted slavery, the Negroes were thrust into a central and commanding position in the struggle against the slave power which culminated in the Civil War and Reconstruction.

It was the slaves who built abolitionism, gave it ideological leadership, and a mass body of support. It was their actions which broke up the class peace between the privileged classes of the North and South. It was their policy which won the Civil War.

These factors expressed the breaking out of the Negro question from the confining limits of a narrow, provincial, local or regional question into the arena of the great national struggles of the American people. The Negroes' culture shared the same fate as did their political economy. Instead of turning further inward upon itself until a completely new and independent language and culture would emerge, the Negro culture assimilated with the national and became the greatest single factor in modifying the basic Anglo-Saxon culture of the United States.

These are expressions of the historical law of mutual assimilation between Negro and white in the United States. The social custom and political edict of segregation expresses race relations in this country. Forced assimilation is the essential expression of national relations in eastern Europe. Mutual assimilation, in defiance of segregation expresses the Negro struggle, just as profoundly as the will to self-determination expresses the struggle of the oppressed nations of eastern Europe.

It appears that the matter of Negro national consciousness, which may occur as the result of the revolution, is for Comrade Breitman an entirely mystical property. It is devoid of any basis in either political economy, culture or history and can be proven only by identifying the Negroes with the "non-classical" nationalities of Czarist Russia who were too backward, too oppressed, too illiterate and primitive, too lacking in consciousness, too unaccustomed to unified struggle to be able to realize that they were embryonic nations.

5. The Secondary Laws of Motion of the Negro Struggle

As should be plain by now, I am not so interested in "closing the door" on self-determination as I am in showing that the Negro struggle is not within the orbit of the national struggle and that it is, therefore, not the question of self-determination which is at stake.

The Negro people in the U.S. have established their fundamental goals without assistance. These goals were dictated to them by their peculiar position in

society as the objects of the racial system in its only pure form.

The goals which history has dictated to them are to achieve complete equality through the elimination of racial segregation, discrimination, and prejudice. That is, the overthrow of the race system. It is from these historically conditioned conclusions that the Negro struggle, whatever its forms, has taken the path of the struggle for direct assimilation. All that we can add to this is that these goals cannot be accomplished except through the socialist revolution.

But there are circumstances under which this movement is forced to take a different turn. In this connection it is quite clear that Comrade Breitman completely misunderstands my attitude. When he says that I would consider a separatist type of development of the Negro struggle to be a calamity, he puts the cart before the horse in the rather important matter of the relation between cause and effect.

Negro separatism would not of itself be a catastrophe, but it could only *result* from a tremendous social catastrophe. One which would be of sufficient depth to alter the entire relationship of forces which has been built up as the result of the development of the modern Negro movement and the creation of the CIO. Only once during the past 130 years have the Negro masses intimated in any way that they might take the road of separatism. This was the result of a social catastrophe: the defeat of the Negroes in the Reconstruction. This defeat pushed them back into such a terrible isolation and demoralization, that there was no channel for the movement to express its traditional demand for equality. The result was the Garvey movement. This occurred, and could have occurred, only in the deepest isolation and confusion of the Negro masses. The real meaning of the Garvey movement is that it provided a transition from the abject defeat of the Negroes to the renewal of their traditional struggle for direct equality. It did not at all signify a fundamental nationalism.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there were sufficient elements of genuine separatism in the Garvey movement to have taken it in a different direction than it actually went, under different circumstances. Consequently, it cannot be excluded, with a reappearance of similar conditions which brought on the Garvey movement, under different historical circumstances, the separatist tendency might become stronger and even dominant, and the historical tendency of the struggle might change its direction. I would view it as a potentially great revolutionary movement against capitalism and welcome and support it as such. But no more “revolutionary” than the present tendency toward direct assimilation.

It is important to note here the following comparison between the Negro movement in the United States and the oppressed nations of Europe. The Negro movement expresses separation at the time of its greatest backwardness, defeat and isolation. The oppressed nations express separatism only under the favorable conditions of revolution, solidarity and enlightenment.

We must now return to the specific circumstances which were mentioned by Trotsky as being conducive to the possible development of Negro separatism,

to my interpretation of them, and to Comrade Breitman's remarks about my interpretation.

First in regard to the "Japanese invasion." Comrade Breitman, a fairly literal-minded comrade himself, objects to my literal interpretation of Trotsky's reference to the possibility of a Japanese invasion being a possible condition for the emergence of Negro separatism.

Now in the text ("a rough stenogram uncorrected by the participants") there is no interpretation of this proposition. At no other place in either the published discussion or in any writing does Trotsky allude to it again. We are left with the necessity of interpreting it as is most logical and most consistent with the context in which it appears.

I am firmly persuaded that it is necessary to stick very closely to a literal construction of what Trotsky said here in order to retain his meaning, or at least that meaning which appears to me to be self-evident.

Trotsky said, "If Japan invades the United States." He did not say, "If the United States embarks upon war with Japan." Or, "If the United States wars on China." As a matter of fact the U.S. had a long war with the Japanese, an imperialist nation, and another long war with the North Koreans, a revolutionary people. Neither of these wars created any conditions which stimulated Negro separatism. But this wasn't what Trotsky was talking about. He said, "If Japan *invades* the United States." And he must have meant just that. He didn't mean an attack on the Hawaiian Islands, or the occupation of the Philippines, but an invasion of the continental United States in which large or small areas of the U.S. would come under the domination of an Asian imperialist power, which, however, is classified by the United States as an "inferior race."

Such a circumstance would cause a severe shock to the whole racial structure of American society. And out of this shock might conceivably come Negro separatism. For in the beginning of a Japanese occupation, it seems highly probable that the Negroes would receive preferential treatment by the Japanese, at least to the extent of being granted equality. But this would be the equality of subjection to a foreign invader. The contradiction which this kind of situation would put the Negro people in is the circumstance which Trotsky saw as containing the possibility of developing Negro separatism.

Comrade Breitman's proposal that an invasion of China by the U.S. might bring forth similar results is very wrong. If the Negro people began to develop a reluctance to fight against China under the conditions of a protracted war against China, they would not develop separatist tendencies. They would combine with the more class conscious white workers who felt the same way about it and develop a vital agitation leading the mass action of the workers and all the oppressed against the war.

But it is significant that Comrade Breitman immediately postulated Negro separatism as the most probable expression of their opposition to war. This

derives from his nationalist conception of the Negro question. If we could agree that Trotsky's analysis of the problem of nationalities in the Russian revolution was the key to the understanding of the Negro question I would be more sympathetic to Comrade Breitman's tendency to see Negro separatism as the possible result of every minor change in the objective conditions of the class struggle. As it is I cannot go along with it.

Next comes the question of fascism. And again, I am inclined to rather literal construction of Trotsky's statement, for the reason that it is the only one which corresponds to the actual possibilities. Trotsky said that if fascism should be victorious, a new condition would be created which might bring about Negro racial separatism. He wasn't alluding to the temporary victories which might appear during the course of a long struggle against it. He specifically included a new and different national "condition" in race relations: a new privileged condition for the white workers at the expense of the Negroes, and the consequent alienation of the Negro struggle from that of the working class as a whole.

I maintain that until the complete victory of fascism the basic relation between the Negro struggle and the working class struggle will remain unaltered and even in partial and episodic defeats will tend to grow stronger; that there will be no groundwork for the erection of a fundamentally separatist movement as long as the present basic relation between the Negro struggle and the working class struggle remains as it is.

Comrade Breitman says on page 13, "And in that case (an extended struggle against fascism) may a fascist victory not be possible in the southern states, resulting in an intensification of racial delirium and oppression beyond anything yet known." And may this not bring about a separatist development?

His contention obviously is that a victory of fascism in the South would result in something qualitatively different than exists there today. But what is at stake here is not the question of self-determination, but our conception of the southern social system. Comrade Breitman obviously disagrees with my analysis of the South or he could not possibly make such an assertion.

I have characterized the basic regime in the South since the end of Reconstruction as *fascist-like*; i.e., "herein is revealed the sociological and historical antecedent of German fascism." Further, a fascist-like regime which has now degenerated into a police dictatorship.

The present rulers of the South were raised to power by the Klan, a middle class movement of racial terrorism. This movement was controlled not by the middle class, but by the capitalist class and the plantation owners. It achieved the elimination of both the Negro movement and the labor movement from the South for an extended period of time. It was the result of a defeated and aborted revolution. It crushed bourgeois democracy and eliminated the working class and the small farmers from any participation in government. It resulted in a totalitarian type regime. It resulted in a destruction of the living standards of the masses of people, both white and black, both workers and farmers.

Since the triumph of the Klan in the 1890's which signified the triumph of a fascist-type regime, there has been no qualitative change in political relations. As the mass middle class base of the Klan was dissipated by the evolution of capitalism, the regime degenerated into a military dictatorship, which is the condition of the South today.

It has been difficult to arrive at a precise and scientific designation of the southern social system. When I say "fascist-like" it not only implies identity but difference. There are the following differences.

First, that the southern social system was established not in the period of capitalist decline but in the period of capitalist rise. The most important consequence of this difference has been that the middle class base of southern fascism was able to achieve substantial benefits from their servitude to the plantation owners and capitalists in their function as agents of the oppression of the Negroes and the workers generally. The persecution of the Jews by the German middle class got them nothing but their own degradation. As capitalist decline sets in the South, the middle class base of the southern system begins to lose its social weight and many of the benefits it originally derived from the system.

Second, the southern system occurred in an agrarian economy, whereas fascism in Europe was a phenomenon of the advanced industrial countries. In the more backward agrarian countries of Europe and Asia, where the peasantry is the main numerical force which threatens capitalism, it has not been necessary to resort to the development of a fascist movement in order to achieve counter-revolution. In the Balkan countries, a military counter-revolution was sufficient to subdue the peasantry in the revolutionary years following the Russian revolution.

The counter-revolution in the United States agrarian South during the Reconstruction required the development of a fascist-like movement long before its necessity was felt elsewhere. This was because chattel slaves are more like modern proletarians than like peasants.

The weakness of the peasantry as a class has been their petty-bourgeois character as tillers of small plots of soil to which they are attached. This has dispersed them, and made it difficult and indeed impossible for the peasantry to form a unified and homogeneous movement.

The chattel slave, the product of an ancient mode of production, has no land, no property, no nothing. He differs from the modern wage slave only in that he does not even have his own labor to sell for he doesn't even own his body. In addition to this, unlike the peasantry, slaves are worked in large numbers, and in the western hemisphere, under conditions of large-scale commercial agriculture.

This proletarian quality of the slave has resulted in the creation of movements of considerably greater homogeneity and vitality than were possible for the peasantry of Europe. Capitalism was made aware of this in both Haiti and in the U.S. Reconstruction.

The third difference between the southern system in the U.S. and European fascism is that the southern system was a regional rather than a national system. It was always surrounded by a more or less hostile social environment within the framework of a single country. It did not have national sovereignty. So even though the southern bourbons have held control of some of the most important objects of state power in the United States for many decades and have attempted to spread their social system nationally in every conceivable manner, that they have not been successful has been a source of constant pressure upon the whole social structure of the South. The great advances which the Negro movement of the South has made of recent years occur under conditions of the degeneration of the southern system. The limitations of these same advances are, however, that the basic regime established by the Klan remains intact.

A new fascist upsurge in the South would worsen the conditions of the Negroes only in *degree*, not qualitatively. Comrade Breitman's position is that there would be a qualitative difference. It seems to me that it is necessary to cope with this question fundamentally, rather than exclusively with its secondary manifestations.

There is another false conclusion inherent in Comrade Breitman's series of assumptions. A victory of neo-fascism in the South would have no fundamental effect upon the basic course of the Negro movement. For although the Negro movement is not "national" in the sense that Comrade Breitman refers to it, it is certainly national in scope; it is a single homogeneous movement throughout the country.

This was true in 1830 and it is true today. In the era before the Civil War, the movement of the slaves could take no open or legal character in the South. The northern Negro movement was the open expression of the slaves' struggle. But it also provided the fundamental leadership and program for the movement of the slaves.

A similar relation between the various geographical sections of the Negro movement exists today. This relationship is modified, however, by the fact that the specific weight of the Negro struggle outside the South is greater than it was a century ago, by virtue of the large concentration of Negroes in the northern and western cities.

6. The Question of the Independent Organization of Negroes

Comrade Breitman has asked me to express myself more clearly and fully on the vital aspect of the Negro question relating to the "independent activities" of the Negro movement.

Very well. I advocate the unqualified support of the independent organizational expressions of the Negro struggle. I consider that the various manifestations of

the independent character of the Negro struggle represent an absolutely essential arena of our work. This applies to the all-Negro organizations, as well as others.

I have a different evaluation of the quality of the independent Negro movement than does Comrade Breitman. I see the independence of the movement as expressing the fundamental aspirations of the Negro people in a contradictory manner; separate organization is the form in which the demand for assimilation is found. This results from the contradictory character of race relations in the U.S. White supremacy is created and maintained by the independent and exclusive organization of whites. Negroes are, therefore, forced into racial organization of their own in order to conduct a struggle against the race system.

On this question of the independent character of the Negro struggle Comrade Breitman is preoccupied with the form of the struggle. He tends to confuse the question of independence of form with independence as a direction of social motion. He implies constantly and even states that *by virtue of independent form*, its direction of motion may become toward social independence.

Although he has reluctantly acknowledged that we must also deal with something other than form, Comrade Breitman's complete preoccupation with it has committed him to disregard all of the fundamental economic, cultural, geographical, and historical factors, the difference in consciousness and direction of motion, the difference in origin and development, all of which set the Negro question apart from the national question in Europe. Because of the one factor of independence of form of the struggle which bears a slight similarity to the movements of oppressed nations of eastern Europe, the Negro struggle is to him, therefore, national in character and will (or may) be stimulated toward separatism by similar circumstances which produced the demand for self-determination of the national minorities of Europe.

7. Self-Determination and the White Workers

One of the signs of the vanguard character of the Negro struggle in its relation to the struggle of the working class against capitalism is the greater class consciousness of Negro workers as compared to the white working class.

This class consciousness derives from race consciousness and is rooted in the very nature of the Negro question. One of the main factors which prevents the development of class consciousness in the American working class is race prejudice. Specifically: white chauvinism.

The division of American society into races cuts across the working class. The white monopoly in skilled crafts created an aristocracy of labor corresponding to the racial division of society in general. The working class generally accepted the idea that they secure an economic advantage from the subordinate position of Negroes in the working class.

But as the role of the skilled crafts diminishes in modern industry, the possibility of maintaining an aristocratic division in the working class is revealed as a

weapon against the working class as a whole, dividing it and preventing unified class action against capitalism.

Class consciousness and race prejudice do not mix. Rather one excludes the other. It is only the revolutionary socialists and the Negroes who are the implacable and conscious foes of race prejudice.

Segregation is the foundation of prejudice. The Negroes, in their struggle against segregation are constantly clearing the ground for the emergence of class consciousness in the working class as a whole.

It is the historical role of the Negro struggle to break down race prejudice in the working class and thereby to lead white workers toward class consciousness.

If the Negro struggle should change its course and strike out for racial independence, it would deprive the working class of its most class conscious, and advanced segments. Such a development would probably doom the American working class to a long continuation of its present political backwardness.

Under these conditions, Negro separatism would be reactionary and we would fight it mercilessly along with the militant Negroes.

The movement for the 49th State was precisely such a reactionary movement. It was promoted by middle class Negroes at the very time when Negro workers were at last in a position to see the possibility of joint struggle with the white workers against the employers in the great struggles of the 1930's. This movement was rightly condemned by the militant Negroes associated with the working class movement and with the NAACP.

At the present moment, the rise to prominence of many Negro segregated educational institutions is calculated to be a counterweight to the struggle against segregation in the schools.

As the American working class reaches the very threshold of class consciousness and is on the verge of overcoming race prejudice sufficiently to take a fundamental step in consciously organizing itself as a class; at this time there will unquestionably be a revival of Negro separatism. It will be a last-ditch attempt on the part of the capitalist class to prevent working class solidarity and we will fight it.

It is not difficult under present conditions to convince even backward white workers of the idea of the right of Negroes to self-determination. This is because it corresponds to their race prejudice. It is precisely the backwardness of the white working class and the tradition of segregation which make the idea of self-determination for the Negroes more palatable and "realistic" to prejudiced white workers than the idea of immediate and unconditional equality.

This factor is another reason that Negroes tend to be hostile to the idea of their self-determination. It also reveals another important distinction between the national question as expressed in the Russian revolution and the race question in the U.S. In the struggle against Russian capitalism, the slogan of self-determination

for the oppressed minorities was the key to the liberation of the Russian workers from Great Russian chauvinism.

But it is different with racial chauvinism. The foundation of racial exploitation is not forced assimilation but segregation. White chauvinism expresses essentially the ideology of segregation. By virtue of the fact that segregation is part of the implied foundation of the idea of Negro self-determination, it tends to confirm white workers in their chauvinistic backwardness.

8. On the Nature of the Slogan of Self-Determination

The idea of self-determination of the oppressed minorities of Europe has played a decisive role in the unfolding of the revolution there since 1917. What is the actual content of this idea?

First of all, of and by itself, it decides nothing for an oppressed minority except to open up the question of free choice in deciding the fundamental questions. The economic and political development of Great Russia required the subordination of petty states and principalities to the national needs, as in the unification of France and Britain. But the belated and uneven development of Russia combined the development of a single nation, Great Russia, with its imperialist oppression of subject peoples.

This expression of uneven development was typical of eastern Europe in general. And in many cases the pressure for assimilation into the dominant nation was strong enough, and the national aspirations of the oppressed minorities sufficiently subdued to inject an element of doubt as to the fundamental historical mode of direction of these peoples.

The revolutionary party cannot appear before such oppressed minorities as dictating to them that they must aspire to independence. By means of the slogan of self-determination, the Bolsheviks *invited* the oppressed minorities to undertake a struggle for national independence and promised them support if they should so decide.

Therefore, the slogan for self-determination is a *transitional* slogan; a transition to national consciousness.

What is to be determined? In the first place it is not one of two things which are involved at this stage. It is not a matter of determining either assimilation or independence. For an oppressed nation does not struggle for assimilation. It merely ceases to be a nationality and assimilates. Such a nation does not determine that it will do this, but is just absorbed into the dominant nation.

The only thing to be determined is whether to undertake a struggle for national independence.

The second phase of the question of self-determination occurs when national consciousness is already established and a nation begins to emerge. In the Russian revolution the oppressed nationalities established the conditions of their future

assimilation into the USSR under the Bolshevik principle of self-determination. The question to be determined at this stage was whether the formerly oppressed nations of Czarism should give up a portion of their national sovereignty and federate into the USSR, or to assert complete independence. Either of these choices is, of course, merely the condition by which these people will eventually assimilate into world socialism which will be without national boundary lines.

Among the colonial peoples the slogan of self-determination has little if any meaning or application. Their struggles are from the beginning far advanced in comparison to the small nations of Europe. They have already determined not only that they are nations but also that they want and require complete independence from the oppressing imperialist country.

Furthermore, the nationalism of most colonial peoples is not generally questioned by the oppressor so long as it does not express the desire for independence. Britain never attempted to “assimilate” the Indians, as Russia did the Ukrainians. On the contrary the strictest division between the European and “native” cultures was always maintained as a necessary condition of the rule of the British.

The Chinese never felt the need for this kind of transitional slogan to awaken their resentment of colonial oppression or their desire to be independent of it.

Neither the Colonial Theses of the Second Congress of the Comintern, nor the theses on the Far East of the First Congress of the Fourth International give any indication that the question of self-determination plays a role in the struggle of the colonial peoples against imperialism. There is a direct struggle for independence which doesn’t require this transitional vehicle. The strategic problem for the revolutionary party is considered to be to create a class differentiation in the national struggle whereby the proletariat may be able to give leadership to it.

9. The Negroes and the Question of Self-Determination

I have admitted a certain limited historical possibility in which the Negro movement might take a separatist course. Such as after the complete triumph of fascism in the U.S.

I believe that even under such circumstances the separatist movement of Negroes would probably have the same function that the Garvey movement had in its day: to provide a transition to the open struggle for direct assimilation.

But even in this circumstance, the fundamental difficulty reappears. For the slogan of self-determination was designed for the national question in Europe, and the Negro question in the U.S. is different in kind.

If the necessities of the struggle against capitalism required the Negroes to aspire or strive for racial separation it would probably be quite as obvious as the desire for national independence of the colonial peoples. In this case the slogan of self-determination would be just as meaningless as it is today for both the colonial peoples and the Negroes in the U.S.

Negroes in the United States do not have national consciousness. This is not because they are politically backward as the Stalinists claim and as Comrade Breitman implies, but because there is no economic groundwork upon which they might build a national consciousness.

They do, however, possess race consciousness. Race consciousness is primarily the Negroes' *consciousness of equality and their willingness to struggle for its vindication*. This consciousness is *the political equivalent of the national consciousness of oppressed nations and of the class consciousness of the working class*. It is equivalent in that it provides an adequate groundwork for the solution of the question of racial discrimination.

Among the oppressed nations and classes of the world, both national and class consciousness can be fulfilled in the present epoch only through the socialist revolution. This is also true of Negro race consciousness.

What is the problem of consciousness among Negroes? Some Negroes are not conscious of their right to equality. They are victims of the pressure of white supremacy and through the B.T. Washington influence accept the social status of inequality as right and proper. They must strive to be the equivalent of whites by the standards of white supremacy.

The individual, left to his or her own resources must work out a servile solution to his or her individual problem. The social objective which is contained in this theory is the possibility of a *separate but subordinate* society for Negroes modeled after the social system of the South.

This is another reason that Negroes react with hostility to the program of Negro separatism: it is very well known to them as containing racial subordination.

Our strategical problem is to overcome the absence of race consciousness. Or, putting it another way: to find a transition to race consciousness.

