

# Black History and the Class Struggle

No. 21

## Obama: CEO of Racist American Capitalist System



Getty



AP

President Obama defends mass firing of Rhode Island teachers, March 2010, part of bourgeoisie's war on public education. Unemployed workers at job fair in Louisville, Kentucky, September 2009. Periodic capitalist economic crises mean immiseration for working people.

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## Introduction

In the first issue of *Black History and the Class Struggle*, published in 1983, we wrote: "The fight for black freedom in the United States is inextricably linked to the fight for socialist revolution against the racist, imperialist capitalist system." Today it remains the purpose of this pamphlet series to bring working people and youth to an understanding of this inextricable link, as part of winning them to a Marxist program of struggle to bring the working class to power at the head of all the oppressed.

The articles reprinted here show that, as Barack Obama became a serious contender for the U.S. presidency heading toward the 2008 elections, the Spartacist League clearly set forward our position refusing political support to all candidates of the bourgeois class enemy. Our revolutionary program begins from the fight for political independence of the working class from all capitalist parties and state institutions. After the election, we wrote (*Workers Vanguard* No. 925, 21 November 2008): "From the standpoint of the international working class and oppressed there is *nothing to celebrate* in Obama's victory and much to fear. Enthusiasm among large sections of the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, is justified." Large numbers of black people were also celebrating, not least older people, who had never thought a black man could be elected president in this deeply racist country.

In contrast to our position, Workers World Party, one of the organizations that falsely claim to be socialist, wrote: "The election victory of Barack Obama will go down in history as a triumphant step forward in the struggle against racism and national oppression in the U.S." The illusions of workers and youth in Obama are false consciousness, fed by the lying propaganda of the ruling class, and based on people's desperate desire to believe things are getting better. To purvey such false consciousness is the main job of reformist organizations—those who believe that the capitalist system can be reformed to "serve the people."

Now these opponents of revolution profess to be disappointed at Obama's record. But Barack Obama promised nothing to black people or the rest of the working masses. In acknowledging that slavery and racism have been at the center of bloody American history, Obama was only using a bit of undeniable truth in

order to better sell the big lie that racial oppression is a thing of the past. Indeed, the "end of racism" lie and the burial of the struggle for racial integration are the domestic side of the reactionary "end of communism" myth promoted by imperialist ideologues after the counterrevolutionary destruction of the USSR.

Under Obama's administration the racist cops continue to perform their function of upholding the capitalist order against the working class, including by intimidating displays of racist terror and murder on the streets. Immigrants have been rounded up and deported in higher numbers than under the Bush regime as scapegoats for the capitalist economic crisis. In a country where a distinguished member of the so-called "talented tenth" and personal friend of Obama's, professor Henry Louis Gates, can be harassed on his own front porch by a racist cop, much worse continues to be visited upon the common people. The president underscored again that nobody should expect him to stand up for black people when his administration fired Shirley Sherrod, a black woman official of the Department of Agriculture, after right-wingers alleged she had discriminated against a white farmer, a story revealed as a total fabrication almost as soon as it had been purveyed.

Obama made promises to the ruling class, and he has kept them: to loyally serve and defend the interests of Wall Street, to increase the number of U.S. troops raining death and destruction on Afghanistan, to continue the so-called "war on terror" which is a license for racist persecution of Muslims and others at home and the hypocritical justification for U.S. military adventures in the Near East. Obama bailed out the big banks using billions of tax dollars and brokered the rip-off "rescue" of the auto industry by axing jobs, wages and working conditions of unionized auto workers, with the complicity of the sellout "labor statesmen" at the top of the trade unions. He has gone after teachers unions with a vengeance and redoubled the bourgeoisie's attacks on public education across the board.

Supposedly "socialist" groups covered their loyal support to American capitalism's Commander-in-Chief with a fake militant veneer of opposition (along the lines that Obama will do good things if only we put sufficient mass pressure on

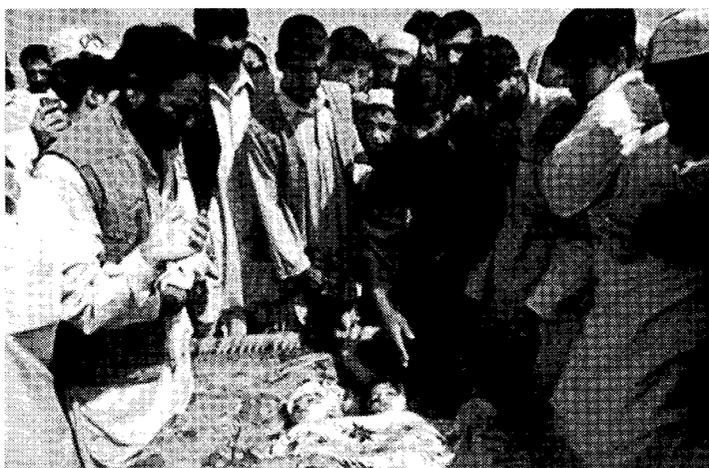
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# Break with the Democrats! For a Revolutionary Workers Party!