To propose to the mass of workers and Negroes the idea of self-determination would be wrong. For the decisive fact in the acceptance of white supremacy is the acceptance of segregation. *The slogan of self-determination requires the desire for segregation as its foundation*. Upon this foundation national consciousness is built.

In this manner the idea of self-determination cuts across the path of our strategic problem because it encourages the acceptance of segregation; and this is the case whether it is advanced as a slogan or merely held in abeyance in our theoretical analysis.

Comrade Breitman's support of the idea of self-determination estranges him from the Negro movement on two counts. First, in relation to the mass of Negroes who have attained race consciousness. These Negroes are above the level of consciousness which requires the kind of transition which is represented in the slogan of self-determination. He proposes that the revolution will (or may) return the Negroes to a stage of ignorance and backwardness in which

this elementary type of transitional slogan will correspond with their lack of consciousness.

Second, this idea contributes nothing to the consciousness of the more backward Negroes except to confirm their backwardness.

10. The Question of Method

The question of method has become involved in the discussion primarily with Comrade Breitman's preoccupation with form.

There are several other aspects of his thinking which require scrutiny from this point of view. The first of these is the tentative character of all or most of his conclusions. This is illustrated by the astonishing circumstance that some of his most important conclusions are contained in parenthetical expressions.

This has been a considerable irritation to me in replying to him: how difficult it is to break through a parenthesis to make a polemic! But in reality this does him no discredit. For this is evidently his means of saying that although he reacts with hostility to my point of view he is not prepared to propose his own in as categorical a manner as I have mine.

He has thereby left important question marks over his own point of view. I consider this a contribution to the tone of the discussion which will help to prevent the crystallization of opinion before the discussion is in a more advanced stage.

Nevertheless, I must call attention to these question marks. I have advanced a fundamental proposition of the two poles of the Negro movement being separatism and assimilation. There is nothing more fundamental to the nature of the question than its internal polar opposition. Yet Comrade Breitman, while he disagrees with my statement of this polar opposition, has only this to say: "(Such oversimplification would be unnecessary with another conception, here advanced tentatively:...)".

On page 12. "We do not know the precise historical direction the Negro movement will take." Now it is not up to us to determine in advance all the tactical variants through which a movement must go in order to fulfill its destiny. But "...the precise historical direction" is the one thing that we are supposed to know. As a matter of fact that is the one thing which has given us the responsibility of the whole future of mankind: that we know the precise historical direction of every social movement which pertains to the international social revolution against capitalism, and the political revolution against the Soviet bureaucracy. If we do not know what the precise historical direction of motion of the Negro struggle is, it is high time we found out, for that is our fundamental concern.

On page 19, he says, in the same vein, "But if the Negro masses, for whatever reason and despite our advice, should determine that they can't get or don't want equality through integration..." etc. This particular question mark

which Comrade Breitman puts over his own convictions is part of his mystical attachment to Negro nationalism. For he somehow knows that the Negro people will (“possibly”) demand a separate state, but he cannot give any reason for it. Therefore he must include in his program, “But if the Negroes, for whatever reason” want to develop a separate society we should support them.

Yet another characteristic of Comrade Breitman’s article is argument by implication.

Take for instance his handling of the Garvey movement. I have analyzed this movement on two separate occasions. Comrade Breitman apparently disagrees with this analysis. He says that I dismiss the question too lightly and am wrong in identifying Garvey with Booker T. Washington.

He doesn’t like my analysis. But what is his? He doesn’t give any.

Now it is just possible that he believes that my argument and analysis are completely vanquished by his few reproving words. That would indicate that he doesn’t consider it necessary to restate an argument which is already conclusively proved. That is, he argues here by implication. As elsewhere in the article, he relies upon traditional conceptions to argue for him. But these are precisely the conceptions which I have challenged, and very specifically, too.

It may be that there are others who, like Comrade Breitman consider the traditional conception of questions to be sufficient evidence of their correctness, by virtue of their traditional existence. But Comrade Breitman sets himself the task of convincing me and the whole party of the errors of my point of view. This requires more than an implied argument.

11. Self-Determination and Stalinism

I believe that I have referred before to the astonishing fact that our resolution on the Negro question is probably unique in all the political resolutions of the party in that it doesn’t even mention Stalinism.

The Stalinists rank very high among our political enemies. They are, at least, our most serious competitors for the allegiance of the radical Negroes. Yet we have never published a criticism of their program for Negroes.

The only possible inference which could be drawn from this circumstance is that we have no programmatic or theoretical criticism of the Stalinists. Comrade Breitman justifies this inference in his proposition that our difference with the Stalinists is a tactical and propaganda difference: that they defend the right of the Negroes to self-determination in a vulgar and bureaucratic manner.

Comrade Breitman’s frivolous description, on page 16, of what the Stalinist position on the Negro question is, does the Stalinists a great injustice. For the groundwork of the Stalinist conception of the Negro question is the nationalist conception of the Negro question. And this is Comrade Breitman’s fundamental ground.

The main difference between the position of Comrade Breitman and that of the Stalinists is that where he is tentative, they are sure; where he is vague, they are clear; where Comrade Breitman says that the Negroes *may* develop separatist tendencies, the Stalinists say that the Negroes *will*.

Comrade Breitman designates the Negroes as a nation, not directly, but by his reference to the identity of the Negro struggle and the problem of the “non-classical” nationalities of the Russian revolution. The Stalinists say that the Negroes are a nation because they fulfill all of the economic and cultural conditions which are the basis of nationalism.

Comrade Breitman suggests that I would be a poor one to clarify and explain how our defense of the Negroes’ right to self-determination differs from the Stalinists’. And he is quite right. For I do not believe that the question of self-determination is at stake in the Negro struggle. The concept of self-determination is a reactionary idea which cuts across the historical line of development of the struggle, confusing its nature, its aims and objectives.

I have upon several occasions alluded to the hostility with which many militant Negroes regard the theory of Negro self-determination. But it is quite true that the Communist Party has a considerable Negro cadre, and upon occasion this has been pointed out as a contradiction to my contention of the attitude of Negroes toward the question of their self-determination.

This is, to be sure, a militant group of Negroes, and if they are not devoted to the idea of self-determination, they are at least tolerant of it to the extent that they are willing to live in a party which holds this idea in theoretical abeyance.

But the idea of self-determination for Negroes in the U.S. is no more fantastic than the theory of socialism in one country and all the political fantasies which flow from it. When a person of any race or nationality whatever, becomes so corrupted in thinking as to be able to accept the fundamental political line of Stalinism, it should not be too hard to accept the idea of self-determination for American Negroes, even as expounded by the Stalinists.

There is another side to the problem of Stalinism. The Stalinist party goes through a regular cyclical crisis over the question of race prejudice. Periods of theoretical reaffirmation of the theory of Negro self-determination alternate with purges and campaigns against white chauvinism.

This hectic internal life around the race question, is caused primarily by the fact that the basic theory of the Stalinists on the Negro struggle does nothing to liberate white workers from prejudice, but on the other hand corresponds to their backwardness and tends to confirm them in it.

Our criticism of Stalinism must be a fundamental one. For I conceive it to be our task as far as theory is concerned to vindicate in every conceivable manner and in all phases, the Negro struggle for equality. The confusion of the Negro question with the national question in Europe and the colonial question serves

only to obscure the real nature of this struggle and constitutes a qualification, or limitation to the validity of the real Negro struggle.

Summary

1. The Negro question in the United States is not a national [one], but is the question of racial discrimination.
2. I disagree with the proposition that the study of the national question in the Russian revolution gives specific illumination to the Negro question in the United States, except in that it reveals a qualitative difference between them.
3. Essentially, only the complete victory of fascism in the U.S. could transform the movement for direct assimilation through immediate equality into one of racial independence.
4. The dual nature of the Negro struggle arises from the fact that a *whole people* regardless of class distinction are the victims of discrimination. This problem of a whole people can be solved only through the proletarian revolution, under the leadership of the working class. The Negro struggle is therefore not the same as the class struggle, but in its independent character is allied to the working class. Because of the independent form of the Negro movement, it does not thereby become a national or separatist struggle, but draws its laws of development from its character as a racial struggle against segregation and discrimination.
5. The question of self-determination is not the question which is at stake in the Negro struggle.
6. We have in our resolution and in the party consciousness on the Negro question, as expressed by Comrade Breitman, a conception of Negro nationalism and the importance of the idea of Negro self-determination. I believe that this should be combated and eliminated. First, because it is dialectically incorrect. Second, because most Negroes are hostile to it on a completely progressive basis. Third, because it teaches white workers nothing but tends to confirm them in their traditional race prejudice.

In conclusion, I wish to thank Comrade Breitman for his reply, which in its own way was straight-forward and more revealing than I had anticipated. I hope that he will not consider that it has revealed more to me than is justified by its content or by direct implication.

Los Angeles
January 3, 1955

For Black Trotskyism

**Against the P.C. draft “Freedom Now”
In defense of programmatic fundamentals
For building a black Trotskyist cadre**

by James Robertson and Shirley Stoute

3 July 1963

—from SWP *Discussion Bulletin*, Vol. 24, No. 30

“If it happens that we in the SWP are not able to find the road to this strata [the Negroes], then we are not worthy at all. The permanent revolution and all the rest would be only a lie.”

—by L.D. Trotsky, quoted in the SWP 1948-50 Negro Resolution

I. General Introduction

The Negro Question has been posed before the party for exceptional consideration and with increasing sharpness as the gap has widened over the past ten years between the rising level of Negro struggle and the continuing qualitatively less intense general Trade Union activity.

1. Basic Theory: National or Race-Color Issue? Breitman vs. Kirk, 1954-57

To our understanding, what was involved then was a *shading* of theoretical difference. Breitman saw the Negro people as the embryo of a nation toward whom the *right* of self-determination was acknowledged but not yet, at least, advocated. Kirk interpreted the Negro question as a *race* issue which, under conditions of historic catastrophe (e.g., fascism victorious) could be transformed into a national question. Hence he agreed to the support of self-determination should it become a requirement in the Negro struggle, but he assumed it could conceivably arise only under vastly altered conditions. Both parties agreed to the inappropriateness of self-determination as a *slogan* of the party then.

The present writers agree essentially with Kirk’s view of the time, in particular with the 1955 presentation, “For the Materialist Conception of the Negro Question” (SWP Discussion Bulletin A-30, August 1955). We concur in noting the *absence* among the Negro people of those qualities which could create a separate political economy, however embryonic or stunted. This absence explains why the mass thrust for Negro freedom for over a hundred years has been toward smashing the barriers to an egalitarian and all sided integration. But integration into what kind of social structure? Obviously only into one that can sustain that integration. This is the powerful reciprocal contribution of the Negro struggle to the general class struggle.

It is the most vulgar *impressionism* to see in Negro moods of isolationist despair over the winning of real points of support from other sections of society today as some kind of process to transform the forms of oppressive segregation into a protective barrier, behind which will occur the gestation of a new nation. Negro Nationalism in ideology and origins is somewhat akin to Zionism as it was from the turn of the century until the Second World War. The large Negro ghettos of the Northern cities are the breeding grounds for this ideology among a layer of petit-bourgeois or declassed elements who vicariously imagine that segregated residential areas can be the germ sources for a new state in which *they* will exploit (“give jobs to”) black workers. Hence it is that separatist moods or currents among Negroes have a very different foundation and significance than as a national struggle.

As for the specific issue of self-determination, we find that the 1957 party resolution makes a good and balanced formulation:

“Theoretically the profound growth of national solidarity and national consciousness among the Negro people might under certain future conditions give rise to separatist demands. Since minority people have the democratic right to self-determination, socialists would be obliged to support such demands should they reflect the mass will. Yet even under these circumstances socialists would continue to advocate integration rather than separation as the best solution of the race question for Negro and white workers alike. While upholding the right of self-determination, they would continue to urge an alliance of the Negro people and the working class to bring about a socialist solution of the civil rights problem within the existing national framework.”

2. From Theoretical Weakness to Current Revisionism

However, it is of immediate importance to point out that this background dispute is far from the central issue in our criticism of the 1963 Political Committee Draft Resolution, “Freedom Now: the New Stage in the Struggle for Negro Emancipation and the Tasks of the SWP.” Thus the 1948-50 party resolution, titled “Negro Liberation Through Revolutionary Socialism,” even though it contains the theoretical outlook that Breitman upheld, is a solidly revolutionary document in its intent and aims. What has happened in the interval is simply that the present party Majority has made the earlier theoretical weakness the point of departure for the profound degradation now arrived at in the 1963 Majority document of the role of the working class in the United States and of its revolutionary Marxist party as well. With evident loss of confidence in a revolutionary perspective by its authors, the essential revision in the 1963 draft is, however qualified, nothing other than the *substitution* of the axis of struggle as oppressed versus oppressor to replace class versus class.

3. The 1963 Revisionism

The essence of what is “new” is found in the following portions of the 1963 PC draft:

"But here, as in Africa, the liberation of the Negro people *requires* that the Negroes organize themselves independently, and control their own struggle, and not permit it to be subordinated to any other consideration or interest.

"This means that the Negroes must achieve the maximum unity of their forces—in a strong and disciplined nationwide movement or congress of organizations, and ideological unity based on dividing, exposing and isolating gradualism and other tendencies emanating from their white suppressors. This phase of the process is now beginning.

“Having united their own forces, the independent Negro movement will then *probably* undertake the tasks of division and alliance. It will seek ways to split the white majority so that the Negro disadvantage of being a numerical minority can be compensated for by division and conflict on the other side.” [emphasis added]

and

“The general alliance between the labor movement and the Negro fighters for liberation can be prepared for and preceded by the cementing of firm working unity between the vanguard of the Negro struggle and the socialist vanguard of the working class represented by the Socialist Workers Party.”

The lesser sin of this schema of the future for the Negro struggle is the complete capitulation to Negro nationalism. (For one to see this vividly, re-read the quotations above substituting, say, “Algerian” for “Negro” and “French” for “whites.”) It is serious enough that the draft envisions no effort to compete with the black nationalists’ understandable reaction to liberal-pacifist toadying. Certainly it is the duty of Marxists to struggle to separate militant elements from a regressive ideology. To say that the Negro struggle must not be subordinated to any other consideration is to *deny* proletarian internationalism. *Every struggle*, without exception, acquires progressive significance only in that it furthers directly or indirectly the socialist revolution internationally. Any struggle other than the workers’ class struggle itself has, at best, indirect value. Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks were obligated to wage a two-front ideological dispute in order to free the revolutionary vanguard from misconceptions on this score—against the petit bourgeois nationalist socialists who saw the national struggle as having a progressive historical significance in its own right; and against the sectarian view of Rosa Luxemburg and the workers’ party in Poland which, from the correct premise that the nation-state had become reactionary in the modern world drew the over-simplified and erroneous conclusion—“against self-

determination (for Poland).” Lenin pointed out that independent working class involvement in the struggle for national self-determination in several important ways furthered the class struggle and *thereby* acquired justification. Similarly Trotsky pointed out that defense of the Soviet Union was subordinate to and a part of the proletarian revolution internationally and that in the event of a clash of interests the particular lesser interests of the part (and a degenerate part at that) would for revolutionists take second place.

It is worthy of note that the Negro struggle in America is more directly related to the class struggle than any essentially national question could be—for the Negro struggle for freedom is a fight by a working class color caste which is the most exploited layer in this country. Hence *any* steps forward in *this* struggle immediately pose the class question and the need for class struggle in sharpest form.

The graver consequence of the proposed Majority draft is its necessary corollary that the Majority would see the revolutionary workers’ party excluded from one more area of struggle. In their 1961 Cuban question documents the Majority made it clear that for them the Cuban Revolution and, by implication, in the Colonial Revolution as well, the revolutionary working class party is, prior to the revolution, a dispensable convenience. This view has now been explicitly generalized and confirmed by the Majority, as in Section 13 of their “For Early Reunification of the World Trotskyist Movement”:

“13. Along the road of a revolution beginning with simple democratic demands and ending in the rupture of capitalist property relations, guerilla warfare conducted by landless peasant and semi-proletarian forces, under a leadership that becomes committed to carrying the revolution through to a conclusion, can play a decisive role in undermining and precipitating the downfall of a colonial or semi-colonial power. This is one of the main lessons to be drawn from experience since the Second World War. It must be consciously incorporated into the strategy of building revolutionary Marxist parties in colonial countries.”

By their extension of this line to include the Negro question in the U.S., the SWP Majority has made the most serious overt denial yet of a revolutionary perspective. What they have done is to *a priori* exclude themselves from struggling for the leadership of a most crucial section of the American working class, and instead to consign that struggle to a hypothetical parallel united Negro Peoples’ Organization which would “probably” one day work with the socialist working class leadership in the U.S. In essence the erroneous conclusions drawn by the Majority from the Cuban Revolution will now be incorporated into the party’s American perspective in the form of “waiting for a black Castro.” Thus the party’s supreme responsibility, the American revolution, is being vitiated!

II. To the Socialist Revolution—and the Broad Masses

1. Method of Objectivism versus Analytical Approach

In surveying current developments the descriptive articles and reports of Breitman have been valuable (for example, his “New Trends and New Moods in the Negro Struggle,” SWP Discussion Bulletin, Summer 1961). However, the material is flawed and limited by its shaping and presentation through an approach which is “objective,” sociological, “descriptive.” This stands in contrast to the indicated *analytical* approach for Marxists. Underlying this difference in method of treatment is the closely correlated difference between viewing the developments as an external observer—now given formal codification in the PC draft resolution—as against conceiving developments from the standpoint of involvement in their fundamental solution. For the Negro struggle to this solution integrally involves the revolutionary Marxist party which is missing in Breitman’s approach to current events.

2. Our Point of Departure—The Socialist Revolution

Our point of departure comes in turn as the *conclusion* that the Negro question is so deeply built into the American capitalist class-structure—regionally and nationally—that only the *destruction* of existing class relations and the change in class dominance—the passing of power into the hands of the working class—will suffice to strike at the heart of racism and bring about a solution both real and durable. Our approach to present struggles cannot be “objective.” Rather it rests on nothing other than or less than the criteria of what promotes or opposes the *socialist revolution*.

Therefore we can find an amply sufficient point of departure in a key statement of the 1948-50 resolution:

“The primary and ultimate necessity of the Negro movement is its unification with the revolutionary forces under the leadership of the proletariat. The guiding forces of this unification can only be the revolutionary party.”

3. Negro Mass Organizations and the Revolutionary Party

It would be fool-hardy and presumptuous to seek after any pat schema detailing the road to be traveled in going from today’s struggles to our ultimate goals. But there are certain qualities and elements which, as in all such social struggles, do and will manifest themselves along the way.

One such matter is that of the basic approach to organizations of Negro workers and youth. The generality is that in an American society in which large sections of the working people are saturated with race hatreds and intolerance of the particular needs of other parts and strata, special organizations are mandatory for various strata. This consideration finds its sharpest expression in the Negro struggle. Today in the wake of the upsurge in mass civil rights struggles there is

a felt and urgent need for a broad mass organization of Negro struggle free of the limitations, weaknesses, hesitations, and sometimes downright betrayal which afflict the currently existing major competitors. This need will be with us for a long time. Participation in the work of building such a movement is a major responsibility for the revolutionary party. Very likely along the way a complex and shifting combination of work in already existing groups and the building of new organizations will be involved. But as long as we know what we are aiming for we can be oriented amidst the complexities and vicissitudes of the process.

At bottom what the Marxists should advocate and aim to bring about is a *transitional* organization of the Negro struggle standing as a connecting link between the party and the broader masses. What is involved in working from a revolutionary standpoint is to seek neither a *substitute* to nor an *opponent* of the vanguard party, but rather a unified formation of the largely or exclusively Negro members of the party together with the largest number of other militants willing to fight for that section of the revolutionary Marxist program dealing with the Negro question. Such a movement expresses simultaneously the special needs of the Negro struggle and its relationship to broader struggles—ultimately for workers' power.

This approach to the special oppression of the Negroes stems from the tactics of Lenin's and Trotsky's Comintern. It was there that the whole concept was worked out for relating the party to mass organizations of special strata under conditions where the need had become evident and it becomes important that such movements contribute to the proletarian class struggle and that their best elements be won over to the party itself. The militant women's organizations, revolutionary youth leagues, and radical Trade Unionists' associations are other examples of this form.

Parenthetically, it should be noted how little there is in common between this outlook and that of the 1963 PC draft. Thus even in the *hypothetical* case that a separate social and material base was somehow created sufficient to generate a mass Negro national consciousness, the Bolshevik response is *not* just to back away and talk of facilitating eventual common work between a "them" of that nationality and an "us" of the (white) socialist vanguard of the (white) working class. Even if a new state—a separate black Republic—were created, our Negro comrades, even at this greatest conceivable remove, would become nothing other than a new section of a politically common international party—the Fourth International. And their struggle for socialism would continue to be our cause too.

4. Toward a Black Trotskyist Cadre

To return to the realities of the Negro struggle as it is and to the SWP as it is, there is one vital element without which the basic working program remains a piece of paper as far as *actual* involvement in the struggle is concerned. That element is an existing section, however modest, of Negro party members

functioning actively and politically in the movement for Negro freedom.

Viewed from this aspect the current PC draft is at once a rationalization and an accommodation to the weakness of our party Negro forces, and, moreover, will exacerbate this weakness. This organizational abstentionism is obtrusive in the draft's direct implication that it doesn't really matter about the SWP because the Negro movement can get along well enough without the revolutionary working class party and one day the Negro vanguard may turn in our direction anyway. The key paragraph of the PC draft quoted in this article sums up a permeating thread of the entire resolution, places the party's role as one of fraternal relationship between two parallel structures: the (white) working class and its vanguard on the one side, and the Negro people and their vanguard on the other. This conception denies the fundamental necessity that the party will lead, must lead, or should even try to lead the decisive section of the working class in America. The resolution gives credence to the concept that "we cannot lead the Negro people." This is absolutely contradictory to a revolutionary perspective. *Our leadership* means the revolutionary class struggle program carried out by revolutionists in the mass movements, fused into the revolutionary party. Just as trade unionists will not join the revolutionary party if they do not see it as essential to winning the struggle, so Negro fighters for liberation will not join the party on any basis other than that the *only* road to freedom for them is the revolutionary socialist path of struggle through the combat army. Negro militants will *not* see any advantage in joining a party which says in effect: "We cannot lead the Negro people. We are the socialist vanguard of the white working class, and we think it is nice to have fraternal relations with *your* vanguard (that of the liberation movement)."

Likewise, once we have recruited Negro militants to the party, the line expressed in the PC draft serves not to help them to develop as Trotskyist cadre and to recruit other black workers on the basis of our program, but rather would serve to waste and mislead them. When the party denies its role of leadership of the black masses, then for what reason do we need a black Trotskyist cadre? The logic of this position means that there is no role for a Negro as a party member that differs from that he could play without entering the party, or, as in the case of the position taken on southern work, membership in the party would actually *isolate* him from important areas of work because "the party is not needed there."

Some comrades, in response to the criticisms made here, will say that the party is not giving up a revolutionary perspective, but is only being realistic and facing the fact that the majority of our membership is white and that we have only a tiny and weak Negro cadre. We must seek to become *in reality* what we are *in theory*, rather than the reverse—i.e., adapting our program to a serious weakness in composition. If we take this road of adaptation the party program in a process of gross degeneration will become based on a privileged section of the working class.

Negroes who are activists in the movement, such as, for example, the full-time

militants around SNCC, are every day formulating concepts of struggle for the movement. The meaning of the line of the PC draft is that we are not interested in recruiting these people to our white party because we have the revolutionary socialist program for the section of the working class of which we are the vanguard, and *they* (Negro militants) must lead *their own* struggle, although we would like to have fraternal relations with them. This is the meaning of the PC draft.

To the concept of the white party must be counterposed the concept of the revolutionary party. For if we are only the former, then black workers are misplaced in the SWP. There are three main elements which we recruit to the party: minority workers, white workers, and intellectuals. In the process of the work which brings these elements to the party there are special considerations which must be made with reference to the suspicions of minority peoples (“white caution”) in regard to personnel, etc. However, once *inside* the party we are all only revolutionists. All of these elements are fused in the struggle to achieve the revolutionary program into revolutionists who as a whole make up the revolutionary party. Thus the “white caution” in Negro organizations is wrong inside the party. An internal policy of “white caution” equals paternalism, patronization, creation of “party Negroes,” etc., and has no place in a Bolshevik party.

The statement by Trotsky, quoted at the head of this article, that if the SWP cannot find the road to the Negroes then it is not worthy at all, finds its concurrent counterpart in the choice now before us. Either the revolutionary perspective in the U.S. has become blunted and lifeless or else its expression today as a living aim of the party pivots, in the context of relative working-class passivity and active Negro struggle, upon the development of a black Trotskyist cadre.

The principal aim of this article is to show that this deficiency in forces is not the fault of objective conditions—isolation and the like—but is rooted in the complex of related political and organizational faults stemming from a loss of confidence and orientation toward the proletarian revolution by the SWP majority.

[Because of the pressures of other work upon the authors, the last two sections of this article have not been completed in time for the bulletin deadline even in the rough form of the first sections. The sections which it had been hoped to include are:

III. The Party

[Incomplete section]

1. External and inner party aspects of winning and building a Negro cadre.
2. Against “ours is a white party” end against patronization.

3. Qualitative difference of required approach inside and outside the party.
4. Priorities in Negro work—defining the most recruitable layers by the party.

IV. Mass Work Today

[Incomplete section]

1. Essential and common flaw in agitation based on either Federal Troops to the South!" or "Kennedy—Deputize and Arm Birmingham Negroes!"
2. Against Union decertification hearings as a way to fight Jim Crow; for mass picketing to break racial exclusion in unions.
3. Specific aims and balance of our work—North and South.
4. Appraisal of existing organizations, including SNCC, the Muslims, etc.

In lieu of these developed sections, we are concluding with a few fragmentary notes. It is our hope that the coming party Convention will act to continue a literary discussion following the Convention in the fast changing Negro Question. In addition, for a brief statement of views on mass work, attention is directed to the Minority Tendency's amendment to the PC draft on the American Question (in Discussion Bulletin Vol. 24, No. 23, June 1963).]

1. *The Black Muslims* are, with many contradictions, primarily a religious organization. Their political activity is primarily limited to the propaganda sphere. They do not have a program for struggle to meet the demands of the black masses in the community today, although their promise of political candidates would represent somewhat of a turn. We take exception to comrade Kirk's statement that, "The foundation of the Muslim movement is basically a reflex of the lumpen proletariat to gradualism, to the betrayal of the intellectuals and the default of the union movement." The Muslim movement has a petit-bourgeois program—black business, black economy, separate on this basis, for this goal, is the answer to the oppression. Their internal organization is bureaucratically structured, with heavy financial drainage on the rank-and-file membership to the enrichment of "The Messenger." On the other hand, while they call to all levels of black society, businessmen, workers, even socialists and communists, as long as they're black, in reality the appeal is attractive mainly to the working class and especially to the lumpen layers, but they are no longer lumpen when they join the movement. One tendency of the leadership represented by Malcolm X condemns American *capitalist* society and shows favor toward Cuba and Red China as opposed to Chiang Kai-shek. Another tendency claims that international affairs don't concern them and the black man's problems in America have no relation to the Cuban Revolution, etc. It is realistic to expect that we may be able to win some of its periphery and membership to the revolutionary program, but because of the religious, non-action oriented, exacting and bureaucratic nature of the organization, this can

best be done through discussion and common action where possible, rather than on the inside.

2. *R. Vernon* as prosecuting attorney of “The White-Radical Left on Trial.”

In his article comrade Vernon states: “The absurdity of a *Militant* talking trade unions and Negro-White unity at the same time that it sounds like the very voice of the depths of the Negro ghetto is offered with a straight face.” This is but one blatant indication that comrade Vernon is not making criticism from the point of view of a revolutionary and does not see the struggle for socialism—the class struggle—as having any essential connection to the Negro struggle for equality. Vernon’s current writings, “Why White Radicals are Incapable of Understanding Black Nationalism” and “The White Radical Left on Trial,” are based on the premise, or attempt to prove, that Marxism and revolutionary socialism have no place in the struggle of the most exploited section of the American working class nor in the colonial revolution either. For Vernon the building of a revolutionary party aiming toward the American revolution is at best irrelevant and international working class solidarity meaningless. In short, there is little in comrade Vernon’s articles that is common to Marxism. Furthermore, his views are saturated with the spirit of the treacherous justification “that ours is a white socialist revolutionary party”—the logic of which is liquidationist.

Lest any comrades think we are too harsh in criticizing Vernon as having theoretically surrendered to black Nationalism and rejected Marxism (with or without quote marks), let them ponder such a remark as, “The problem of revolutionary nationalism has never been dealt with adequately in any Marxist or ‘Marxist’ movement anywhere. Lenin only scratched the surface. . . .” Of the entire, penetrating, historically verified theory of the Permanent Revolution, Vernon says not a word! Yet, above all, Trotsky’s theory tackles “the problem of revolutionary nationalism” and lays bare its solution.

Moreover, even if “Lenin only scratched the surface,” our luck has finally turned. Vernon coolly informs us that the SWP has now proved its unique worth: “It is the only group whose internal life can, and did, produce the WWR [‘Why White Radicals. . .’] document. . . .” Apparently Vernon, the author of WWR, has capitulated to his own ego even more fully than to nationalism!

We are happy to accept comrade Vernon’s finding that the Tendency we support is the most distant from his views of any in the party.

The Negro Struggle and the Crisis of Leadership

Draft Resolution on Civil Rights Submitted by D. Konstan, A. Nelson and S. Stoute

—Reprinted from YSA *Discussion Bulletin* Vol. 7, No. 5, August 1963

“In the politics of Marxism the tactics of the day, as well as the strategy for the long run, *flow from a theory* which, in turn, is a generalization of previous experience in the evolution of class society in general and of capitalism in particular.” [emphasis added]

—James P. Cannon, *The Road to Peace*, p. 15

“For the proletariat, however, [national] demands are subordinate to the interests of the class struggle.”

—V.I. Lenin, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, p. 23

1. The new level of militancy reached by the Negro people in their struggle for equality sharpens the contradictions of capitalist society, highlights the problem of the crisis of leadership, and furnishes the first significant breakthrough for the participation of revolutionary socialists, especially youth, in struggle since the post-war reaction. However, the peculiar racial distortions of American proletarian consciousness, in addition to the oppressive lag of organized labor in the struggle, pose the special problem of tactics and organizational forms which can serve to unite the American working class to overthrow capitalism.
2. This difficulty is further compounded by the fact that the NEC Majority has a basically false and disorienting theory on the Negro movement, which essentially holds that integration is a “merely” bourgeois demand, far surpassed by black nationalism which is profoundly revolutionary and inevitably drives, under its own steam and without Marxist leadership, toward socialism; we thus have a reliable, though non-Marxist, ally. A further consequence of this “theory” is that the struggle in the south is of secondary importance; here again, moreover, objective conditions are supposed to give birth to a revolutionary leadership, and thus our presence in the south is entirely unnecessary. It is “sufficient,” we are told, for the YSA to endorse SNCC without reserve, and with the assistance of the

federal government and a thoroughly confused misrepresentation of the permanent revolution, Trotskyist leadership becomes utterly dispensable.

3. The labor bureaucrats well served their masters—the American capitalist class—when they failed to extend the organizational drive of the CIO into the south, and when they divided labor in organized areas by permitting and encouraging discriminatory practices in the unions. The pattern of struggle for the American working class was in large measure determined by these defeats. While the labor bureaucracy conservatively maintained its privileges by ignoring the needs of the most oppressed layer or caste of the working class, the Negro people lost confidence in their white allies and grew prepared to take independent action to secure equality.
4. The Korean War, like all wars, speeded up social processes, increasing the militancy and consciousness of the Negroes and leaving in its wake the palliative Supreme Court decision on segregation in 1954. Legalistic tactics were surpassed when the Negro people in Montgomery discovered the weapon of the economic boycott; “they pushed the whole movement towards a higher stage of development” (*The Class Struggle Road to Negro Equality*, p. 10). Furthermore, the growing independence movement in Africa increased the confidence and consciousness of the Negro masses in America. The next major tactical development in the Negro struggle was the sit-ins, which spread throughout the country.
5. However, in the bosom of this new militant movement there erupted the same infection which had corrupted labor’s drive toward integration: a conservative bureaucracy which took root in the absence of revolutionary leadership. Thus the tactics of self-defense, against violent racist attack, of Robert F. Williams, which are vitally necessary to furthering the struggle in the south, and which have been deliberately hushed up by the bourgeois press, were opposed and condemned by the conservative leaders of the Negro movement.
6. Mass pressures have resulted in the limited radicalization of the older civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP and CORE, despite the repressive efforts of the bureaucratic leaderships, while new militant organizations have been formed in response to the needs and aspirations of sections of the Negro people (SNCC, SCLC, RAM in Philadelphia, etc.).
7. Moreover, the recent period has seen the rapid growth of the nationalist (separatist) movement. However, nationalism must be seen as a product of the crisis of leadership in the northern movement. (Note: nationalism is a popular term which does not lend itself to scientific or concrete definition. It may refer generally to anti-white feelings or to strong sympathies with the African independence movement [LCA]. In some circles it has been generalized to mean simply militancy. Most specifically it refers to separatist movements organized along racial lines. This sense is the only one which has any meaning for Marxists. The movement best representing

nationalism today is the Muslims.)

8. Nationalism is a bourgeois demand. Its economic base lies in the need for subject nationalities to liberate and organize themselves in order that commodity exchange (capitalism) may develop more freely and rapidly. It can be supported, from an independent proletarian point of view which fosters no illusions of patriotism or national superiority, only when the oppressed nation has a nascent economy which is kept from development by oppression. In the oppressor nation, the *right* to self-determination may be advocated as a counter-measure to chauvinism.

When the problem of nationalism is posed in its classical Leninist form, it becomes apparent that separatism is not in itself a revolutionary demand, requiring the unconditional support of Marxists.

9. The separatist demand of the Muslims, their advocacy of the building of a separate black economy, and their dangerous abstentionism with respect to the mass integration struggle are utopian and petty-bourgeois. The class base of their ideology is the petty-bourgeoisie of the northern big-city ghettos (especially New York and Chicago).
10. The Muslim movement is fundamentally a religious organization. It is dominated by a tight bureaucratic structure. This makes it virtually impossible to work within the movement. Nevertheless, the Muslims have a broad appeal to the black working class, which is perhaps the dominant element in their composition. This is due ultimately to the lag in consciousness and lack of revolutionary leadership in the labor movement; to the absence of an alternative Negro revolutionary leadership and organization; and to the Muslims' vitriolic denunciation of "white society" plus their assertive self-confidence, which correspond to the new mood of the Negro people. We can best reach the working class elements in the Muslims by working with them when possible, defending them against the attacks of the capitalist government; at the same time we must publish *critical* appraisals of their ideology in our press, exposing its petty-bourgeois content.
11. Existing civil rights organizations are naturally responding to the heightened consciousness of the Negro masses. The NAACP, for example, has experienced a "revolt of the youth" at its last convention in Chicago, July 1-6. A new turn in the northern movement has been marked by the fight against racism in the unions and the mass picketing of construction sites. Another example of the turn to mass action is Philadelphia CORE's current fight against the slum-lords. CORE has also made efforts to support SNCC's work in the south, and is the primary vehicle of militancy in the "united front" organization which has continued to picket the Downstate Medical Center construction site in New York City despite the withdrawal of support by the ministers after Rockefeller's token proposals.
12. The rise in militancy of the masses and the changes reflected in the

leadership show many contradictions; thus while a section of the leadership of Philadelphia CORE still firmly upholds the doctrine of non-violence, and tends to eschew mass demonstrations, the leadership as a whole nevertheless busily mobilizes an angry mass and leads it in militant actions. These contradictions afford an incomparable opportunity for revolutionary socialists.

13. Our general task in the coming period must be to recruit a black Trotskyist youth cadre to the YSA. We do this by participating in the civil rights organizations openly as revolutionists fighting for militant mass actions. The basic method of Trotskyists working within these organizations is clearly to establish left-wing revolutionary caucuses by means of a transitional approach embodying a succession of concrete programmatic slogans. The long-range perspective is of course to develop an alternative leadership based on class struggle solutions in these groups; this inevitably involves a polarization and confrontation of political tendencies, which is preparatory to a split of revolutionary from conservative petty-bourgeois forces in the organization.
14. The specific programmatic slogans must be geared to the particular circumstances and organization. In the north, general slogans may be:
 - A) A pre-arranged percentage of all newly hired apprentices or laborers must belong to minorities (Negroes and Puerto Ricans or Mexicans)—cut the hours of work sufficiently to provide jobs for all, with no cut in pay.
 - B) Workers themselves, through their weapons of mass action (picketing, sit-downs, demonstrations) must reform their class organizations; against decertification suits.
 - C) Demonstrations must continue despite promises by government officials until the specific terms agreed upon by the membership have been met; against Cecil B. Moore-New York ministers type of sell-out.
 - D) End all restrictions employed to soften demonstrations—against strait-jacket approach of the bureaucrats (the March on Washington).
 - E) End support to traditional capitalist parties.
 - F) Support independent Negro candidates and socialist candidates who run on principled programs of civil rights.
 - G) For independent political action by minority peoples for civil rights.
15. The southern region of the United States is a doubly exploited area: the average wage is approximately half that of the northern region. This is made possible by the absence or weakness of unions, and by widespread racial antagonisms. It is only the super-exploitation of the Negroes which, in the era of imperialist decline, maintains a tense stability in the south.

16. The contraction of the world market, and increasing foreign competition are responsible for the drastic cuts in American steel production: steel factories are currently operating, it is well known, at less than 50% capacity. In Birmingham, primarily a steel town with the highest concentration of proletarians in the United States, the contraction of steel output and automation have resulted in a major unemployment crisis. Negroes are the first to be laid off industrial jobs, when they have them (about half the union locals in Birmingham have no Negro members at all—a fact which is not true of industrial unions in the north). Worse than this, Negroes now face unfair competition in local menial jobs from unemployed whites—whites invariably get preference. There is thus an army of frustrated and angry unemployed Negroes in Birmingham
17. Against this background enter the petty bourgeois ministers, raising their petty-bourgeois demands (one sales clerk position, etc.). Committed to non-violence and fearful of proletarian militancy, the King-Shuttlesworth-Abernathy leadership have only one weapon: to put pressure on the big bourgeoisie—represented by the federal government—to intervene on their behalf. The federal government (i.e., Robert Kennedy and Roger Blough) can act at the expense of the local bourgeoisie to head off future demonstrations by granting the mildest, most meaningless concessions. Nevertheless, because racism is an essential divisive factor in the working class which is propping up American capitalism in the epoch of its decay, it is impossible for the big bourgeoisie to grant any significant demands. The only action by the Kennedys in the Birmingham crisis was sending troops—directed against the Negro community rather than to protect them. The latest civil rights bill is such a farce as to have received vehement criticism from the NAACP and the Urban League.
18. Utterly frustrated by the suffering endured for the sake of King's utterly insignificant demands, and enraged to see even these bargained away without a struggle, the unemployed workers, who previously had stood on the sidelines, took the incident of a bombed motel to vent their anger in violent resistance. The responsibility for this undirected violence, and for the subsequent campaign of terror against the Negroes which has been waged and is being waged in Birmingham, must be laid to King. While it is true that King's leadership has been largely discredited, the price was very high—possibly widespread demoralization. (See statement by James Foreman, executive secretary of SNCC, concerning Birmingham in *National Guardian*, May 30, 1963: "The usual effect of long waiting periods after a few concessions is to kill the Movement.")
19. Even though SNCC, which is not homogeneous, has maintained its militancy and its attachment to the aspirations of the masses, events like the Birmingham crisis are entirely beyond the scope of the organization because of its formal commitment to non-violence and its self-imposed limitations on its perspectives.

20. SNCC is the most viable part of the southern civil rights movement. Its cadre continually come into conflict with NAACP, CORE and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (King). Its statement of purpose is a credo of non-violence, but people of different ideologies are not excluded. SNCC does not have a worked out program but their workers condemn the “black bourgeoisie” and orient toward the poor masses. They have very close ties with SDS, which is practically dominated by YPSL, and with SCEF. SNCC is the left wing of the southern civil rights movement, and it is a movement which we should be a part of.
21. The SNCC leadership is every day formulating concepts of struggle for the movement. The empirical changes in orientation stem from their experience in the day to day struggle alone. While this cadre is militant and is tied to the aspirations of the black masses, it harbors many illusions as to the nature of the oppressor, the nature of capitalist society, and therefore the nature of the struggle itself. From this flows an incorrect conception of the methods necessary to effectively combat racism.
22. The masses of black workers and the SNCC leadership and ranks will not pragmatically come to understand and adopt the science of Marxism simply by virtue of their militancy and readiness to grasp any methods within their reach that they find may be necessary to the forward surge of the fight. They are groping for answers, and some of the more conscious of them have picked up pieces of phraseology without fully comprehending their significance which seem on the surface to indicate the necessity to change the system; but this must not be mistaken for a true revolutionary class consciousness.
23. The rising upsurge and militancy of the black revolt and the contradictory and confused, groping nature of what is now the left wing in the movement provide the revolutionary vanguard with fertile soil and many opportunities to plant the seeds of revolutionary socialism. Our task is to create a Trotskyist tendency in the broad left wing of the movement, while building that left wing. Our ideas will *help* the movement, not *hurt* it. We must consider non-intervention in the crisis of leadership a crime of the worst sort.
24. It is our duty to send a small fraction of YSAers to work consistently in the south in SNCC. The task of this fraction should be to establish itself as a part of the movement by proving its dedication and devotion through hard work. We should seek to recruit individuals through extensive discussion with militants while projecting to the movement as a whole certain immediate programmatic demands, as well as transitional demands, to be adopted. We work in these movements because we want to fight racism in practice as well as in theory, because we know that it is only through the socialist revolution that racism can be wiped out. To build the revolutionary vanguard is to participate in and build a revolutionary leadership of the *current* struggles of the working class—of the fight for

Negro liberation. In the course of these struggles the cadres of the world revolution will be built.

25. General demands in the south must be:

- A) For *organized* self-defense movements in southern cities—for the tactics of Robert F. Williams; against federal military intervention, which always supports the status quo.
- B) Against discrimination in unions and industries—especially companies with government contracts or subsidies.
- C) For drives for union organization.
- D) For independent political organization—make voter registration meaningful.

26. The most oppressed stratum of the working class is in motion. It struggles bravely but blindly to remove the unbearable burden of capitalist exploitation from its shoulders. There is only one program which can point the way to the Negro masses north and south: Trotskyism, the vanguard consciousness of the proletarians of all the world. The American working class still idles in a false and quickly dissipating security; the doubly exploited Negro caste has special demands corresponding to its peculiar needs and the pervading crisis of leadership. These circumstances dictate special organizational forms which reflect the independent activity of the Negroes. It is essential that Trotskyists help crystallize and guide these transitional forms, preserving the independence of the black proletariat from bourgeois influences, and preparing the Negro people for the task which they will share with the white sector of the working class—the revolutionary transformation of society.

New York
August 18, 1963

The Secret War Between Brother Klonsky and Stalin (and who won)

—Reprinted from *Spartacist* No. 13, August-September 1969

The following document was written for a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) regional conference by Spartacist League comrades in the South; later copies of the polemic, with an introduction and entitled *Mike Klonsky Versus Brother Stalin*, were distributed at the June 1969 SDS Convention.