## Obama Offers Facelift for U.S. Imperialism



AFP (top); Reuters

**Top: Imperialist candidates Barack Obama and Joseph Biden at Democratic Party convention in August 2008. Obama calls for 10,000 more troops to Afghanistan. Above: Afghan villagers mourn two children killed by U.S.-led troops in Kabul on 1 September 2008.**

As the glittery red-white-and-blue media circuses of the two bourgeois parties' presidential nominating conventions in Colorado and Minnesota faded away, the last whiffs of police tear gas dissipated, and the last police barricades were dismantled, official U.S. unemployment hit a five-year high of 6.1 percent, while the actual business of American imperialism continues unabated. The occupation of Afghanistan—supported by both capitalist candidates—heated up as the U.S. killed or wounded 500 people in one week alone. Meanwhile, U.S. commandos openly made incursions into Pakistan on September 3, the sort of action advocated by Democratic Party presidential nominee Barack Obama. With bipartisan unity, Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden's proposal for a \$15 billion bribe to Pakistan's new president to ensure compliance with further U.S. incursions was supported by the Bush administration. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have recommended shifting some troops out of the Iraq quagmire in order to send them to Afghanistan, a move in line with Obama's recent call for 10,000 additional troops into Afghanistan. And both parties continue threats

against Iran over its nuclear program.

As Marxist opponents of this racist capitalist-imperialist order, we stand for the political independence of the working class from the capitalist class enemy. Working people need a party that fights for their class interests, a workers party committed to sweeping away the murderous imperialist order through socialist revolution. We are opposed to any political support to any capitalist politician—Democrat, Republican, Green or "Independent." A vote for any bourgeois candidate is a vote of confidence in

the reformability of capitalism and a vote against the need for socialist revolution. Nor would we run for executive office—president, governor or mayor—ourselves (see *Spartacist* [English-language edition] No. 60, Autumn 2007). In the U.S., the president is the top cop responsible for the most massive military power in history and for the domestic machinery of repression that maintains social oppression and exploitation.

To the U.S. rulers, Obama, the son of a Kenyan man and a white American woman, is an acceptable choice for president because he would refurbish the tattered image of U.S. imperialism.

Obama serves as a very powerful propaganda weapon for the bourgeoisie, telling black people and the oppressed to shut up and stop complaining, because, you see, "the American dream" works! Former Bush supporter and former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan pointed out in promoting Obama: "What does he offer? First and foremost: his face. Think of it as the most effective potential re-branding of the United States since Reagan. Such a re-branding is not trivial—it's central to an effective war strategy" (*Atlantic Monthly*, December 2007).

Indeed, when Obama spoke in Berlin on July 24, more than 200,000 Berliners, waving U.S. flags, cheered him on. It was a public relations triumph that President Bush could not have pulled off; as one commentator quipped, the only way Bush would have gotten that kind of crowd was if he was being tried as a war criminal. Obama's speech itself was a rip-roaring rehash of just about every anti-Communist Cold War cliché known to bourgeois speechwriters.

Berlin was where John F. Kennedy made his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech in 1963—after his failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and his dispatch of U.S. troops to Vietnam. It was also in Berlin that Ronald Reagan demanded that Soviet leader Gorbachev "tear down that wall" in 1987 during Cold War II. Obama's performance, a virulent mix of classic "Cold War liberalism" with neoconservative Reaganite rhetoric, was designed to show how tough an imperialist Commander-in-Chief he would be.

Obama declared that after World War II "the Soviet shadow had swept across Eastern Europe." Left unsaid, of course, was the fact that it was the Red Army that defeated the scourge of Nazi terror in Europe at the cost of over 20 million Soviet lives. Obama sang the praises of NATO, "the greatest alliance ever formed to defend our common security." He gave shout-outs to "the German people" who "tore down that wall" and to "American bases built in the last century" that "defend the security of this continent." It was a speech geared to reinvigorating "Western allies" behind U.S. imperialist aims abroad: "The Afghan people"—the same ones the U.S. and NATO forces slaughter with impunity—"need our troops and your troops."