Trotskyists loathe Stalin, and after his earliest years we do not consider his views Marxist. *Marxism and the National Question* was a viable reference for two reasons: this was Klonsky's "theoretical" cover for his own separatist views, not corresponding to canon text; secondly, as the document makes clear, Stalin

wrote this work in 1913 at Lenin's direction and under his editorial tutelage. The work pales in significance compared with the subtlety and depth of Lenin's own work on nationalities; but if mediocre, Stalin's essay is still considered justifiably a theoretical contribution of the Marxist movement.

But even in terms of his own theory, Stalin never had an integrated and systematic view on the national question. The man who shortly before the Bolshevik Revolution was capable (with aid) of stating the Leninist analysis on imperialism and the special oppression of minorities could, by 1922, indulge himself in a fierce, great-power bureaucratic suppression of Georgia and the Georgian Bolsheviks in so crass and ugly a manner that when finally notice of this came to the attention of the dying Lenin his response was to recommend to the Central Committee of his party that Stalin be removed from the office of its General Secretary.

Our document quotes Stalin to the effect that in contradistinction to the bourgeoisie's attempt to prolong the *national* aspects of social struggle "the class-conscious proletariat cannot rally under the 'national' flag of the bourgeoisie." This is Lenin's politics. Yet the same man who wrote that became the architect of the popular front with the "progressive bourgeoisie" and in China, Spain, France and tens of other places wrecked potential communist revolutions by the self-same rallying under the "national" flag. Would-be revolutionaries should understand that blind enthusiasm for "national liberation movements", in preference to class struggle conceptions leads down an old, old road heaped with the bodies of dedicated communists butchered by their "progressive" "liberal" bourgeois allies. Those who seek sustenance in Mao thought should remember that it was Mao, Stalin's greatest living acolyte himself, who engineered the political techniques that disarmed the Indonesian working class and led to the mass execution of their Communist Party. Readers of this document should not allow any admiration for Stalin's youthful Leninist orthodoxy here to blind them to the fact that in whatever contemporary guise Stalinism is the syphilis of the workers' movement and unless mercilessly eradicated will destroy yet another generation of young revolutionaries.

What is self-determination? SDS National Secretary Mike Klonsky says self-determination means the right of a *group*, or a *people*, to decide their own destiny.

According to Marxism, self-determination means the right of a *nation* to independence and equality in its dealings with other nations.

What's the difference? First, the Marxist begins with material reality. Can this or that group *really* decide its own destiny? Maybe students and soldiers *ought* to be able to decide their own destiny. It might be nice. But these groups *exist* only because they're subsidized by the rest of society. Their struggles for political and personal freedom are necessary and just, but we can't talk about self-determination for a fragment of society that can't support itself. Would a steel mill, under socialism, decide its own destiny? No, the fate of the mill and

the workers would be *socially* determined by the need for steel, the availability of ore, the state of technology, the skill and consciousness of the workers.

After a successful revolution, does a workers' state "decide its own destiny"? No. Cuba's destiny is strongly influenced by U.S. and Soviet foreign policy. Even if socialism were victorious on a world scale, the economic development of individual areas and industries would be *socially* determined on an *international* basis.

So, Marxists don't begin by asking whether a group *wants* complete autonomy, or is oppressed, or deserves a break, or *feels* it needs independence. When a revolutionary says "self determination" he isn't talking about abstract or utopian independence from society by small, weak castes—"student power," for example. The revolutionary uses "self-determination" to describe the right to *secede*, and the capability to form a nation, when that struggle for secession advances the revolution—the *whole* class struggle.

A Black Nation?

Klonsky says American Blacks are a nation, and that self-determination, *in the Marxist sense*, applies to their struggle. In his recent *New Left Notes* article on SSOC, he says:

"While I disagree with SSOC's notion of the South as a colony, I do believe that the nature of the struggle in the South is going to take on special characteristics. This is due primarily to the historic role of the Black liberation movement in the South and to the fact that *the historical basis for a separate Black nation lies in the South*. [emphasis added]

Of course the South will exhibit special characteristics. The revolution in Brooklyn will be very different from the struggle in Queens, for that matter. But is there *actually* a historical basis for a separate Black nation? Is there *now*, or in the future, a *material* basis for separatism?

Brother Klonsky seems to assume—correctly—that most radicals are unaware of just what Marxists consider constitutes a "nation." At the recent SSOC High School Conference in Atlanta, he recommended as an authority on the national question—J.V. Stalin. Lenin, too, considered Stalin an authority on the national question for the Party; that is, until Stalin's brutal treatment of the Georgian communists, along with other offenses against the Bolshevik principle led Lenin to declare that Stalin's tenure as General Secretary posed grave dangers for the Party.

Stalin's Contribution

A standard work on the national question and self-determination is Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question*. We reread it after the confusing experience

of listening to Klonsky in Atlanta. The National Secretary kept referring to “self-determination” to support his points. For example, he said that American radicals have no right to criticize the policies of the NLF. That would be imperialism, since their revolution was their own business. We were wondering whether we had the right to criticize counter-revolutionary Soviet policy when he dropped another one—criticism of the Black Panthers indicated a racist mentality, since whites had no right to tell the Black liberation fighters what to do.

That sounded consistent, anyway. But the next moment Klonsky had nominated the Panthers for vanguard not only of the Black liberation struggle, but the whole American revolution. Now if the National Secretary really thought he had no business criticizing the Blacks he wouldn’t be putting the Panthers on a pedestal at the expense of SNCC, ELRUM, and many others. He would take his own advice, and keep his mouth shut. However, no such deviation from character occurred.

By and by, Klonsky was asked where his theory came from. He referred us to Stalin. We had read the pamphlet. Someone had a very bad memory. Checking the pamphlet would tell us which. When we reread Uncle Joe’s work, we found that Stalin contradicted Klonsky on every point. The differences can’t be accounted for by lapse of memory.

Let’s summarize just what Stalin said about the national question in 1913, when his view was close to Lenin’s. Once people get this straight in their minds, Klonsky can come forward and take credit for developing a new theory of nationalism that has nothing to do with the Bolshevik crew of amateurs.

Leninist Criteria

What constitutes a nation, and once we know that, what should we do about it? In *Marxism and the National Question* (Stalin, *Works*, vol. ii, pp. 300-381) Stalin declares that:

“A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”

He goes further:

“It must be emphasized that none of the above characteristics taken separately is sufficient to define a nation. More than that, it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be lacking and the nation ceases to be a nation.”

The Bolsheviks thought it was pointless to spend a lot of blood trying to get political independence for groups which would fall, quickly and totally, under the economic domination of some other power. So they defined a nation in such a way as to exclude religions, cliques, castes, and any other groups which couldn’t

make a go of it independently. Stalin set down four characteristics, and specified that a “nation” must have *all* of them.

1. Common language
2. Common territory
3. Common economic life (with independent class structure and means of production organized along capitalist lines)
4. Common psychological make-up; common culture

Now which of these features of nationalism is shared by Blacks in the U.S.? Do they have a common language? Well, yes: English, like most other Americans. Common territory? While the South retains a large Black population, the population shift of Blacks in the last fifty years has been from the rural South into all parts of the country, especially into the big cities, many of which now have Black majorities or near-majorities. The geographical distribution of Blacks is increasingly the same as that of the U.S. working class as a whole. Psychological make-up manifested in a common culture? This question lends itself more than the others to subjective interpretation; but it seems that what common, distinctive culture exists is that of the lower, most oppressed stratum of the American working class and that section squeezed into the ranks of the chronically unemployed. Blacks may give the appearance of possessing some degree of special, national culture, because unlike whites almost all Blacks are working-class; this is a class difference in culture, not a national one. Appalachian white workers, or migrant agricultural laborers, for example, possess a somewhat distinct culture as a result of their special niches in capitalism’s division of labor.

The *forced segregation* of Blacks in the U.S. is another factor lending them the appearance of nationhood. But this forced segregation from the bulk of the working class, of which they are economically a part, stands in direct contrast to the usual pattern of *national* oppression: *forced assimilation*. The forced segregation imposed on Blacks by a ruling class seeking to prevent working-class unity has impelled Blacks to seek integration and equality with the rest of the working class. Separatism is an accommodation to the ruling class’ tactic of working-class division along racial lines, and most Blacks know it. When they unite in separate Black organizations it has usually been to fight the separatism, the *appearance* of separate nationality, imposed upon them by the (white) bourgeoisie. A separatist ideology, in its very nature, cannot direct a struggle against the segregation which keeps Blacks in their doubly oppressed condition. And it’s obviously dangerous to imply to racist white workers that since Blacks are a separate nation and deserve a separate state, the whites can have a segregated socialism. This is not different in principle from SSOC’s organizing workers as Southerners.

Utopian Cultural Nationalism

People trying to make a case for Black Culture usually tell only half, or less than half, of the story. They emphasize escape, insurrection, sabotage, protest—the whole spectrum of Black resistance to oppression.

In fact, these traditions are largely absent from the Black community. They are smothered by the culture of humility and submission promoted by the preachers and Uncle Toms. The demand for Black studies is an attempt by the militants to attack the dominant ghetto culture, the culture of submission. This situation duplicates that of the working class as a whole: a dominant ideology of religion and patriotism, promoted by the rulers and all their media, and an insurgent culture of class struggle preserved by the left and part of the labor movement.

In their book *Black Power*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton state:

"Under classic colonialism, the colony is a source of cheaply produced raw materials. . . which the 'Mother Country' then processes into finished goods and sells at a high profit—sometimes back to the colony itself. *The black communities in the United States do not export anything except human labor.*" [p. 6, emphasis added]

Now that is a respectable Marxist definition not of a nation—colony or otherwise—but of the situation of the proletariat under capitalism. Many of the special features of Black life and consciousness in the U.S. follow from the fact that Blacks are proletarians like most other Americans, *only more so*; that is, the Black petty bourgeoisie is extremely small, and the Black big bourgeoisie nonexistent. In the epoch of decaying capitalism there simply isn't room for new Black Rockefellers.

On Separate Organization

Are Black people *simply* working-class, in their vast majority? No. They represent a *specially oppressed color caste within the U.S. working class*. There are other such specially oppressed strata, or "castes," within the working class, and within the petty bourgeoisie as well. The special oppression of Blacks is *qualitatively* similar to that endured by women, youth, many American Indians (some of whom would qualify for a national status in the Marxist sense), and white ethnic minority groups. These examples, too, are predominantly working-class in composition, though sometimes less overwhelmingly so than Blacks. Each of these groups suffers special oppression in addition to the fundamental oppression of the working class under capitalism.

Modern Bolsheviks, like Lenin's party, do not oppose but rather encourage these groups to form special organizations to fight their special oppression. These organizations and movements do not *compete* with the vanguard party of the whole class, but rather are *linked to it* through their most conscious cadre. What we *must* oppose is the dual vanguard concept; the U.S. has a single bourgeois

state and ruling class, and unifying the struggles of all capitalism's separate oppressed groups must be a *single* Marxist party.

With Lenin looking over his shoulder, Stalin would probably say that Blacks no longer have a common territory, that language barriers don't separate them from most other workers, that their culture is not widely divergent either, and that they own nothing but their bodies. He would conclude from this that it would be extremely difficult to unite the Blacks around a demand for secession. And if secession were accomplished, Black workers would still be working for white capitalists since there is no Black big bourgeoisie, no Black capital. Similarly, Lenin's party opposed self-determination for the Jewish ghetto because it provided no avenue of struggle against the dominant institutions of oppression. For this reason the Party opposed the slogan despite the recognized special oppression of the Jews under Tsarism, and despite the existence of widespread anti-Semitism among the less conscious Russian workers.

So the Bolshevik Stalin might say: "Throw in with the white workers, struggle against the bosses *and* against the specific forms of oppression that isolate you and weaken you."

Klonsky cuts through all this nit-picking. He states, boldly and clearly, "If you want to secede, go ahead. It's your blood, and anyway it's not my business to tell you what to do."

Let's put another question to Klonsky and Stalin: Assuming an oppressed and oppressor nation, how should the vanguard party organize?

Klonsky thinks in terms of two vanguards—one Black, one white—with unity at some future date.

Stalin's views on the vanguard are sort of old-fashioned:

"We know where the demarcation of workers according to nationalities leads to. The disintegration of a united workers' party, the splitting of trade unions, aggravation of national friction, national strike-breaking, complete demoralization within the ranks of Social-Democracy."

Simple, isn't it? One ruling class, one vanguard. One boss, one union. One bureaucracy, one caucus to fight it. Stalin wouldn't think much of ELRUM, with its demands for Black foremen. That would seem to him only one step from the demand for Black cops.

Klonsky is more open-minded and liberal in his approach. He's more modest and diplomatic. He knows his place.

No Liberal Blank Checks

Let's assume Klonsky can persuade us that the situation of the American Blacks is a national liberation question, and furthermore, that it requires a separate vanguard. Would that mean that revolutionaries shouldn't criticize the

Black vanguard? The Bolsheviks were notorious for fierce and uncompromising criticism of foreign vanguard parties. *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* is *mostly* criticism of the mistakes of other vanguards. Lenin considered this international criticism and debate to be a *vital* part of internationalism.

Marxists emphatically *do not* support all national demands. They proclaim the *right* of nations to wage their own class struggles, to decide their own historic destinies, even to move backward to an outmoded social order. But Marxists don't abdicate their responsibility to their class, the proletariat. They don't tail-end the self determination struggle. They try to direct it politically, to lead the national struggle in a direction favorable to the *international proletariat* and the establishment of its dictatorship. They don't act as yes-men for national movements, which usually suffer from bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leadership. Honest revolutionaries don't issue blank checks of support to anybody.

The Bolsheviks adopted an extremely critical attitude toward national movements and their demands. In the first section of the pamphlet cited Stalin observes that nationalism was flourishing in 1913, to the weakening and defeat of the proletarian movement internationally. As to the Marxist approach, he says:

"Social-Democracy [will not] support every demand of a nation. A nation has the right even to return to the old order of things; but this does not mean that Social-Democracy will subscribe to such a decision if taken by some institution of a particular nation. The obligations of Social-Democracy, which defends the interests of the proletariat, and the rights of a nation, are two different things.

"This is what essentially distinguishes the policy of the class-conscious proletariat from the policy of the bourgeoisie, which attempts to aggravate and fan the national struggle and to prolong the national movement.

"And that is why the class-conscious proletariat cannot rally under the 'national' flag of the bourgeoisie."

Stalinist enthusiasts for non-proletarian "movements of national liberation around the world" (Arab nationalism, Ben Bella and Boumedienne, Sukarno, Chiang Kai-shek in the 1920's, etc.) should note that Stalin, too, before he liquidated the Old Bolsheviks Left, Right, and Center, spoke for the critical, proletarian, Leninist approach to the national question.

Stalin makes another important observation about nationalism which is very difficult to square with the "historical basis" which Klonsky says exists for a separate Black nation in the U.S.

"A nation is not merely a historical category but a historical category belonging to a definite epoch, the epoch of rising capitalism. The process of elimination of feudalism and development of capitalism is at the same time a process of the constitution of people into nations."

Does Klonsky believe that the twentieth century is one of “rising capitalism” in the U.S.? Or that the U.S., even the South, was “feudal” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the historical basis for a separate Black nation was presumably being laid?

Ersatz Orthodoxy

Summing up: Klonsky and the National Collective have been using Stalin’s name—only his name—to justify their attitude toward the Black liberation struggle and their overall perspective for SDS. Even a *hasty* reading of *Marxism and the National Question* leaves us with this choice of conclusions:

1. Klonsky can’t read.
2. Klonsky is lying.

Ever since the National Collective made its first abortive power-play it has been desperately searching for a national perspective for SDS that would justify greater centralism. It was unable to develop a program of class struggle, because most of the National Collective doesn’t believe in the working class as a revolutionary force, much less the *primary* force for change. But it could and did unite around the romantic appeal of the Panthers. By making the victory of the Black movement a precondition for the development of the American revolution (Klonsky, “The White Question,” *NLN* 20 Mar. ’69) it has dumped the difficult job of teaching class consciousness and promoting the class struggle. What remains is simple agitation against white supremacy, which quite a few liberal and reformist groups have been doing for years. In effect, the National Collective is “with” the Panthers the same way a tape worm is “with” its host. If the Panthers pressure the National Collective to adopt a genuine revolutionary strategy of class struggle, we can depend on the parasite to leave by the traditional route.

PL vs. Marxist Clarity

The chief opposition to the National Collective’s line on nationalism has come from Progressive Labor. Observers of this battle should know that until its drastic left turn on nationalism a few months ago, PL endorsed the same kind of petty-bourgeois nationalist movements here and abroad which the National Collective enthuses over now. PL condemned the Trotskyist Spartacist League for its critical approach to national movements, an approach now adopted by them. PL won’t admit just *whose* analysis they have borrowed from, any more than Stalin admitted adopting aspects of the Left Opposition’s program *after* purging them from the Party. They admit they were wrong on the Black liberation movement, Algeria, the NLF, etc. (see the article on Black Liberation in *PL*, Feb. ’69), but they can’t say who was *right* on these questions or what political *method* led them to avoid PL’s errors. Maybe they feel that all that’s lost is Marxist clarity, and they’re right. Keeping silent means fewer questions when a new zig-zag is called.

PL has not revised its *method* of analyzing problems like the national question. That would require the repudiation of all the characteristic theory and practice of Communist Parties since Stalin's break with Lenin, Trotsky, and Marxism, and his dictatorship over the Party. Socialism in One Country, the Bloc of Four Classes, the Theory of Social Fascism, the liberal Pop Fronts—all this history of the Third International parties would have to be condemned, and that would be getting “dangerously” close to—Trotskyism.

PL belongs to a tradition of degenerate Bolshevism—Stalinism and Maoism. Both look to social formations other than the working class for support of parasitic bureaucracies ruling in place of the proletariat. This is the basis, in political method, of the forty-year pattern of betrayal of the proletariat, a betrayal proceeding from the bureaucracy's need to obtain support or neutrality from bourgeois forces. PL's dependence on the ideology and leadership emanating from China (read *Peking Review*, if you can) will bring their national position right back to where it was should Mao's bureaucracy reprimand PL for its recent divergence from Peking's ultra-opportunistic stance on the national questions. The old Moscow-oriented Communist Parties followed every twist and turn of the Soviet bureaucracy as it sought to avoid the twin dangers of imperialist invasion and workers' political control from below—in the period which PL considers healthy and revolutionary. Radicals leaning toward PL should keep their political spines flexible, and keep close watch on *Peking Review*.

- Nick Dicken—SDS at large, Spartacist League
- Leon Day—SDS at large, Spartacist League

Rise and Fall of the Panthers: End of the Black Power Era

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The spectacular and violent split in the Black Panther Party can be viewed as the symbolic end to a period in American radical politics. The impact of the Panthers, in vast disproportion to their actual size and strength, indicated the pervasive black nationalist mood of which they were the most militant expression. Following the collapse of the liberal-oriented civil rights movement, virtually all U.S. radicals saw the struggle of black people against racial oppression as the central and overriding contradiction within American capitalism. The Panthers' popularity, enhanced by the vicarious black nationalism of white-guilt liberal circles, coincided with the rejection by impatient petty-bourgeois radical students of a perspective based on the revolutionary role of the working class, black and white. The current split, with tragic implications for the defense of jailed Panthers, certainly gladdens the hearts of racists and cops, but has far-reaching implications for the left as well. No longer can the Panther leadership use unquestioned moral authority to claim automatic allegiance from militant black youth and uncritical support from radical whites regardless of their particular

experiences and views.

It is important to recognize that the Panthers came into being at the ebb of the mass black civil rights movement, as a selection of the best black militants in the battles waged over the corpse of the movement. The particular character of the Panthers was shaped by two interrelated developments which marked the death of the respectable civil rights movement of King, Farmer and the early SNCC. One was the movement's obvious failure to change the living conditions of the black masses—in particular, its inability to do anything about the terrorization of the ghetto population by the cops, the armed force of the bourgeois state. This point was driven home by the anti-cop “riots” that swept the ghettos from 1964 to 1967, which proved that militant blacks were through with the non-violent reformism of the SCLC and CORE. The other major development was wholesale ruling-class purchase of black leaders—not only moderates like Farmer but also self-styled black power advocates. The sordid fate of the black power movement was personified in individuals like Roy Innis, who drove the whites out of CORE and later hustled tickets for the Frazier-Ali fight in partnership with General Electric. Another example is LeRoi Jones, black power ex-beat poet, who became aide to His Honor Mayor Gibson and prominently assisted in his attempt to destroy the Newark Teachers Union. The Panthers were thus defined negatively, in reaction against the dying civil rights movement on the one hand and the rise of “pork chop” nationalism on the other.

Ghetto Uprisings and the Myth of Urban Guerrilla Warfare

It was clear to all that the ghetto uprisings, which began in Harlem in 1964 and continued with undiminished intensity until Newark in 1967, marked the end of the old civil rights movement. What was not clear was how the uprisings affected the future of the black movement. Rather than recognizing the ghetto outbursts for what they in fact were—the final spasm of frustration and fury in the wake of a movement that had raised great hopes and activated enormous energy only to accomplish nothing—the left wishful-thinking saw in the ghetto-police battles the beginning of mass revolutionary violence which presumably had merely to be organized in order to be made effective. The notion that the ghetto was a base for urban guerrilla warfare was common not only among black nationalists, but was accepted by most of the left, from serious Maoists like Progressive Labor to the pundits of *Monthly Review*. The Panthers were outstanding in their willingness to face jail and even death for their theory.

The ghetto uprisings did not give the black masses a sense of their own power. They did just the opposite. During the rioting, it was blacks' own homes that were burned down and the cops who went on a killing rampage. The riots proved that police brutality was not an isolated injustice that could be eliminated through militant action. The cops are an essential part of the armed force of the state; if defeated locally, they came back with the National Guard or Army. To drive the cops out of the ghetto and keep them out was equivalent to overthrowing the American state; thus as long as the majority of white workers

remained loyal or only passively hostile to the government, black activism could not liberate the ghetto. It was not their lack of formal organization but a sense that they really could not win that gave the ghetto uprisings their spontaneous, consciously self-sacrificing character.

The Panthers chose to make a stand on their ability to purge the ghetto of police brutality when experience had shown the black masses that this could not be done given the existing over-all balance of political forces. The Panthers, realizing that the masses could not be organized to aggressively confront the police, developed a conscious policy of substituting their own militants for the organized power of the masses. In so doing, they developed a self-image of a band of warrior-heroes avenging the historic injustices visited upon the downtrodden black population. Adventurous black youth joining the Panthers did not see themselves as building a successful social revolution, but anticipated “leaving the Party in a pine box” with a dead cop to their credit, having done their share to avenge the centuries-old oppression of their people.

The Panther leadership knew they were standing up to the cops in isolation from the black masses. In his essay, “The Correct Handling of a Revolution,” Huey Newton contended that armed Panthers would set an example which the rest of the black people would follow. Written after thousands of blacks had battled the cops and lost in Harlem, Watts and Chicago, Newton’s argument had a forced and unreal quality. History was about to give Newton a swift and deadly counter-argument.

The Panthers Pick Up the Gun and Are Defeated

Taking advantage of California’s liberal gun laws, the Panthers applied their theory. At first their tactics appeared successful. Newton’s armed patrols in Oakland went unmolested. The Panthers held an armed rally in Richmond commemorating the murder of Denzil Dowell by a deputy sheriff, and faced the cops down. Most spectacularly, Bobby Seale led a group of armed Panthers to the State Capitol during a debate on gun control, and received only a light prison sentence. Taken aback by the Panther flamboyance, and uncertain how much support they had in the ghetto, the authorities at first demurred. But beginning with the wounding and jailing of Newton in October 1967, and gaining steam with the killing of Bobby Hutton and the arrest of Cleaver in April 1968, a coordinated national campaign to wipe out the Panthers was launched by local police and the FBI operating in many cases with the assistance of cultural nationalist groups (the murder of Los Angeles Panthers by members of Ron Karenga’s US). Over the past few years, the murders of Panthers have continued and virtually the entire leadership has been imprisoned on capital charges.

Contrary to Panther theorizing, the crackdown on them did not provoke mass ghetto rebellions. In fact, the Panthers’ real weakness can be seen by comparing the response to their persecution with the spontaneous eruptions of ghetto rage at the assassination of Martin Luther King.

The Panthers' feeling of desperate isolation as the police rifle sight zeroed in on them is expressed in a moving account by Earl Anthony, a former Deputy Minister of Information who later split from the Party in the direction of mainstream nationalism. Writing after the Battle of Montclair, where three Panthers were killed by the cops in Los Angeles, Anthony reflects:

"I kept thinking to myself. . . about the ease with which the Panthers were being killed, and I couldn't do anything about it, and nobody I knew could do anything about it. And I thought about the thousands upon thousands. . . of black people who have been murdered, and nobody could do anything about it. . . . What really burned me inside was that I was forced to realize the untenable position the Party and other blacks who dare to put their toe to the line are in. I knew that white people didn't really care that Little Tommy, Captain Steve, and Robert were gone, or that the pigs were scheming the murder of the rest of us. . . . I had learned to accept that attitude from whites. But the painful reality was that many blacks had it too. When you got down to it, we were pretty much alone. Not many people really cared. . . ."

-Earl Anthony, *Picking Up the Gun*, pp. 138-39.

The Panthers Defend Themselves and Move Right

Isolated, with repression bearing down on them, the Panthers shifted the focus of their activities to legal defense work in an effort to gain the broadest possible support. The Panther alliances with white radicals were not motivated by any realization that American society could only be revolutionized by an integrated working-class movement, but by the material needs of their defense campaign. As Seale openly admitted, the Panthers' support for the ill-fated Peace and Freedom Party was not based on a desire to establish an integrated radical third party, but by a belief that the PFP was a convenient vehicle in gaining left liberal support for defense of Newton. The other widely divergent groups supporting the PFP, such as Progressive Labor and the Independent Socialist Clubs (now the International Socialists) were no less opportunistic, although in their case the motivation was chiefly a desire for a recruiting vehicle.

The Panthers' tendency to move closer to liberalism, implicit in their support of the liberal program of the PFP, was made explicit in the equally abortive United Front Against Fascism, launched in 1969. Guided by the Communist Party's legal apparatus, the UFAF was an attempt to create an alliance of everyone to the left of Nixon-Agnew on an essentially civil libertarian basis. The UFAF's main programmatic demand—community control of the police—combined liberal illusions over the nature of the bourgeois state with black nationalist illusions that the oppression of black people can be ended through "control" of ghetto institutions.

The Panthers' overtures to the liberals were not very successful since the Panthers

were too notorious for defense by bourgeois politicians. A few West Coast black Democrats, like Willy Brown and Ronald Dellums, protected their left flank by coming out for the Panthers. Some politicians like Cleveland's Carl Stokes, questioned whether the police might not have actually violated the Panthers' rights! The Panthers were somewhat more successful in garnering support and money from the cultural wing of the liberal establishment, as indicated by Leonard Bernstein's famous party where the "beautiful people" met the Panthers and paid handsomely for the titillation of exposing their bourgeois sensibilities to the black revolution in safety, an expensive delight somewhat recalling the Roman arenas. But despite their efforts to present themselves as simple anti-fascists, the heat continued to come down on the Panthers.

Although the Panthers since 1969 have clearly given up street patrols in favor of defense rallies and soirees, they have not officially abandoned their claim to be the vanguard of urban guerrilla warfare. In the current split, the Cleaver wing points to this contradiction and claims with some truth that Newton's Oakland group has deserted the original Panther banner.

Along with their turn toward the liberals, the Panthers launched a series of ghetto social work programs, exemplified in their "breakfast for children" drive. The new activities were designed to gain support from the black masses who had not rallied to the confrontationist image, as well as give the Panthers a more humanitarian image when facing white middle-class juries. Thus, Panther attorney Lefcourt forced the undercover agent in the New York 21 case to admit that the defendants spent most of their time doing good works in the community and not plotting to blow up buildings.

The "breakfast for children" program is also a rather ridiculous attempt to apply literally the standard Maoist "serve the people" strategy. While Mao's Red Army could give some real material aid to the Chinese peasants in protecting them from rapacious landlords, helping with the harvest and the like, the notion that the Panthers could compete with the Welfare Department or the Baptist Church in feeding the ghetto poor is simply ludicrous. But the fundamental flaw in the "serve the people" line is not that it doesn't work, but that it strengthens the paternalistic character the Panthers already present in their self-image as avenging angels of the black masses seen as grateful clients of a revolutionary organization, not as potential conscious revolutionists in their own right.

The Panthers' need for activities like the "breakfast for children" program to improve their image in the ghetto destroys the myth that they are a spontaneous expression of black militancy. Some radical groups—notably the International Socialists, who followed the Panthers right up to the gates of Peking Stalinism—contended that one should support the Panthers regardless of their politics because they were the highest organic expression of ghetto political consciousness. In contrast, the Panthers have always regarded themselves as a highly self-conscious vanguard tendency. On the one hand, they sought to win the loyalty of the ghetto youth from competing groups, mainly the cultural nationalists. On the other, they beat the ghetto life style out of their new recruits (while glorifying

it in their press), recognizing that a lumpenized life style is incompatible with serious and sustained revolutionary activity. The contention that lax political standards should be employed in judging the Panthers because they are an authentic cry from the soul of the black masses is not only factually false but reflects a patronizing attitude toward blacks that borders on racism.

Glamor and Terror

The Panthers' serious internal difficulties, manifested not only in the present decisive split but also in the endless series of expulsions, reflects the impossibility of building a revolutionary organization with street gang methods. Because the Panthers recruited adventurous youth without a stable axis, they could only prevent the disintegration of their organization into competing warlordisms through the imposition of a kind of military terror. New recruits were assigned fifty push-ups for failing to memorize the Panther program, and pressure was put on them to do two hours of reading a day. It is argued that such coerced internal political life is necessary in any radical organization not composed primarily of middle-class intellectuals. But the history of the proletarian socialist movement in the U.S. and elsewhere yields many examples of organizations in which articulate and politically able industrial workers though often lacking formal education, shaped policy, and did not merely memorize a program by rote, like a prayer. This was possible because the socialist movement recruited workers to a comprehensive program for long-term political goals. The Panthers, on the contrary, recruited on the basis of a radical street gang mentality, with its attendant personal, ethnic and geographical loyalties. The Panther program did not shape their organization and its activities, but was treated as a decoration like icing on a cake.

The Panthers' concept of rule through terror, and its application to internal factional struggles as well as relations with other radical groups, can no longer be ignored by the opportunists who tailed after the Panthers and their popularity, hoping it would rub off. In discussing the factional struggle with Cleaver, Newton simply said "We'll battle it out" and "... I have the guns," to which Cleaver replied, "I got some guns too, brother" (*Right On!*, 3 April 1970). In a like manner, the Panthers responded to criticisms of their "United Front" with the CP and liberals by physically throwing the critics out of the UFAF conference (see *Spartacist West*, No. 18) and making repeated public threats against all left critics. At no time has the Panther leadership reacted to criticism by seeking to politically discredit their opponents within the radical constituency. At no time have they recognized that building a revolutionary party requires methods in any way different from conducting a street gang rivalry.

Apart from terror, the main element holding a street gang together is a power mystique, manifest in the warrior-hero cult of the Panthers. Seale testified to the importance of glamor to the Panthers in noting that a number of members left the Party when ordered not to wear their uniforms except on Party assignment. The best expression of Panther glamor-mongering is the ascending order of hero

worship, culminating in the cult of Huey Newton which appears even more absurd than the Stalin and Mao cults because of its imitative character.

The disastrous effect of building an organization through hero worship is apparent in the split, which has been dominated by personal rivalries and clique politics. The split originated not in clear political differences, but in accusations that Chief of Staff David Hilliard was playing favorites in allocating defense funds and expelling out-of-favor Panthers, like “Geronimo” Pratt, to avoid the responsibility for their defense. But there are political differences implicit in the split. Each faction occupies one of the two poles around which Panther politics have revolved. The Cleaver group represents the anti-cop confrontationism characteristic of the early Panthers while Newton’s group reflects the liberalism and social-work do-goodism of the defense campaigns. In terms of internal dynamics, the Algiers group tends toward reconciliation with mainstream Black Nationalism, while the Oakland group has gravitated toward liberal reformism sometimes more naked than that of the Communist Party. The actual faction fight has touched these differences only marginally, and has been conducted almost entirely in terms of competing heroes, character assassination and counter-retailing of atrocity stories (e.g., the claim that Cleaver is keeping his wife prisoner, the accusation that Hilliard is doping Newton). The main programmatic demand of the Algiers group is a call for collective leadership and an attack on the personality cult, while the Newton group has defended itself by asserting the personality cult, namely Newton’s own.

Sections of the left have of course attempted to find a qualitative political superiority of one wing over the other, as a rationale for drawing close to it. Perhaps the crudest attempt to paint one of the wings as “Marxist” or close to it was that of the assertedly Trotskyist “Workers League” of Tim Wohlforth. Wohlforth hailed Newton’s proclaimed embracing of the dialectic in a fit of organizational appetite early last year. Newton very soon thereafter announced his peace with black capitalism and the church, teaching Wohlforth again that “dialectic” is a word of four syllables and “method” of two, and that it takes much more than the mouthing of the two words to make a Marxist, or even a potential Marxist. To make his short-lived praise of Newton more grotesque, Wohlforth printed fulsome praise and carefully selected revolutionary proletarian quotes from Newton in the same article in which he defended, against SWP-YSA criticism, his view of the New York police “strike” as “a reflection of a very general, deep and profound movement of the working class”! (15 February *Bulletin*) “Only the Workers League”... dares to suck up to the Panthers and defend the “job action” of their mortal enemies, the cops, in the same issue of the same publication.

Hero worship is one of the ways bourgeois ideology enters the revolutionary movement and destroys it. Its corrupting nature is evident in Huey Newton’s \$650 a month penthouse, paid for out of Party funds raised in defense campaigns, while rank-and-file Panthers hide from the police in rat-infested hovels. The Panther paper justifies Newton by noting that he had “stood up and faced the

pigs (from which he was wounded and spent two years in prison)” and that he had “put his life on the line in the fight to end this racist, exploitative system.” The paper went on to state: “Huey and his generals of staff should have the best as they plan their party’s strategy.” (*The Black Panther*, 27 February 1971) The belief that the pest sufferings of militants entitle them to the good life at rank-and-file expense is an important subjective justification for bureaucracy in the labor and radical movement. Moreover, left-wing leaders can continue to enjoy the good life only with ruling-class cooperation, obtainable by holding back the organizations they are supposed to lead against it. Many present leading AFL-CIO bureaucrats were beaten, shot at and jailed in their youth. Newton’s penthouse and the Party’s defense of it indicate a deeply anti-socialist attitude. The revolutionary movement is not like a medieval joust where the best knight gets the castle. Its purpose is to destroy the castle.

Lumpens, Hippies and New Left Ideology

An analysis qualitatively superior to the Workers League’s general pattern of alternating denunciation and grovelling before the Panthers was written by “Lil Joe” for the 15 March 1971 *Bulletin*. The author, no longer with the Workers League, well analyzed the tension between the “national” and “class” orientation of the Panthers:

"The Black Panther Party was organized as a nationalist organization. Unlike the other nationalist groups, however, it was organized for the most part, by ghetto Blacks—the most oppressed sections of the ghetto youth—the unemployed and if employed, employed in low paying industry. As nationalism is a middle class ideology of ‘unity of race or nation’ rather than ‘unity of class,’ the Black Panther Party, organized by and for Black working class youth necessarily took on a class character.

"Hence in its earliest development the Black Panther Party was thrown into conflict with nationalism itself. The Black Panther Party, however, externalized this struggle by declaring itself ‘Revolutionary Nationalist’ as in primary opposition to that which they described as ‘Cultural Nationalism.’

"What the Panthers would not do was confront the fact that ‘cultural nationalism’ and ultimately ‘Black Zionism’ under the guise of ‘Pan Africanism’ was the logical conclusion of Black nationalism by virtue of the fact that Black people in America share not a national, but a cultural or racial identity.

"By externalizing their struggle against ‘Black nationalism’ or ‘cultural’ nationalism, the Black Panther Party was able to prolong, to ‘put off,’ an inevitable explosion within the Black Panther Party itself. While denouncing ‘Cultural’ nationalism and maintaining itself as a racial rather than a class organization—‘Revolutionary

Nationalist’—the Black Panther Party was able to make criticisms of sorts, while at the same time bowing to the pressures of the Black middle class ‘nationalists’ themselves.”

To avoid the Marxist contention that the organized working class is the key revolutionary element, the Panthers came up with the theory that black lumpens are the revolutionary vanguard, and that all employed workers, black and white, have been bought off by the ruling class. The Panthers’ “theory” of lumpenism is a mixture of self-aggrandizement and impressionism. Its role is similar to the theories of “student power” and the “new working class” that were popular in SDS a few years ago: our revolutionary organization consists largely of lumpens (or students); therefore lumpens (or students) must be the vanguard of the revolution. This kind of “theorizing” unfortunately does not merit serious consideration.

A lumpen life style has very different social roots among ghetto black youth and middle-class whites; but in both cases youth rebel against the prospect of holding down a meaningless job, raising a family and suffering a deadly “respectable” life. Such rebellious attitudes are not merely justified, but are the subjective raw material out of which revolutionary consciousness is made. No one will be a revolutionist who does not hate a society that makes life for working people boring, trivial, deadening and often heartbreaking. But a political movement which isolates itself in a social milieu hostile to normal work-a-day society must become irresponsible, individualistic and ultimately cynical and contemptuous of the mass of working people. It is precisely that task of revolutionaries to penetrate the mainstream of social and economic life and explode “normal work-a-day” society on the basis of its terrible oppressiveness—the very oppressiveness which drove individuals to become revolutionaries in the first place.

The Left’s Panther Cult

The Panther split is another nail in the coffin of the New Left. For years, the U.S. left has defined itself in terms of supporting this or that militant action or opposing particular acts of oppression and injustice. Within the issue-oriented movement, support for the Panthers has been one of the few common elements that prevented the left from fragmenting completely through “doing one’s own thing.” The net effect of the Panther influence on the left was negative, not only because the Panthers’ own politics never transcended black nationalism and crude Stalinism, but because Panther-worship and uncritical concentration on their defense campaigns prevented the political interaction essential to revolutionary program and strategy. It was Cleaver’s presence at the head of the ticket that enabled the PFP to bring together a collection of left McCarthyites, Yippies, orthodox Maoists (Progressive Labor) and “third campers” (IS) into an unprincipled, liberal-program “unity” for a time. In a like manner, uncritical support for and from the Panthers was one of the few concrete issues the diverse anti-labor elements in the old SDS could unite around in expelling the “Worker-Student Alliance” tendency. The Panther split proved

once again that hero worship and tail-ending are no substitute for the struggle for Marxist clarity as a foundation of a revolutionary party.

Since their inception, the Panthers have been a test for the predominantly white American left as a whole—a test of its ability to apply Marxist analysis, and a test of its consistency and courage. The absence of a Leninist vanguard party made the ruin of the Panthers likely if not strictly inevitable. Lacking a link to the revolutionary party of the working class, organizations fighting special oppression stand isolated from the rest of the working class and endangered by the problems and backwardness of their particular, isolated areas of struggle. The extreme result of such a situation is “self-determination for everybody” with every organization and particular struggle competing for a larger share of the capitalist pie.

It is important to note the significance of *how* the Panthers were defeated. That the Panthers were defeated *physically* by the state rather than *politically* through the intervention of the vanguard party means, in effect, that many of the lessons of their demise will surely be lost. It means that more despair and less consciousness of what went wrong has been created in many of the best subjectively revolutionary elements. On a smaller scale, the difference is not unlike that between the destruction of a bureaucracy like, say, the North Vietnamese by American tanks and bombers instead of by the North Vietnamese workers in political revolution.

But did any of the various left organizations show by their attitude toward the Panthers the fitness, the right (or for that matter even any intention) to construct the vanguard party which was lacking? Nearly all self-proclaimed Marxist organizations failed the test, most of them repeatedly on a variety of issues and occasions. The gutless IS, loudly proclaiming their anti-Stalinism, tailed the Panthers throughout the process leading to their embrace with the Stalinists and their liberal allies in the United Front Against Fascism. The SWP-YSA, the most vociferous “Marxist” proponent of black nationalism, consistently ignored the Panthers’ systematic errors and violations of proletarian ethics until, we presume, they became scared. They refused to sign a protest issued by the Spartacist League against the beating and exclusion by the Panthers of radical tendencies selling their literature outside a Panther “Birthday Party” celebration in Berkeley, California, in February 1970. Their proclaimed reason for refusal was their unwillingness to intervene in Panther internal affairs—as if physical attacks on competing radical tendencies were an “internal affair”! But they were shortly to repudiate the Panthers as part of their general “orthodox” shying away from the guerrilla warfare line they had preached—for others—for years. (See *Spartacist* No. 20, April-May 1970, “World Trotskyism Rearms” for an analysis of their newly-discovered Leninist opposition to guerrilla warfare strategy when their European co-thinkers proposed that the U.Sec. implement its pro-guerrilla stance.) The SWP’s new criticism of the Panthers whom they supported for so long, is fundamentally criticism *from the right*, expressed CP-fashion in orthodox-sounding rhetoric about the need to rely on the movement of the masses. The

SWP criticized the Panthers also for not being *nationalist enough*; the scattered references in Panther leaders' speeches to *class* struggle (of which the Workers League briefly made so much) were too much for the thoroughly reformist SWP to swallow. In an article "Which Way for Black Liberation" in the December 1969 *Young Socialist*, the YSA leadership condemned the Black Panthers for "waving the little red book, or calling this the year of the gun" instead of "reaching out to the broadest masses of the community" around "the questions of black control of the schools, ending police brutality, better jobs"—precisely the issues the liberals can campaign on. The YSA's critique is thus not a critique of the crude Panther brand of Maoism, but an attack on their attempt to popularize their conception of communist consciousness as opposed to the SWP's classless community reform line.

From Black Power to Communism

If the Panther split is disorienting for the "white" radical movement, it is devastating for the black radical movement. With the demise of the Panthers as a united organization, no national black organization exists which can claim the allegiance of large numbers of radical blacks. The civil rights movement, which attracted young militants through its social activism and a sense that it was engaging in decisive political battles, is long dead and buried. The mainstream black nationalists are openly and unashamedly on the payroll of "the man." Localized *ad hoc* groups like black student unions or tenants' unions cannot have serious revolutionary pretensions, whatever their members might think. The Panthers were the only organization which could seriously claim to be both black and subjectively revolutionary. And now the Panthers are no more. Two competing apparatuses exist in disarray, stripped of moral authority. The only black organization now existing which can claim both a degree of militancy and rudiments of national structure is the Black Workers' Congress. BWC leader James Forman, assertedly converted to anti-imperialism from his SNCC liberalism, expounds a policy of separate organizations of black workers and a view of Marxism as [a] handbook of how-to-run-an-organization-and-be-serious. The BWC appears at this time to be capable of sowing considerable revisionist confusion especially among unionists, but not likely to acquire the widespread moral authority enjoyed by the old Panthers. There is now no place for a black revolutionist to go... except the integrated proletarian socialist movement.