While the Soviet Union has been destroyed, Obama's anti-Communism still serves a real purpose in targeting the deformed workers states of Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam and especially China, the most powerful of the remaining deformed workers states. Just as we did with the USSR and the deformed workers states of East Europe, today we stand for the unconditional military defense of the remaining workers states against imperialist attack and capitalist counterrevolution.

The 1991-92 counterrevolutionary destruction of the Soviet degenerated workers state, a world-historic defeat for the international proletariat, has created a one "superpower" world dominated by U.S. imperialism. It is in this context that the U.S.-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan must be seen. As revolutionary working-class Marxists, we oppose U.S. imperialist adventures and invasions everywhere. We wrote

**Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, at Khyber Pass outpost overlooking Afghanistan in 1980 as U.S. financed and armed cutthroat mujahedin against Soviet Red Army. Today Brzezinski serves as one of Obama's foreign policy advisers.**



in "U.S. Imperialists Out of Afghanistan, Iraq!" (WV No. 918, 1 August):

"The Spartacist League, U.S. section of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist), stood for the military defense of Afghanistan and Iraq against imperialist attack without giving any political support to the reactionary, woman-hating Taliban cutthroats or the capitalist dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. We underlined that every victory for the imperialists in their military adventures encourages more predatory wars; every setback serves to assist the struggles of working people and the oppressed the world over. Today, we call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. troops and bases from Iraq, Afghanistan and Central Asia!"

In contrast, reformist left groups, such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Workers World Party (WWP) and the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), and the various antiwar coalitions they built—ANSWER (founded by WWP but now run by the Party for Socialism and Liberation), United for Peace and Justice (where the ISO worked) and the RCP's Not In Our Name—refused to militarily defend Afghanistan and Iraq against U.S. attack. Through their refrain of "money for jobs and education, not war," the reformists promote the lie that imperialism can be reformed through some peace-and-justice-loving "different policy." But as Bolshevik leader V.I. Lenin wrote in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), as the first inter-imperialist world war wreaked its devastation:

"Private property based on the labour of the small proprietor, free competition, democracy, all the catchwords with which the capitalists and their press deceive the workers and the peasants—are things of the distant past. Capitalism has grown into a world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the population of the world by a handful of

'advanced' countries. And this 'booty' is shared between two or three powerful world plunderers armed to the teeth (America, Great Britain, Japan), who are drawing the whole world into *their* war over the division of *their* booty."

The occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have gone hand in hand with the capitalist rulers' onslaught against working people, minorities and most everyone else domestically. What is necessary is class struggle against the capitalist rulers at home. Such a perspective requires political combat against the pro-capitalist trade-union bureaucracy, which subordinates the proletariat to its capitalist class enemy, particularly through promoting Democratic Party "lesser evilism." Above all, what is required is the forging of a revolutionary workers party, built independently of and in opposition to the Democrats, Republicans, Greens and all capitalist parties; a workers party that fights for socialist revolution and a workers government.

## Evil Dead II: Obama's Heroes

Obama told the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2007 that the U.S. needs "the first truly 21st century military.... We must maintain the strongest, best-equipped military in the world." He stated in March that he "would return the country to the more 'traditional' foreign policy efforts of past presidents, such as George H.W. Bush, John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan." Such a "tradition" includes the Bay of Pigs invasion under Kennedy, the covert wars against Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980s under Reagan, and the invasion of Panama and the Iraq War of 1990-91 under Bush Sr.

Obama's foreign policy coterie includes Democratic advisers Zbigniew Brzezinski and Madeleine Albright. Brzezinski is the anti-Communist Dr. Strangelove who

served as National Security Advisor to Democratic president Jimmy Carter and as godfather to the reactionary Afghan *mujahedin* cutthroats financed by the CIA against the Soviet Army, which intervened in Afghanistan in late 1979 in defense of the USSR's southern flank and on the side of elementary human progress.

Madeleine Albright was Democrat Bill Clinton's Secretary of State. When asked about the U.S. starvation blockade against Iraq that killed *one and a half million people*, she said: "We think the price was worth it." She was also a key player in Clinton's U.S./NATO devastating aerial war against Serbia in 1999, supported at the time by liberals and many reformists as the kind of "human rights" interventions that the U.S. should be carrying out.