The shriveling of the civil rights movement in the fires of Watts and Detroit, the rise of pork-chop nationalism and the external and internal destruction of the Panthers cannot be explained in terms of the problems of particular organizations and the defections of particular leaders. Rather, these developments prove the impossibility of building a black liberation struggle independent of the rest of American society. The civil rights movement failed because the oppression and degradation of black people is deeply rooted in the American economy and society and cannot be eliminated through legalistic reforms. Only a socialist economic system can lift the ghetto masses off the bottom of the economic

order. That the black power protests of H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael produced a movement of Uncle Toms in dashikis and professional strike-breakers was not because the movement was always composed of corrupt opportunists. The black power advocates realized the ghetto was not economically viable. If black power meant more black principals, welfare department heads and police chiefs, then only the ruling class could finance a substantial increase in the black bureaucracy. And the ruling class always demands a return on its money. The Panthers could not defeat the cops because the cops are an essential part of the capitalist state and the Panthers could not defeat that state. Given that fact, the Panthers could only alternate between the bitter consequences of heroic adventurism or appealing to the liberal establishment.

The oppression of the black people cannot be ended by black activists alone, but only by the working class as a whole. The breakup of the Panthers' organization and authority creates greater opportunity—but only opportunity—for the struggle for an integrated proletarian socialist vanguard party. The process is in no sense inevitable; there will always be plenty of hustlers and romantic rebels to attempt endless repetition of the old mistakes and betrayals. But the intervention of Leninists among radical blacks can stimulate the understanding that the liberation of black people will be both a great driving force of the American proletarian revolution, and a great achievement of the revolution in power. That revolution will be made, not in the name of black power, but of working-class power—communism.

Soul Power or Workers Power? The Rise and Fall of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers

—Reprinted from *Workers Vanguard* No. 36, 18 January 1974

Crippling three major Chrysler facilities in this past summer's wave of wildcats (including the first auto plant takeovers since the historic sitdowns of the late thirties), the Detroit working class has once again demonstrated its capacity for militant action. It was among the largely black work force of these same inner-city plants that the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was born in the late 1960's.

Unlike other black nationalist groups, the League insisted on the centrality of the working class and, in the beginning, seriously oriented toward organizing at "the point of production." The LRBW and its various auto factory groups (DRUM, FRUM, ELRUM) have since disappeared, inevitable victims of their own internal contradictions. But it is important for working-class militants to examine the League and its evolution, which clearly reveal the incompatibility of nationalist and proletarian politics.

Reuther Betrayals Pave the Way

It was no accident that such a group developed in Detroit, where blacks have long been an important element in the auto plants. At first courted by Henry Ford as a counter-force to unionism, the vast majority nevertheless refused to serve as Ford's scabs in the crucial 1940 River Rouge organizing strike.

The increasing population of blacks in the city and the plants after World War II contributed to the pressure on the Reuther bureaucracy to support the early civil rights movement—a movement characterized by the non-violent protest politics of Martin Luther King and well within the framework of Reuther's "labor-Democratic alliance." But despite Reuther's social-democratic past and demagogic "progressive" image, the "red-haired wonder" failed to apply even these minimal liberal capitalist policies to the widespread racism permeating the lower levels of his own bureaucracy. This situation led aspiring black bureaucrats to set up such opportunist formations as the Trade Union Leadership Council. The TULC was founded in 1957 by a group of lower-level blacks in the UAW apparatus (like Buddy Battle of Ford's River Rouge Local 600) and black labor diplomats like venerable social democrat A. Philip Randolph, whose main concern was simply to garner a bit of face-saving independence from the Reuther machine, while maintaining its liberal politics.

At the same time, the combination of Reuther's hypocritical liberalism and the impotent pressure-group politics of King and the black bureaucrats provided fertile ground for the spawning of more militant black nationalist political currents and organizations. Detroit is the home of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, the Republic of New Africa (RNA) and the Pan-African Congress; scene of the Black Economic Development Conference and the "Black Manifesto" (April 1969); and battleground for the race riot of 1943 and the ghetto rebellion of 1967.

The 1943 riot was a result of the mass migration of southern whites and blacks into Detroit during the war. Extremely overcrowded housing and the hostility with which the southern poor whites viewed the relative equality which black workers enjoyed in the war production plants turned the city into a bloody no-man's land for several days. Yet the mass lynchings elicited little more from the UAW than a pious call to end racial discrimination and to appoint a black assistant prosecutor in the investigation and a self-congratulatory pat on the back that the bloodshed had not entered the plants!

The conflagration of July 1967 was the bloodiest, and one of the last, of a series of anti-cop ghetto riots that buried the liberal illusions of the civil rights movement. This uprising was the product of a combination of circumstances. On the one hand, the "progressive" Reuther UAW bureaucracy and its liberal Democratic "friends in the White House" had done nothing to stem Detroit's recurring massive auto-related unemployment, which during the 1957-58 recession reached 19.5 percent, and topped 15.2 percent at the height of the next recession in March 1961. More damning still was the unemployment figure for Detroit blacks

in the same 1961 period—39 percent, and a phenomenal 78 percent for black youth as compared to 33 percent for youth overall!

On the other hand, for the first time in almost two decades large numbers of young blacks were being hired into the auto plants to replace older white workers. Seniority lists at Detroit's Chrysler plants invariably show a gap for the period 1953-1965 or so. Thus, the upsurge in militancy coincided, as in 1943, with rising expectations on the part of the oppressed black minority (now a majority).

As in 1943, the UAW response was hypocritical do-nothingism. After 43 blacks had been killed by cops and National Guardsmen, Reuther offered a union volunteer crew for cleaning up debris on bloody 12th Street—an offer he never fulfilled.

The Black Panthers' acclaim of black lumpen street youth as the socialist vanguard was made ludicrous by the reality in Detroit of 60,000 militant blacks working in the strategic center of American industry. The real social power of blacks rests not with the lumpen street gang that occasionally guns down an isolated cop in the ghetto, but with the worker who can stop the lifeblood of American capitalism

Recognizing this reality in reaction to the Panther approach, a group of radical nationalists centered around the Wayne State campus and including Ken Cockrel, John Watson, Mike Hamlin, General Baker and John Williams (among others) coalesced shortly after the rebellion around a community-oriented paper, the *Inner City Voice*. Some among the original *Inner City Voice* group, such as John Watson, had earlier been around the ex-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, while others came from a Maoist background. They were held together by a vague, but militant, determination to create a "black Marxist-Leninist party". Maintaining their adherence to nationalist ideology, they nonetheless saw that black workers occupied a key role in the American economy and the working class. As Watson pointed out in his pamphlet, *To the Point of Production*:

"Our analysis tells us that the basic power of black people lies at the point of production, that the basic power we have is our power as workers. As workers, as black workers, we have historically been, and are now, essential elements in the American economic sense. . . . This is probably different from these kinds of analysis which say where it's at is to go out and organize the so-called 'brother on the street.' It's not that we're opposed to this type of organization, but without a more solid base such as that which the working class represents, this type of organization, that is, community based organization, is generally a pretty long, stretched-out, and futile development."

DRUM, ELRUM Lead Wildcats

As a result of its orientation, the *Inner City Voice* group reportedly soon attracted a group of young black workers from the Chrysler Hamtramck Assembly plant—

Dodge Main. Disgusted with the bureaucratic union politics they had experienced, these workers crystallized around an ICV member in the plant to form the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). A wildcat over line speed-up in May 1968, involving both black and white workers, resulted in racist disciplinary actions being applied overwhelmingly to the black militants.

The high level of nationalist sentiment among the recently hired young black workers, the isolation of the largely older, Polish bureaucracy and the absence of any other alternative leadership opened the way for a spectacular and rapid success by DRUM in establishing itself as the leadership of the 60 percent-black work force at Dodge. Within six weeks of its first newsletter distribution, DRUM organized a highly effective boycott by the black workers of two nearby bars that refused to hire blacks. Three weeks later, in the crucial pre-change over period, they led a three-day wildcat which shut down the plant and held a rally of 3,000 workers in the plant parking lot.

Besides calling for reinstatement of seven workers fired in the May walkout, DRUM demanded an end to union and company discrimination, and demanded, in particular, more upgrading and apprenticeship openings for blacks. It also called, however, for more black foremen and other supervisory personnel and launched an attack on the “racist” seniority system.

Such demands can hardly be expected to lead to united working-class struggle against capitalism. Demands to change the skin color of the companies’ disciplinary personnel implicitly assume that the brutal realities of capitalist exploitation can be changed by a few reforms. Instead, revolutionaries who seek to take the struggle beyond such pitiful reforms would vigorously protest cases of racial discrimination, while calling for the elimination of company supervisory personnel from the shop floor and for workers control of production. (Incidentally, the auto companies have since hired large numbers of black foremen without changing one iota the oppressiveness of the plants.)

Similarly, while militants must oppose racially and sexually discriminatory aspects of existing seniority systems, and call for a sliding scale of wages and hours to provide jobs for all, they must also recognize that seniority systems are a primitive form of job security that must be defended. And although class-conscious workers must pay special attention to the needs of the more oppressed sections of the proletariat, they would seek to unite blacks and whites by simultaneously raising demands which directly benefit all workers.

Despite the demands’ nationalist inspiration, a number of white workers did support the walkout. But the DRUM leadership consciously avoided organizing them. “No attempt was made to interfere with white workers. . . . Most of the white workers reported to work after they saw that it was safe for them to go through the gate. Those who stayed out did so for various reasons. Some believed in honoring picket lines, and a few were sympathetic” (*The South End*, 23 January 1969)

Though the UAW responded with heavy red-baiting (which led DRUM to deny

that it was indeed communist!), the wildcat resulted in the reinstatement of five of the fired seven (an open DRUM supporter and founding ICV member was not rehired). In addition, DRUM's reputation was firmly established; it continued publication of a weekly newsletter, went on to consolidate its support into an organizational structure in September and shortly decided to run a candidate for union office.

Taking advantage of a special election for trustee of Dodge Local 3, DRUM ran Ron March in a campaign designed to demonstrate "DRUM power and black solidarity," on such demands as:

1. The complete accountability to the black majority of the entire membership. . . .
2. Advocating a revolutionary change in the UAW (including a referendum vote and revive the grievance procedure). . . .
3. A refusal to be dictated to by the International staff of the UAW. . . .

—*DRUM Newsletter* No. 13

March barely lost in a runoff election to the candidate of a temporarily unified bureaucracy, after initially beating out a field of 21 candidates. In a later election for vice-president, the in- and out-bureaucrats again blocked to support Andy Hardy (current Local 3 president), who defeated the DRUM candidate by 2,600 to 1,600.

Word of DRUM's audacity spread to other plants and even outside the industry. ELRUM was formed at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant in late 1968, and less important groups arose at Detroit Forge (FORUM), Jefferson Assembly (JARUM), Mack Avenue Stamping (MARUM), Ford River Rouge (FRUM), Cadillac Fleetwood (CADRUM), the Detroit News (NEWRUM), United Parcel warehouse (UPRUM) and other places.

The Eldon plant, in particular, is crucial to Chrysler's entire operation, supplying parts to all of its assembly plants, and is part of the vital Lynch Road complex which includes the Detroit Forge and Plymouth Assembly. ELRUM launched itself by organizing a mass rally in front of the Local 961 union hall in January 1969, demanding that the union act on the many unresolved health and safety grievances.

The firing of two militants who participated in the rally, and the local president's agnostic response, led to a wildcat the following week with an expanded list of demands, similar to those raised by DRUM, including "the removal of the non-English speaking witch doctor we have at present and replaced with a Black doctor" (*The South End*, 10 February 1969)! This second action resulted in the firing of a large number of workers, of whom 25 were not reinstated.

By May, Eldon was again shut down in a two-day wildcat organized by the Eldon Safety Committee, "a loose coalition composed by ELRUM, Eldon Wildcat (a

small syndicalist group) and several discharged union officials" (*Radical America*, March-April 1971). The wildcat, which resulted in the firing of three ELRUM militants, was a response to the death of a young, black forklift driver and the mounting pile-up of safety violations.

Though the ELRUM newsletter pointed out that it was betrayed by those "Uncle Tom" union officials and ignored by "Our Uncle Tom President and N--- Executive Board," ELRUM's solution "to break up this union-management partnership" was "to obtain BLACK representation," as though the problem were the lack of blackness" (i.e., nationalism) of the sellout bureaucrats.

Concretely, this meant running a slate which included Jordan Sims (now Local 961 president and co-chairman of the reformist United National Caucus) for committeeman, and later supporting the opportunist Sims (though he cautiously refused to accept their support) in his bid for local president in 1970. This turn of events came from DRUM's (and ELRUM's) admitted emphasis on:

"selecting an all Black slate. . . we have always been handed this slate or that slate none of which represents the best interest of Black Workers. We all remember how we used to go to the polls with a hand full of slates trying to pick out all of the black candidates . . . We were forced in many instances to vote for stone cut throat pollacks, known white racist, and head scratching Uncle Toms because we had no alternative candidates."

—DRUM leaflet, February 1970

From the Plants to the "Community"

Based on the apparent strength of DRUM and ELRUM after the initial wildcats and the obvious attractiveness of the DRUM concept to other black workers, yet seeing the need to transcend the isolation of individual plant caucuses, the ICV cadre moved to organize the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in early 1969. The impetus behind the League's formation led to conflicting notions within the leadership: whether to expand into the community or orient toward a pan-plant, pan-industry workers' organization.

Reflecting its success and base in the plants, the League introduced itself as follows:

"DRUM, FRUM, and ELRUM are organizations of and for the super-exploited, over worked, last-hired, first-fired, sick and tired Black workers of Detroit. These organizations are dedicated to the development of unified, disciplined, and effective action by Blacks acting in their own interests. We believe that this can best be accomplished through a League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

" . . . Those Brothers and Sisters who are interested in a truly militant organization that is dedicated to the cause of Black labor and Black

liberation should contact the League of Revolutionary Black Workers now."

—*Spear*, Vol. 1, No. 1

But the inability to square a nationalist orientation with the realities of class struggle in the plants and the decline of plant-related activity, plus pressure in that direction from a section of the leadership, led to an increasing emphasis on the black worker's role in the community:

"Black workers have the ability to deal with the overall problems that exist within the black community. . . . CHRY-RUM will be concerned not only with problems that exist inside the plants but problems that exist inside our community—the Black Community. The first two projects that CHRY-RUM has undertaken are the International Black Appeal and Parents and Students for Community Control (control of our school system)."

—*CHRY-RUM*, Vol. 1, No. 1

The abortive IBA was conceived of as a black alternative to the United-Foundation—a charity fund to be supported by "communities of the black and poor." This is the logic of community control: the poor supporting the poor'

Detroit had recently passed a school decentralization measure setting up regional school boards (which were to become centers of strike-breaking activity in the recent DFT strike). In response, the League's front group, Parents and Students for Community Control (PASCC), demanded that regional boundaries be redrawn so that blacks would exercise a majority in most districts. Black worker-student-faculty committees would then be elected to ensure such things as community kitchens and the "teaching of skills that have longevity and are marketable." A PASCC slate was run in the regional school board elections based on that program.

The League simultaneously developed a base in several ghetto high schools. Its Black Students United Front apparently had no working-class orientation whatsoever. In an illustrative campaign against the suspensions of several students disciplined for taking part in a "revolt" at militant Northern High School in September 1969, it called for a total amnesty for all disciplined students and the removal of cops from the school, but also demanded "that all pictures of whites be removed from Northern High School and be replaced with pictures of our own heroes . . . [and] the Nationalist Flag of Unity (Red, Green, Black) be raised each morning" (*Inner City Voice*, February 1970). While the League gave its community control campaign some "working-class" rhetorical flourishes, its basic appeal was to black nationalism. And, like the nationalist demand for black foremen, it simply oriented to changing the trappings (the flag!), without attacking the essence of the racist, anti-working class educational system.

Defense of Black Militants

The other major arena of the League's non-plant work, and the most successful, was a series of major legal defense campaigns. The campaigns, conducted in a highly political manner and propagandized in the plant newsletters, were largely under the control of Ken Cockrel, whose extensive use of white radical legal assistance was viewed with disdain by the more "honky"-baiting elements in the organization.

The first major case was the New Bethel incident: several members of the black separatist Republic of New Africa were indicted for allegedly murdering two cops during a police attack on a RNA meeting at the New Bethel church in March 1969. Cockrel mobilized a large staff of sympathetic liberal lawyers and supplemented the successful courtroom defense with massive demonstrations in the black community and open-air "People's Courts" staged in downtown Detroit. Later that year, LRBW also led the campaign against the attempted extradition of RNA head, Robert F. Williams to North Carolina.

James Johnson, an Eldon worker who killed two white foremen and a co-worker, was successfully defended by Cockrel on the grounds that the pressure of the assembly line and the continual racial harassment had driven Johnson temporarily insane. The Labor Defense Coalition, a League front, was able to mobilize Coleman Young, John Conyers and other black liberals (not to mention the Guardians, a black policemen's association) against police harassment and U.S. Senate surveillance of the League. In a fine example of adaptation, the League demanded not the dismantling of the police, but rather its reorganization to "concentrate its efforts on organized crime and the heroin traffic in Detroit" (*Detroit News*, 4 May 1971)—a demand even the black cops could easily support!

"White-Skin Privilege" and All-Black Unions

It was the key programmatic points of "white-skin privilege" and separatist dual-unionism which were the focal points of DRUM's approach to the plants. The strong support they elicited resulted in large part from the condition facing the newly hired black youth. Besides the gross negligence of safety standards and the massive speed-up, they were confronted by older, conservatized racist white workers, an all-white management, and a ponderous, isolated, heavily white bureaucracy dominated by cold-war anti-communism. The "progressive" Reuther bureaucracy had no response to the dramatic increase in speed-up which greeted the black new-hires and was of course hostile to the nationalist currents circulating in the ghetto. Being unfamiliar with the UAW's relatively more radical and democratic past, new black workers were presented with a view of the union as a hostile, white-controlled apparatus allied with the company. The response was a widespread nationalist hostility to the union itself rather than class-struggle opposition to the sellout bureaucracy.

For the unconsciously nationalist League leadership and the guilt tripping white New Left, which also embraced the theory, "white-skin privilege" was nothing

but a cover for evading the difficult task of uniting the entire proletariat around a revolutionary program. Rather than seeing the struggle against the rampant chauvinism among white workers as an integral part of the strategy for socialist revolution, they wrote off that section of the working class as an “aristocracy of white labor which gives white labor a huge stake in the imperialist system, and renders white labor unable and unfit to lead the working class in the U.S.” (LRBW General Program).

Consequently, DRUM and ELRUM actively discouraged militant white workers from following their leadership, and, at times, lapsed into the crudest race-baiting and ethnic slurs. The DRUM constitution explicitly “denied [membership] to all honkies due to the fact that said honkey has been the historic enemy, betrayer, and exploiter of black people.” It went on to state its main task as:

“Getting rid of the racist, tyrannical, and unrepresentative UAW as representation for Black workers, so that with this enemy out of the way we can deal directly with our main adversary, the white racist, owners of the means of production.”

DRUM forsook a serious struggle for leadership in the UAW and attempted instead to substitute itself for the existing organizations of the class which encompassed the masses of black, as well as white, workers. By offering itself as a revolutionary alternative to the UAW it was caught, as well, in the organizational bind of attempting to satisfy the needs of a conscious revolutionary vanguard and those of a broadly based trade union. Thus, while the DRUM constitution demanded a membership based on programmatic agreement, it was forced to set up various makeshift levels of “affiliation.”

Dual-unionist in principle, the League caucuses nonetheless vacillated in their conceptions concerning the degree to which it was permissible to work within the UAW. At times, they emphasized the similar positions of black and white workers under capitalism, or claimed interest in “a peaceful change in our Local 3. DRUM has always represented all elements of Hamtramck Assembly” (*DRUM Newsletter*, undated). In a march on a UAW Special Convention (November 1969), they demanded “50% representation for black workers on the international executive board” and Reuther’s replacement by a black president, yet maintained the need for autonomous League control over the black membership.

Their program raised a number of transitional demands, indicating a certain familiarity with Trotskyism and the Transitional Program. These demands included an end to unemployment through a shortened workweek, organizing the unorganized and unemployed, organization of workers militias for self-defense and the call for a general strike against the Indochina war. However, their work in the plants was characterized by simple shop-floor economism coupled with exposés of company and union racism. The plant newsletters would describe the racist, shoddy medical care provided by the clinic or the racism of an individual foreman or union official. Having rejected the perspective of a long, but necessary struggle to replace the International bureaucracy with a revolutionary leadership,

the League rationalized its impotence with an emphasis on local issues: “We must keep our eyes open and see through the elaborate smoke screen of the National contracts and focus on our local supplement which is the point at which we lose or gain” (ELRUM leaflet, 1970).

This parochial outlook resulting from the absence of a program to unite the entire class eventually facilitated a motion away from the auto plants as well as the UAW and led the League to seek support from non-working-class elements in the black community. In *Our Thing is DRUM*, LRBW leader Hamlin said:

“We always had an impulse to stay with the plants and organize the plants because that’s where the power was. That’s where blacks have power, they are the producers, they can close down the economy. But after we recognized that we had to involve all our people in supporting those struggles in the plants, we began to look beyond factories. . . . What had happened was that the League represents a merger of a number of various elements in the black community and includes students. . . .”

That these “various elements,” essentially hostile class forces, could not be cohesively unified into a single political formation became evident with the later factional split in the LRBW. The logical conclusion of their nationalism, in a country where no material basis for a black nation exists, was to tail after the petty-bourgeois elements (and Cockrel’s personal ambitions) in openly reformist community-control struggles, abandoning the struggle for a militant opposition in the plants. Thus, the caucuses became tools in the struggle for community control, and the League went full circle from seeing the black community as a supportive mechanism behind the vanguard struggle of the black proletariat, to assigning the black worker a supportive role in the community struggle.

The factors leading to the League’s rightward shift in emphasis were not accidental, of course, since its dual-unionism, anti-white-worker approach did not accept the reality of American society which the League itself put forward: that black workers are an essential sector of the American proletariat. And while an organization of black workers could play an important role in class struggle if linked to a united proletarian vanguard party, the League’s nationalist orientation led it to orient black workers against white, thus condemning itself to impotence in the face of the company and UAW bureaucracy.