Delaware Senator Joseph Biden, Obama's vice presidential choice and the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was aptly described by radical-liberal columnist Alexander Cockburn—a supporter of right-wing libertarian Republican Ron Paul!—as a "corporate serf" (along with his new boss Obama) and "a man so ripely symbolic of everything that is unchanging and hopeless about our political system that a computer simulation of the corporate-political paradigm senator in Congress would turn out 'Biden' in a nano-second" (*CounterPunch Diary*, 23/24 August). In his speech at the Democratic convention on August 27, Biden outlined the Obama camp's imperialist blueprint:

"Our country is less secure and more isolated than at any time in recent history.... The emergence of Russia, China and India as great powers; the spread of lethal weapons; the shortage of secure supplies of energy, food and water; the challenge of climate change; and the resurgence of fundamentalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the real central front against terrorism.... We've once again seen the consequences of this neglect with Russia's challenge to the free and democratic country of Georgia. Barack Obama and I will end this neglect."

World, watch out.

### The "End of Racism" Lie

Both conventions were an exercise in rank hypocrisy. With the vice presidential nomination of Alaska governor Sarah Palin, Republican anti-abortion bigots have now discovered the evils of sexism. Or witness the spectacle of Republican politicians pretending to care about black and poor people, as they scaled back the first day of their convention when Hurricane Gustav hit the Gulf Coast. The threat of Gustav to the Gulf Coast recalled the racist atrocity by the bourgeois rulers—Democrats as well as Republicans—in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and re-

mined everyone that the levees have yet to be adequately rebuilt.

One should also recall that following the horror exposed by Katrina in 2005, Obama declared, "the incompetence was color-blind." The Obama campaign touts the "end of racism" myth, with the Obama family itself supposedly living proof that black people can make it in the U.S. The "end of racism" lie and the burial of the struggle for racial integration as a "failed experiment" are the domestic side of the reactionary "end of communism" mythology promoted by imperialist ideologues after the counterrevolutionary destruction of the USSR. Both myths are deeply false. Black oppression, rooted in chattel slavery, is deeply interwoven in the social fabric of capitalist America. It can be measured in astronomical unemployment

ing its victory in the Spanish-American War, to its intervention in Nicaragua to suppress the Sandino rebellion in the 1920s and '30s, to the occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965, to Lebanon, Panama and Grenada, to its wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. imperialism has left a grisly trail of carnage around the globe, all accompanied by vicious racial oppression and contempt for "non-white" peoples. This includes U.S. imperialism's counterrevolutionary wars against the social revolutions in Korea and Vietnam, resulting in the slaughter of some six million people. As one Iraqi driver bitterly commented after being trapped in Baghdad as the city was closed down during Obama's visit this summer: "Why does it matter to us if a white man or a black man wins the election. Obama and



24 July 2008:  
Obama's  
speech before  
cheering crowd  
in Berlin hailed  
U.S.-led  
Cold War  
anti-Soviet  
crusade.

rates, police terror, the consignment of nearly one million blacks to prisons and the purge of black youth from higher education. Obama looks upon all this and claims, as he did in his speech in Selma last year, that America is "90 percent of the way" toward racial equality! In fact, it is only the current *lack* of militant labor and black struggle against conditions of oppression that makes this lie even possible.

The link between U.S. imperialist wars abroad and racist reaction at home is clear. Two years before the 1898 Spanish-American War, when U.S. imperialism came onto the world scene, the Supreme Court codified Jim Crow segregation with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision declaring "separate but equal" the law of the land, while the years 1889 to 1903 saw an average of two lynchings a week. Among black people, opposition to U.S. imperialism's military adventures has historically been stronger than among the rest of the populace.

From U.S. imperialism's genocidal "pacification" of the Philippines follow-

Bush are two faces on the same currency, an American currency."

### Defeat U.S. Imperialism Through Socialist Revolution!

While bloodsoaked war criminals and corporate fat cats made deals as their candidates preened for the cameras inside both Republican and Democratic conventions, outside these bastions of bourgeois politics masses of police were mobilized to muffle protest. As the Partisan Defense Committee—a class-struggle, legal and social defense organization associated with the Spartacist League—wrote in a September 7 protest letter: "The brutal suppression of the rights of speech and assembly, which was also carried out by the police in Denver outside the Democratic National Convention as well as the conventions in 2004, has become a staple of these spectacles to choose those vying to become what is ludicrously promoted as the leader of the 'free world'." We denounce the police violence at both conventions and demand that all charges be



Workers Vanguard

**Spartacists at  
March 2007  
New York City  
antiwar  
demonstration.**

dropped against those arrested.