The League Splits

Though the split of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in June 1971 concerned the question of merging with the newly-formed Black Workers Congress, it was a result of the longstanding tension inherent in the League’s contradictory “pro-working-class” nationalism. The League had not effectively struggled for programmatic clarity to begin with, and the factional lineups clearly reflected the different sections and appetites in the heterogeneous organization. The faction favoring the maintenance of a separate identity for the League consisted

of the worker cadre and those leadership elements involved in the early plant activities—Baker, Wooten, Williams, Luke-Tripp. Rooted in the day-to-day reality of the assembly line, their driving concern was a struggle to change the conditions on the shop floor. On the other side were the petty-bourgeois types like Cockrel, Hamlin and Watson in the pro-BWC faction, who saw black workers as a tool to enable the “black people” to get a piece of the action.

Ostensibly, the major factional issue involved in the split was nationalism. In fact, both sides were strongly nationalist. The pro-LRBW held a third-period Stalinist position calling for the creation of a black nation after a successful proletarian revolution, whereas the ostensibly anti-nationalist Cockrel wing had an openly reformist, popular-front conception of involvement “in mass struggles in the community as well as the plant” (LRBW split documents).

Socialism in One City

The community-control nationalism of the pro-BWC wing was a theoretical mask for its opportunistic appetite for political power in Detroit. Thus, it was Cockrel and Hamlin who served as the League’s spokesmen to the white radical community, and it was Watson who achieved notoriety as editor of *The South End*, when he turned that campus newspaper into an unofficial organ of the League and an avowedly revolutionary daily paper. Watson’s role in the West Central Organization and the PASCC, and Hamlin’s in the Black Student United Front, were the main elements in the League’s community-control work.

They, along with ex-SNCC leader, and sometime LRBW leader, James Foreman, were the organizers of the Black Economic Development Conference, a scheme to finance black charities and small businesses through extortion from white churches. Cockrel’s major work was in the flashy legal defense cases, and all three were instrumental in setting up the Motor City Labor League and Control, Conflict, and Change Book Club, a white support group. Cockrel and Hamlin viewed the League’s isolation in Detroit as a strength and foresaw the possibility of winning electoral control of the city: “the resources we want to acquire in Detroit is, you know, monopolistic control of the use of force. . . control over the apparatus of state power” (*Our Thing is DRUM*) .

If Stalin’s theory of “socialism in one country” was a criminal apology for Soviet Russia’s isolation, Cockrel’s “socialism in one city” is a cover for appetites to win a place in respectable bourgeois politics. Cockrel’s direction is straight toward the Democratic Party as a newer model Coleman Young.

This orientation is as far removed from the motivation which initially attracted black workers to DRUM as is the Mayor’s desk in Detroit City Hall from the assembly lines at Dodge Main. Their nationalism was a raging reaction to the racism of the bureaucrats and the bosses and a violent disappointment in the apparent apathy of their white class brothers. The pro-BWC faction somewhat accurately accused the other wing of “contending that in essence all League activity should be focused upon Dodge Main and Eldon plants, [and posing] a

reformist, economist program that opposed the anti-imperialist line of the BWC with a mass line of ‘Black Workers Unite.’”

Though it still called for community control, the pro-LRBW wing was motivated by a workerist impulse which nonetheless recognized the BWC’s anti imperialist emphasis as a liquidation of class interests into a classless front:

“A calling for everyone to struggle against imperialism subsumes one’s own struggle to the majority to the extent that the specific form of our struggle is overlooked and we end up for example with anti-war demonstrations as the prime form as opposed to organizing Black people around concrete conditions.”

—Split documents, pro-LRBW position

The pro-LRBW wing alternative was “zeroing in on the plant settings with the appropriate use of the Marxist-Leninist method” and “building the mass base of Black workers around proletarian consciousness.” Its nationalist line was that “the removal of capitalism does not stamp out racists,” and thus, blacks must have “the revolutionary right to self-determination and secession after capitalism is smashed.” This position, and the general identification of these elements with Maoism, led a number of them to join the latter-day third-period Stalinists of the Communist League. Of the other faction, only Mike Hamlin was to remain active in the BWC, now closely connected with the right-Maoist Revolutionary Union.

The splintered League left behind a two fold legacy in Detroit: on the one hand, a nationalist-tinged social-democracy-in-embryo (manifested in the complementary appetites of Ken Cockrel and Jordan Sims), and, on the other, a hard nationalist semi-syndicalist cadre embedded in the inner-city auto plants.

Cockrel’s pro-BWC position in the split was designed to propel him into a more acceptable milieu for his political appetites. Already, through the Labor Defense Coalition (which he took with him out of the League) and his earlier legal defense work, Cockrel had established ties with white radicals like “Marxist” Judge Justin Ravitz and black liberals like Coleman Young. After his brief stay in the BWC, Cockrel’s LDC initiated the anti-STRESS campaign, with its watered-down version of community control of the police.

Cockrel’s changing rhetoric is a barometer of his adaptability in pursuit of personal ambitions: his earlier black workerese (“Dig the whole characterization that black people give jobs man: it’s a ‘yoke,’ it’s a ‘hang,’ it’s a ‘slave’...” [*Our Thing is DRUM*]) gave way to “responsible radical”—sounding declarations of the need “to use the 1973 municipal elections to take power and use that power in the interests of the people.” This in turn gave way to a diplomatically neutral, back-handed support for Democrat Coleman Young when Cockrel realized he personally had no chance of winning a mayoral election at this time: “of all the individuals being talked about as being ‘electable,’ Coleman Young comes closest to an individual with whom we could work” (*Ground work*, July 1973).

At a time when both bourgeois parties stand increasingly exposed as being unable to satisfy the most minimal needs of the working class, Cockrel is grooming his base in preparation for diverting the dissatisfaction of Detroit's largely black proletariat into the snare of a homegrown social democracy.

The logical complement to Cockrel's city-hall social democracy is, of course, a slicker, blacker, more palatable bureaucracy in the UAW. The fragile position of the present bureaucrats was revealed by the fear with which they viewed the relatively small LRBW caucuses, as well as their panic during the recent Mack Avenue Stamping Plant sitdown, the River Rouge shootout and the UAW's desperate maneuvering to shove the 1973 contract down auto workers' throats.

The League's failure to build a principled opposition to that bureaucracy, not to abandon the existing mass workers organizations but to struggle *within* the UAW for a united movement of class-conscious black and white workers, opened the way for demagogic reformists like Jordan Sims. Sims, now president of Eldon Local 961, saw the futility of the League's separatist line, and then opted for joining the bureaucracy rather than fighting it. In the recent Chrysler negotiations last September, Sims voted *for* the grossly sell-out contract before claiming he had been "duped" into it.

Neither the minimally economist demands that Sims' United National Caucus puts forward in its role as the respectable "left" opposition to the Woodcock leadership, nor the shop-floor economism of DRUM's earlier "mass line," can advance by one iota the political consciousness of workers —black or white! This is not to deny that there are differences. Whereas many of the original LRBW cadre were apparently driven by a revolutionary impulse, Sims is driven by something much more mundane—a thirst to replace the presently isolated, ineffective Woodcock bureaucracy with a more streamlined machine, better capable of serving as the "labor lieutenants of capital."

The other legacy, the League's semi-syndicalist, "third-world" nationalism, as expressed by the pro-LRBW faction, now finds itself supporting the Communist League while clandestinely buried in the inner-city auto plants. Subjectively revolutionary instincts notwithstanding, its members will find no revolutionary solution within the framework of the CL's reformist Stalinism. Once more, they will be confronted with many of the contradictions that wracked DRUM and ELRUM early on.

There may be a militant impulse behind rejection of the Moscow-line Stalinists' pipedreams of a "peaceful road to socialism" and Martin Luther King-style pleas for interracial harmony. But the CL's Peking-brand of peaceful coexistence and crackpot-nationalist theory of a "negro nation" in the Deep South (with a majority of "white negroes"!) are no better.

Only by breaking sharply with the petty-bourgeois politics of trade-union reformism and Stalinism and adopting the proletarian program of Trotskyism can subjectively revolutionary black worker militants contribute to overcoming the crisis of proletarian leadership which is today the decisive roadblock to socialist

revolution. In struggling to build a unified Leninist vanguard party based on the Transitional Program and to rebuild the Fourth International destroyed by Pabloist revisionism, it is now possible to lay the bases to replace the symbiotic duo of petty-bourgeois black nationalism and reactionary white racism with proletarian internationalism.

For a United Vanguard Party and Class-Struggle Union Caucuses

The membership of the League was certainly motivated in good part by militant opposition to the pro-company bureaucracy of the UAW and by a desire for a proletarian strategy for black liberation, as opposed to the Panthers' idolization of "brother-on-the-block" lumpen elements. But this is not to ignore the pernicious honky-baiting and anti-white pseudo-nationalism which were also an integral part of the LRBW—and to which so much of the left accommodated or prostrated itself in a pathetic attempt to tail after the popular petty-bourgeois current of the moment. As Lenin remarked repeatedly, it is the task of the proletariat "to combat nationalism of every kind" ("The Right of Nations to Self-Determination," 1914).

Unprincipled tailism is not the way to win and educate solid communist cadre, capable of leading the masses to victory over capitalism by successfully combating all forms of reformist false consciousness, among them nationalism. Among the tasks of the Trotskyist vanguard, rather, is to state clearly the responsibilities of socialist militants who claim to stand for Marxism-Leninism and the historic interests of the proletariat.

The "black question" is one of the most difficult, and at the same time strategically most important, problems for U.S. communists. Its solution requires an uncompromising fight against white chauvinism and the myriad forms of special oppression of minority workers and an equally consistent struggle against the bourgeois ideology of nationalism, even in the most "proletarian" guise. The latter is no academic question.

Black workers are a doubly oppressed section of the U.S. proletariat, forcibly segregated at the lowest levels. Consequently, their liberation will come about only through socialist revolution and common struggle with white workers under the leadership of a unified vanguard party. The concept of a separate black nation in the U.S. not only lacks an objective basis in the class struggle and political economy of the country, but actually plays into the hands of those whose answer to social conflicts is race war—the inevitable result of which would be the massacre of thousands of blacks and the triumph of white racism. More than any other social group, minority working people have a direct interest in working-class unity.

In the factories, even with the present level of widespread racial discrimination, separate organizations of black workers would be a hindrance rather than an aid to class unity. Instead, the best guarantee for a struggle against racial discrimination

is uncompromising hostility to any form of labor reformism. Thus the SL's call for trade-union caucuses based on the full transitional program, rather than opportunist lowest-common denominator "militant" formations pushed by various fake lefts, is of particular importance for black worker militants.

Though their concerns are not *limited* to the fight against racial discrimination, such caucuses are a much more effective weapon in securing even immediate gains for specially oppressed minority workers than reformist formations organized around the single issue of racial oppression—which is what the League's caucuses (DRUM, ELRUM, etc.) effectively became. On the other hand, to the extent that DRUM demands such as ending unemployment through a shortened workweek, organization of workers militias for self-defense and a general strike against the Indochina war were intended seriously to pose a *revolutionary* alternative to the bureaucracy (and not some reformist mishmash), then clearly it can only be harmful to divide supporters of such a program on racial lines.

The struggle against white racism and special oppression of minority workers will depend on winning the working masses to understand the need for a class-struggle program on all questions facing the labor movement, and on posing the struggle against special oppression in a manner that strengthens class unity instead of setting one part of the class against another. Thus a class-struggle trade union caucus would call for ending unemployment through a sliding scale of wages and hours and for an end to all discriminatory practices in hiring and upgrading.

On the other hand, while struggling within the unions for the elimination of all racial, national and sexual discrimination, such a caucus would vigorously oppose taking the union to court, i.e., calling on the bourgeois state to arbitrate disputes within the workers movement. It would raise demands which emphasize the international character of labor's struggle for emancipation (labor strikes against imperialist wars, against protectionism, full citizenship rights for foreign workers, for international strike action) and fight for its program on an explicitly political basis. Thus in opposition to the bureaucracy's policies of begging for crumbs from the capitalist parties (Democratic and Republican) and petty-bourgeois nationalist calls for a black party (which—witness the 1971 Gary convention—end up tailing after black Democrats), we call for a workers party based on the unions to fight for a workers government.

While the Stalinists occasionally pay grudging lip service to Marxist principles when it does not interfere with their reformist maneuvers, their trade-union work is uniformly characterized by simple union militancy. As Trotsky correctly remarked, the purpose of raising transitional demands is to make a bridge between the present consciousness and needs of the masses and the socialist program of the revolution. In the epoch of decaying capitalism, when successful reformism is *impossible* the trade unions will either be won to revolutionary leadership standing for the Transitional Program or they will serve as instruments of the bourgeoisie in crushing the workers movement and obliterating those gains already won by labor through bitter struggle. Just as worker-militants must transcend narrow trade unionism, so must revolutionists among the specially

oppressed social strata transcend the special interest pressure group strategy—which offers no real solution to their felt oppression—and embrace a socialist world view, which alone provides a consistent strategy for a unified fight against capitalist exploitation and oppression.

Black Power and the Fascists

—Reprinted from *Spartacist West*, Volume 1, No. 8, 30 September 1966

Until just a few months ago, it seemed as if the Civil Rights Movement had almost come to a stand-still. It seemed to have failed to achieve any of its goals or alleviate to any degree the special oppression suffered by the masses of Negroes in this country. Politically, it had gotten nowhere. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had failed to jar the racist white Democratic Party from power in Mississippi or to achieve recognition from the national Democratic Party. The Movement had failed to alter the police brutality in the ghettos, or provide a meaningful answer to the police-instigated slaughters in the so-called “riots” in Harlem, Watts, etc. And most important, conditions for the bulk of Negroes have actually gotten worse, not better; their income increases in recent years had been substantially less than that of the population as a whole. Unemployment was still four times as great among Negroes, and urban renewal still means moving the poor out, not ending slum housing.

Then came the rapid popularity of the slogan “Black Power,” coined by SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael on the Meredith march in Mississippi, and raised by the Black Panther Party (Lowndes County Freedom Organization) in Lowndes County, Alabama. There has been an infinite variety of definitions of Black Power, but we think the following points contain its real meaning:

1. organization and struggle independent of the Democratic Party, the white liberals and their money,
2. black control of the black struggle and black neighborhoods,
3. an end to the special oppression of blacks, rather than integration into white society (which implies that somehow “white is better”), and
4. self-defense of the struggle against racist attack and police brutality.

These are the elements being adopted by the struggle itself, of which the Black Panther Party and the Community Alert Patrol in Watts are good examples.

Independent politics, neighborhood patrols, and mainly an awareness on the part of blacks that they must *do it themselves*; this is why Black Power has rapidly become the new slogan of the Negro struggle. But Black Power itself is insufficient as a slogan or as a program for struggle. We must not merely praise a good new development in the movement, but carefully scrutinize it from the point of view of the struggle, past, present and future.

The fact is that *Black Power is incapable of delivering on its promise of a new road to black liberation*. All of its elements which we have mentioned above are essential if this liberation is ever to be achieved, but by themselves, they cannot overcome the crippling isolation of the Negro movement in society. This isolation of the Negro has always been and is now the chief cause of the special oppression of blacks. Black Power, as an interview in a recent issue of *Flatlands* pointed out, implies black unity. Thus Stokely Carmichael, when asked if he was upset by the Reverend Martin Luther King's non-violent prattlings and attacks on Black Power in a recent TV interview, replied, "Nothing another black man says ever upsets me." But the Kings and the Roy Wilkins are more than just black; they are the deadly enemies not only of Black Power but of the very struggle for liberation itself. They are the agents of the white power structure within the black community. King, we must recall, *sided with the cops* in the police invasion of Watts.

Ironically it is King and his ilk who point out that the Negro is only 15% of the population, that he needs allies, etc. This much is for certain; the movement does *not* need the kind of allies King is talking about, namely, white liberals, white moral sympathy, the federal government, etc. But it does need allies; it needs allies who can fight with it as equals out of similar interests, allies who instead of crippling the movement and making it dependent can reinforce its self-reliance and strengthen its independence. There is only one direction the movement can turn to find these allies: towards the working class, black, white, brown and yellow.

It must be made clear that this is an urgent problem. The vicious racism of the Nazis and the National States Rights Party—fascists—has rallied the racism of thousands of whites in reaction to Black Power. In Baltimore and Chicago there have been violent attacks on the movement of unparalleled size and intensity. The black movement must launch a counter-attack to fascism; it must take the lead in the anti-fascist struggle at once. Self-defense, of course, is the most immediate need; the fascists must not be allowed to spill the blood of black workers without fear of retribution, and King must not be allowed to lead the movement with prayers in the face of bricks and bottles. But just as urgent is the need to begin actively seeking allies in the working class.

We make no denial that the prospects for this are not immediately hopeful. The white working-class has, on the whole, been indifferent and even hostile to the black struggle. As it stands, many white workers, seeking outlets for their own dissatisfactions and frustrations, may follow the fascists in attacking the black struggle. This is not because fascism offers any solution to their problems, but because they see no way to "get even," to strike back at the *real* cause of their problems. Indeed it is the bosses and the corrupt union leaders who encourage racism among white workers for this very reason: so the white workers will take out their aggressions on their fellow black workers instead of on the bosses and corrupt union leaders, where it belongs. We must remember, however, that white workers too are oppressed; they have no more interest in maintaining the

“white power structure”—capitalism—than do the blacks. And their oppressors are the same as the blacks’: the ruling class that owns and controls this society, and that sets black against white in order to stay in power. White workers have no more interest in fighting the bosses’ war in Vietnam than do black workers; and inflation—especially in food prices—caused by the war boom hurts them as much as blacks. Furthermore, the traitorous union bureaucrats who say “don’t let those n-----s in because they want your job” are also the ones who make deals with the capitalists to prevent strikes, reduce demands, and in general keep the workers under control.

The black workers must seek allies among the rest of the working class. To do this, they must drop the slogan Black Power, not because the elements of struggle that we mentioned above are bad (as King would have us believe), but because as a slogan for struggle it says nothing to workers of other races about the oppression—and the interests—that black and white have in common. What does Black Power say to the striking Delano farm workers, for instance? or to the airline machinists who voted against the contract urged on them by the government and then raised the call for a labor party?

The black workers are in the vanguard of the working class struggle; they must take into their own hands not merely their own struggle, as oppressed *blacks*, but the struggle of the whole working class as oppressed *workers*. They must sound the warning to the whole working class of the danger of fascism by calling for an anti-fascist workers’ united front. They must raise the kinds of demands that represent the interests of all workers, as, for example, those listed in the concluding paragraph of the other article in this issue. Above all, they must raise the call for a Freedom-Labor Party and an end to all foreign intervention by U.S. troops. Turn Black Power into Workers’ Power!

—C.K.

Black Power—Class Power: Once Again On Black Power

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Until fairly recently the dominant tone of the black movement in this country, in its image if not its reality, was that set by the liberal integrationists, the Martin Luther Kings and the Bayard Rustins. Theirs was the politics of black liberalism. The goal was formal, legal, equality; civil rights; or the northernizing of the south. The beneficiaries of this campaign were to be that narrow segment of the black population which is middle class or close to it and is commonly called “the black bourgeoisie.” The political strategy was to seek the support of, and to avoid antagonizing, the liberal establishment, and, logically enough, to seek to bring to bear the powers of the federal government which is controlled by this establishment. The tactics to be used were characterized by a heavy reliance on

non-violence and moral confrontation.

The civil rights movement was thus a coherent whole, one whose politics, tactics, and ideology were well adapted to the social stratum which led it and benefitted by it. The hitch, of course, was that this movement meant very little for the overwhelming mass of the black people in America, who are either working class or economically and socially marginal and hence even more deprived. The black troops of the bourgeois generals began to demand that the movement turn its attention to their needs. This pressure was able to throw up a militant left wing, mainly but not exclusively within SNCC. At the same time, the locus of the struggle began to shift to include the northern ghettos, the bastions as well as the prisons of the black masses.

In contrast to the reform program of the civil rights movement, the demands of the black masses are necessarily and inherently class demands, and demands which the ruling class cannot meet. The call for jobs, for housing, and for emancipation from police brutalization (attacking the very basis of the state)—these cannot be answered by another civil rights bill from Washington. Their pursuit leads inevitably to a sharper and sharper confrontation with the ruling class. It is this transition which is represented by the black power slogan. Its popularization represents the repudiation of tokenism, liberal tutelage, reliance on the federal government, and the non-violent philosophy of moral suasion. In this sense, therefore, black power is class power, and should be supported by all socialist forces.

However, this development occurs at a time when the working class as a whole, except for its black contingent and isolated cases here and there, is quiescent, and in a mood to go along with the status quo. This contradiction between the black vanguard and the rest of the class distorts the black movement, and this distortion is reflected in the “black power” slogan. “Black power” has class content only conditionally, that is, the slogan in the abstract is classless, and takes on class content only from the specific historical context from which it emerges. This weakens the slogan profoundly, and opens it up to various kinds of abuse. It can be used by petty bourgeois black nationalist elements who want to slice the social cake along color rather than class lines and to promote reactionary color mysticism. More seriously, it can be degraded to mean mere support for black politicians operating within the system. To Adam Clayton Powell the slogan means, or he hopes it will mean, just himself and a bunch of black aldermen.

For these reasons, the support that Marxists give to this slogan must be critical, seeking always to deepen its class content. To say that the slogan now has nothing to offer the white workers, has no appeal to them, is true, but irrelevant. This is an error into which I feel C.K.’s article in our previous issue falls. The black movement today sees the white working class mainly in the form of the Cicero rioters, to whose sensibilities *no* concessions are due. When the class as a whole, including its backward white section, emerges as a self-conscious and active force, then it will be possible realistically to raise the question of

transcending the old slogan. “Black power” will become “workers’ power.” In the meantime, black power represents a new and more advanced stage of the social confrontation in America.

—G.W.

Behind the “Roots” Craze—A Black Horatio Alger Story

—Reprinted from *Workers Vanguard* No. 147, 4 March 1977

One hundred thirty million viewers, courses in almost 300 colleges, 1,400,000 copies in print, crowed a recent Doubleday ad. They were talking, of course, about *Roots*. Twelve years ago, professional journalist Alex Haley set out to create a novel based on his research into the oral and written histories of his own family. By the time the saga was dramatized and transmitted to the largest television audience in U.S. history, it had become more than just the popularization of some interesting (if not wholly accurate) research. *Roots* had become something of a social phenomenon.

The furor over *Roots* was not just the usual public relations hoopla, though there is plenty of that (New York’s Mayor Beame and no less than twenty mayors in the South proclaimed “Roots Week” and the Texas legislature voted Haley an “honorary Texan”). Nor was it simply that *Roots* made effective use of the tested clichés of popular culture: a heady mixture of violence and suggested sex focused through the lens of the best known melodramatic techniques of soap opera. No, *Roots* struck a nerve.

The current intensity of the *Roots* craze will be short lived, but the television series and book have tapped an authentic, widespread and seething reservoir of social passion. The passion is in the first instance over the subject: the brutal history of chattel slavery in America, the resurrection of an ancient form of labor for the enrichment of the commercial capitalists and textile lords of Europe and the masters of New World plantations. There is no more explosive subject in the U.S. than this. Only *Gone With the Wind* with its “magnolia, moonlight and banjos” version of the antebellum South has come close to equaling the audience which sat riveted before TV sets to follow the generational saga of a black family from West Africa to Tennessee.

Unlike *Gone With the Wind*, *Roots* is sympathetic to the victims of slavery, and seeks to view through their eyes the anguish of human beings who have become property. Even the sentimentalized, one-dimensional characterizations of *Roots* challenge the racist ideology of slavery: that blacks are subhuman and therefore do not feel as deeply or with as much complexity as their white masters. By presenting slave characters of obvious human worth and dignity uprooted, degraded, punished beyond human endurance, *Roots* breaks with the debasing

“Sambo” traditions of ignorant but happy “darkies” stumbling into paint buckets and singing in the rain.

It is this psychological identification with the slaves which in part explains the impact of *Roots*. For over 100 pages (or two and a half hours on screen) the audience has followed the story of the hero, Kunta Kinte, as he grew to young manhood in his idyllic African homeland. It would be an unusually callous viewer or reader who could thrust aside the vivid image of young Kinte amid the blood, vomit, feces of the sick, starving, terrified blacks who lie shackled on the slave ship. It is one thing to know that it was far from uncommon for a third of the kidnapped Africans to die on board the ships carrying them to captivity. It is another to see it happen.

“There is no arguing with pictures,” said Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which is certainly the moral precursor of *Roots*. Published in 1851, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made an equally sensational entrance into public life. And like *Roots*, it was passionate in its partisanship of the slaves. It presented an upside-down moral universe in which the victims were infinitely good and the slaveholders the personification of evil. It was a weapon in the service of the abolitionist movement.

But that was 1851. The book’s political purpose was clear, its political imperatives unmistakable to its friends and foes. Moved by the personalized indictment of slavery as an institution, the reader was meant to work for its abolition. But what is the political point of *Roots* in 1977? Is it intended as a model for struggle against the continuing oppression of black people in the U.S.? No, *Roots* is a testament to liberal accommodationism and a declaration of personal escapism. It is a sentimental American success story and a celebration of the usefulness of the themes of black nationalism to the racist status quo.

“Consciousness-Raising”?

The media responded to this media event with white guilt and “black pride,” while the fake-radicals scurried along behind. The SWP’s *Militant*, for instance, dubbed *Roots* “one big consciousness raiser” and thinks that perhaps its creators fooled themselves: “Certainly it wasn’t in the minds of [ABC’s] board of directors to encourage black pride or militancy. But I’m afraid that they may have succeeded in doing exactly that.” And the *Militant* recounts this anecdote to illustrate what the SWP means by “consciousness”:

“A young brother stopping in a coffee shop before work said, ‘I tell you one thing, those white folks better not mess with me today. I just might have to stomp one!’”

The *Militant* approvingly reports a racial incident at a mostly black high school in which black youth, chanting “Roots, Roots, Roots,” scuffled with whites. The SWP looks hopefully to *Roots* to “increase Black pride.”

But the clue to the political meaning of *Roots* is precisely the incorporation of

themes generally associated with cultural nationalism into the liberal melting pot of cultural pluralism. That is what the fuss is all about. That is why Haley “dedicated *Roots* as a birthday offering to my country.”

The *New York Times* (February 2) showed that it understood the real political thrust of *Roots* better than the *Militant* when it tried to pass *Roots* off as perhaps “the most significant civil rights event since the Selma to-Montgomery march of 1965.” But *Roots* is not a “civil rights event.” It poses no perspective for social action of any sort. It prescribes the search for black “roots” as a substitute for struggle.

Roots flows directly from the failure of the liberal civil rights movement to provide anything more than the token gains which are coming under increasing attack under the pressure of a worsening economic situation. Now more than ever black people are being told that nothing can be done to alleviate their miserable oppression. Carter’s government is not even making promises about the amelioration of the actual conditions of ghetto life. Instead of jobs, housing and social services, the blacks are being offered “black pride.” This is Jimmy Carter’s formula for a successful election and a moral America, applied to blacks.

The “black pride” which is being cynically pushed as an ersatz program is a diversion from struggle. Marxists’ quarrel with the idea of “black pride” is not with the individual’s feelings of dignity and self-worth that come from understanding. The internalization by blacks as well as whites of the racist stereotypes is a most pernicious effect of racism; Marxists solidarize with every genuine effort to expose the racist ideology which presents oppression as “natural” and even just. But it is through participation and leadership in social struggle against that oppression—not in nostalgic individual escapism—that black people will find their source of pride.

Cultural Nationalism in the Service of Liberalism

Roots was hailed by black capitalist politician Barbara Jordan:

“Everything converged—the right time, the right story and the right form. The country, I feel, was ready for it. At some other time I don’t feel it would have had that kind of widespread acceptance and attention—specifically in the 60s. Then it might have spawned resentments and apprehensions the country couldn’t have taken. But with things quiet, and with race relations moving along at a rate that’s acceptable to most Americans, we were ready to take in the full story of who we are and how we got that way.”

—*Time*, 14 February

The contrast with the 1960’s—a period of significant black militancy—is important. For Jordan, the *Roots* phenomenon heralds not only a general acceptance of that liberal capitalism which she represents in Congress, but the opportunity

for black liberalism and cultural nationalism to get back together on the terrain of demoralization.

In the 1960's it was not so easy to see that liberal integrationists and black nationalists were offering only different varieties of bourgeois ideology. The widespread black nationalist mood of a decade ago was a response to the manifest failure of the liberal-pacifist civil rights movement. Many young blacks, recoiling from the blatant accommodationism of liberal gradualism, identified militancy with separatism and racial solidarity. Black nationalist and vicarious "back to Africa" sentiment was an illusory "solution" born of hopelessness in the face of the evident bankruptcy of integration struggles. But what was once a kind of political statement soon became simply a matter of style.

At the outset, mainstream liberals accepted the nationalists' identification of dashikis and African names with ghetto revolts and quivered with apprehensions that blacks in their mass might break from the traditional liberal organizations. But the usual techniques—tokenistic handouts combined with a virtual cop manhunt against black militants like the Panthers—prevailed. Soon it was not unusual to see the head of a government poverty program dressed like an African, administering the crumbs of capitalism to the impoverished ghetto population.

Roots closes the book on the apparent war between black nationalism and liberalism. Cultural nationalism, in its most vicarious and backward-looking form, has been rendered not only manageable but fully respectable. *Roots* is the pop-culture counterpart of cultural nationalism's smooth slide from radical rhetoric to tool of the poverty pimps and black elected officials.

The Romance of African Heritage

Roots treats the elements of "African identity" formerly associated with radical nationalism and black separatism as a sort of romantic genesis myth. The political and imaginative core of both the book and the TV series is the life and legacy of Kunta Kinte, the African warrior who represents resistance to slavery and whose memory sustains his descendants.

Kunta Kinte's "black pride" is based on the sense of tribal identity and "manhood" instilled in the ordered and idyllic world of his native Africa. He refuses to abandon his heritage: the Mandinka language, the Muslim religion, the customs he learned in Africa. The American-born blacks who are his fellow slaves are rootless and broken; he despairs of teaching them "why he refused to surrender his name or his heritage." When his daughter is born, he insists that she be given the Mandinka name Kizzy rather than "bear some toubob [white man's] name, which would be nothing but the first step toward a lifetime of self-contempt."

The proud African warrior refuses to accommodate. Confronted with the hideous reality of enslavement, he tries four times to escape. When he is recaptured the fourth time, the whites take horrible revenge by chopping off half his foot with an axe. Now crippled, he will never be able to escape. From this point on in

Roots, resistance to the slave regime becomes symbolic rather than a matter of organized rebellion or even overt acts of individual resistance. It is the symbol of resistance, captured in a few African words and transmitted from generation to generation, which becomes the subject of *Roots*.

After the failure of his last attempt to escape, Kunta Kinte determines to pass on his heritage. He marries and has a child. He teaches her some Mandinka words and tells her stories of her ancestors. Kizzy in turn, as mother and grandmother, retells these bits and pieces of Africa to her family.

The TV script even invents some scenes to highlight the importance of the African tradition in resisting the degrading effects of slavery. A character who was not in the book, Kizzy's suitor Sam, is refused because "Sam wasn't like us. Nobody ever told him where he come from. So he didn't have a dream of where he ought to be goin'."

Haley has become the target of several black historians (notably Willie Lee Rose, *New York Review of Books*, 11 November 1976) for inaccuracies and anachronisms in his portrayal of the Mandinka village of Juffure (as well as of the antebellum South). But it is the ideal which is intended—a Garden of Eden world ritualized around the cult of manhood. *Roots* is not even myth, but romance: a deliberate idealization of the past to escape an unbearable present.

The Legacy of Slavery

There is some truth in the image of a rebellious African taken into slavery. Compared to blacks born into slavery in the U.S., those slaves transported directly from Africa prior to 1808 (when the slave traffic to the U.S. was officially closed) were quite "troublesome." They spearheaded the earliest slave revolts; the significant uprisings of the nineteenth century (led by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner) were organized by freedmen or skilled craftsmen whose daily work brought them into contact with free laborers. Haley's acceptance of the centrality of the African heritage engages the old debate over the effects of slavery on the consciousness of blacks.

The relative absence of organized large-scale slave revolts in the U.S.—compared for instance with the massive 1791 rebellion which overthrew slavery in Haiti—precipitated a heated controversy among radical academics in the 1960's. The CP's Herbert Aptheker sought—mainly by redefining the category of "revolt"—to demonstrate a presumably "hidden history" of black resistance. Aptheker's antagonists, spearheaded by Eugene Genovese, advanced a plethora of factors to account for American slaves' relative quiescence—among them the overwhelming military superiority of the white American state power, the small size of most American plantations, the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Africans who became the slave population and their systematic deculturalization, etc.

Underlying the 1960's heat over a historical dispute was the closer-to-home ideological battle over resistance vs. accommodation, posed in terms of separatism

vs. integration. The black nationalists saw the pacifist liberalism they hated as a carryover from slavery. They argued that it was in giving up their African heritage and aspiring to equality in white-ruled America that blacks had gone wrong. Dumping their “slave names,” they accused the black liberals of accommodation to white “Eurocentric” culture and demanded “black history.” This debate ended as liberals and ex-militants clasped hands over the academic tokenism of Black Studies departments.

The radical nationalists who rejected “Uncle Tom” and proclaimed an unbroken tradition of black resistance reaching back to slave times were making a fundamental mistake. The line between accommodation and survival in a militarily hopeless situation is not so easy to draw. If, faced by overwhelming odds against them, most blacks could express their seething hatred of slavery only by sabotage, malingering, petty theft, attempted escape, etc., this is a historical fact of previous centuries and not a prescription for the future.

Roots does more than acknowledge the blacks’ need to accommodate to survive. It embraces it. Following the slave revolt led by Nat Turner, Kunta Kinte’s grandson “Chicken George” and his master “both hoped fervently that there would be no more black uprisings.” But the real highpoint of black resistance to slavery is the one which is left out of *Roots* almost entirely: the civil war, in which 200,000 blacks joined the Union army, despite its vicious racism, and took up arms against the slave South.

An All-American Success Story

Roots incorporates cultural nationalism into the “American dream.” In the old Horatio Alger stories, even the poorest among the downtrodden can become rich through the work ethic and the beneficent workings of divine providence and capitalism. It is an old theme: the good are rewarded and the evil punished. In Alger stories the moral differential can be easily measured by an accountant. The moral implication of a fair market is clear enough: if you work hard, keep your wits about you and are decent you will succeed. So people who have prospered are obviously good folks, and there are some obvious implications about the poor.

Roots is a Horatio Alger myth on two levels. First, there is the token—Alex Haley, the former marine cook and struggling writer who is making a fortune. But the example of an individual black who goes from rags to riches is not likely to have much social impact among the black masses of Harlem and Watts. The myth of upward mobility has little credibility among the black masses, and Haley’s life story is an obvious exception to the general rule.

But as a family saga, *Roots* can make a similar pitch and get away with it. Haley wants *Roots* to become “all of our stories.” He himself says he identifies most with “Chicken George”—after his grandfather, Kunta Kinte, the most important character in the book. “Chicken George” becomes a trainer of gamecocks, a sporting man and entrepreneur. He conceives of the project of accumulating—

through the crumbs which trickle down to him from his master's high-stakes cockfighting ventures—enough money to buy himself and his family out of slavery.

Still a slave, “Chicken George” is sent to England to train birds for a lord. When he arrives back at his own plantation with money in his pocket, he finds that his family has been sold. His son Tom takes over as the patriarch, struggling to reunite the family. Tom manages to get his master to apprentice him to a blacksmith and uses the proceeds from his tireless skilled work to reunite the partially scattered family.

After emancipation, “Chicken George” and Tom move the family to Tennessee. When Tom finds that he will not be permitted to own a shop, he sets up as a traveling blacksmith and he prospers. His daughter marries a hard-working manager of a lumber company owned by an incompetent drunk. His probity and sobriety are rewarded; he eventually takes over the company. The final link in the chain is this man's grandson, Alex Haley.

The route to success in *Roots* is entirely personal and familial. This presumably inspirational saga is an almost perfect contrast to the real life of a real black hero, Frederick Douglass, as he describes it in his autobiography. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is the story of the development of *social* consciousness. Douglass learned to read by applying a simple rule of survival: the slave and the master had opposite social interests. So when Douglass heard his master give instructions that under no conditions must a slave be taught to read, Douglass set out to learn to read.

And when he learned to read, Douglass began to teach other slaves to read. He was committed not only to free himself, but to a social movement against the system of slavery. After escaping to the North, Douglass became a leader of the abolition movement. Rather than seeking to recover a lost African heritage, he learned to absorb the master's culture in order to change society. For him, historical identity meant not an inquiry into his genealogical antecedents but social struggle in the present and for the future.

It is ironic that Haley's real literary achievement is not the maudlin if sometimes powerful *Roots* but his collaboration on the gripping and socially important *Autobiography of Malcolm X*—a work which, like that of Frederick Douglass, starts from personal experience as the raw material from which to generalize a social vision.

Malcolm X was a contradictory figure who personified the break with Martin Luther King-style liberalism, arguing for an African-separatist ideology and black self-defense. When he was gunned down on 20 February 1965 as he addressed a public meeting, he had broken from the religious obscurantism of the Black Muslims and was moving away from black separatist ideology. Had he lived, Malcolm X might have had enormous impact on the development of political consciousness among blacks. But for Haley, “Malcolm died tragically, but perhaps if there was a right time to go, for him, that was probably it”

(*Penthouse*, December 1976). Haley's spitting on the example of Malcolm X is of a piece with *Roots*.

Rootlessness and Roots

For all its promises, *Roots* provides no real historic identification for American blacks. White and black liberals are saying to ghetto blacks that the rediscovery of an African heritage can make them "real Americans." The trouble, they presumably believe, is that blacks have had no Mayflower. But a "Mayflower tradition" is of use perhaps only to that tiny minority of blacks who, like Alex Haley, "make it" as individuals.

This is why the *Roots*-fed interest in genealogy is primarily a fad. It is no more helpful in the fight against racial oppression than the dashikis were in the 1960's. Lineage is important in feudal societies in defining an individual's position in the society. For the owners of private property in bourgeois society, genealogy is a matter of some legal as well as ideological importance. But for the virtually propertyless black masses, it has no point and is certainly not a form of struggle against the white-dominated status quo. At best it is a hobby, bearing approximately the same relation to the fight for black freedom as stamp collecting does to internationalism.

The longing for an African heritage in *Roots* is artificial but the nostalgia for rural Tennessee rings truer. Near the end of the book, "Chicken George" tells his family:

"de lan' where we goin' so black an' rich, you plant a pig's tail an' a hog'll grow . . . you can't hardly sleep nights for de watermelons grown' so fas' dey cracks open like firecrackers! I'm tellin' you it's possums layin' under 'simmon trees too fat to move, wid de 'simmon sugar drippin' down on 'em thick as 'lasses. . .!"

More than any other group in the U.S. the black masses have indeed been uprooted—not only from Africa, but from their roots in the rural South. But this same rootlessness has made them potentially a vanguard element of the future American socialist revolution. Twice severed from his roots, the urban black worker is a motor force of an integrated proletarian revolution.

Certainly the *Roots* phenomenon shows a longing for historic identification. But that identification cannot center on nostalgia for the past. It may well be that for the Haley family, the mythologized memory of their African warrior ancestor and a few words of his language were a consolation in time of deep trouble and an effective source of "black pride" as a survival mechanism against the internalization of racist ideology. But what was perhaps a source of resistance in 1850 becomes a buttress for reaction in 1977. With the economic integration of the blacks into capitalism's factories, their future is bound up decisively with their white class brothers'. U.S. blacks, more than any other group in this country, have truly "nothing to lose but their chains."

Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X : Developing a Social Conscience

I began, with the commencement of the year, to prepare myself for a final struggle, which should decide my fate one way or the other. My tendency was upward. I was fast approaching manhood, and year after year had passed, and I was still a slave. These thoughts roused me—I must do something. I therefore resolved that 1835 should not pass without witnessing an attempt, on my part, to secure my liberty. But I was not willing to cherish this determination alone. My fellow-slaves were dear to me. I was anxious to have them participate with me in this, my life-giving determination. I therefore, though with great prudence, commenced early to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition, and to imbue their minds with thoughts of freedom. I bent myself to devising ways and means for our escape, and meanwhile strove, on all fitting occasions, to impress them with the gross fraud and inhumanity of slavery. I went first to Henry, next to John, then to the others. I found, in them all, warm hearts and noble spirits. They were ready to hear, and ready to act when a feasible plan should be proposed. This was what I wanted. I talked to them of our want of manhood, if we submitted to our enslavement without at least one noble effort to be free. We met often, and consulted frequently, and told our hopes and fears, recounted the difficulties, real and imagined, which we should be called on to meet. At times we were almost disposed to give up, and try to content ourselves with our wretched lot; at others, we were firm and unbending in our determination to go. . . .

We now began to feel a degree of safety, and to prepare ourselves for the duties and responsibilities of a life of freedom. On the morning after our arrival at New Bedford, while at the breakfast-table, the question arose as to what name I should be called by. The name given me by my mother was, "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey." I, however, had dispensed with the two middle names long before I left Maryland so that I was generally known by the name of "Frederick Bailey." I started from Baltimore bearing the name of "Stanley." When I got to New York, I again changed my name to "Frederick Johnson," and thought that would be the last change. But when I got to New Bedford, I found it necessary again to change my name. The reason of this necessity was, that there were so many Johnsons in New Bedford, it was already quite difficult to distinguish between them. I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of "Frederick." I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity. Mr. Johnson had just been reading the "Lady of the Lake," and at once suggested that my name be "Douglass." From that time until now I have been called

“Frederick Douglass”; and as I am more widely known by that name than by either of the others, I shall continue to use it as my own.

—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* [autobiographical]

I think that an objective reader may see how in the society to which I was exposed as a black youth here in America, for me to wind up in a prison was really just about inevitable. It happens to so many thousands of black youth. . . .

I think, I hope, that the objective reader, in following my life—the life of only one ghetto-created Negro—may gain a better picture and understanding than he has previously had of the black ghettos which are shaping the lives and the thinking of almost all of the 22 million Negroes who live in America.

—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

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“Roots”: Romanticizing an Individual Heritage

Then, under the moon and the stars, Kunta raised the baby upward, turning the blanketed bundle in his hands so that the baby’s right ear touched against his lips. And then slowly and distinctly, in Mandinka, he whispered three times into the tiny ear, “Your name is Kizzy. Your name is Kizzy. Your name is Kizzy.” It was done, as it had been done with all of the Kinte ancestors, as it had been done with himself, as it would have been done with this infant had she been born in her ancestral homeland. She had become the first person to know who she was. . . .

Even beyond what she had hoped, George seemed to be building up his own image of his gran’ pappy, and—to the limits of her endurance—Kizzy tried to help it along with tales from her own rich store of memories. “Boy, I wish you could o’heard ‘im singin’ some o’dem African songs to me when we be ridin’ in de masse’s buggy, an’ I was a l’il gal, right roun’ de age you is now.” . . . She said to George, “Yo’ gran’ pappy like to tell me things in de African tongue. Like he call a fiddle a ko, or he call a river Kamby Bolongo, whole lotsa different, funny-soundin’ words like dat.” She thought how much it would please her pappy, wherever he was, for his grandson also to know the African words.

—Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*