The fact is, however, that most of what passes for the left in this country has either explicitly or implicitly endorsed a Democratic Party victory over the Republicans in the upcoming election. Having built an “antiwar movement” premised on appeals to bourgeois (Democratic) politicians to “end the war” in Iraq—and only Iraq, not Afghanistan—the liberals and their reformist supporters have now buried that “movement” in the morass of American electoral politics. The starting point of the reformist left is *not* the fight for socialist revolution, but rather the lie that capitalism can be reformed to serve the interests of working people and the oppressed.

In *Imperialism*, Lenin denounced such shams, noting that “reactionary, petty-

bourgeois critics of capitalist imperialism dream of going *back* to ‘free,’ ‘peaceful,’ and ‘honest’ competition,” and insisting that “a ‘fight’ against the policy of the trusts and banks that does not affect the economic basis of the trusts and banks is mere bourgeois reformism and pacifism, the benevolent and innocent expression of pious wishes.” That sums up the support by groups like Workers World to the capitalist Green Party’s presidential candidate and former Georgia Democratic Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, who spoke at a “Recreate ‘68” rally outside the Democratic convention. She promoted the usual reformist pabulum about ending occupations abroad and redirecting “excessive” military spending toward higher education, and other good

things like universal health care.

The reformist, anti-Communist ISO, for its part, claims that “Support for Barack Obama is one sign of a deeper shift to the left” (*Socialist Worker*, 13 August). The ISO never met a counter-revolutionary “freedom fighter” it didn’t like, so the Obama/Brzezinski crew’s anti-Communism is right up their alley. *Socialist Worker* (27 August) reprinted a piece by Dave Zirin, a regular contributor to that paper, under the title, “What We Didn’t Learn in Beijing.” The article chides the bourgeois media for insufficient China-bashing during the Olympics, condemning them for supposedly not asking “why the State Department last April took China off its list of nations that commit human rights violations.” While the ISO, the Revolutionary Communist Party and Workers World, as well as other reformist leftists, all have articles “exposing” Obama’s policies, these are thin covers for their actual politics of Democratic Party “lesser evilism,” as all their various coalitions in one way or another recapitulate the RCP’s classic call, “The World Can’t Wait: Drive Out the Bush Regime!” This is also the goal—what an amazing coincidence—of the Democrats this year.

The Democrats’ rhetoric about “hope” and “change” is meant to refurbish illusions that the shell game of bourgeois electoral politics can work in the interests of the working masses. And, indeed, Democratic voter turnout during the primaries, including among black people and youth, has been very high. But while the Republicans may revel in inflicting suffering on working people and the oppressed, the Democrats put on a more kindly face and do the same thing. As Lenin captured it in his 1917 work, *The State and Revolution*, “To decide once every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament—this is the real essence of bourgeois parliamentarism.”

This system of imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism, cannot be reformed. It cannot be pressured into being more peaceful or humane. Lenin’s Bolsheviks showed in leading the October Revolution of 1917 that it can and must be defeated through workers revolution. The Spartacist League stands for forging a working-class party like the Bolshevik Party to overturn, by socialist revolution, this rotting capitalist order. Thus we stand in implacable opposition to the dual parties of capitalism, as well as petty-bourgeois would-be reformers like the Green Party. Break with the Democrats—For a revolutionary workers party to fight for socialist revolution! ■

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**T**he *Great Debaters*, directed by Denzel Washington, produced by Oprah Winfrey and starring Washington and Forest Whitaker, is supposed

## By Don Cane and Jacob Zorn

to be a feel-good movie about overcoming racism in the segregated South. It is loosely based on an article published in 1997 in *American Legacy* magazine about the debate team of Wiley College—a small, religious black college in East Texas—during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Under the tutelage of their coach, English professor Melvin B. Tolson, the debaters triumph in contest after contest against bigger black schools and jump over the color bar to triumph over prestigious white schools as well, such as a touring Oxford University team from England. The highlight of the movie is their victory over Harvard; the team defeats the all-white Ivy League team by advocating peaceful civil disobedience against oppression. As the credits roll, we are told that one of the debaters, James Farmer Jr., went on to form the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which was founded in 1942 and went on to become one of the organizations active in the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

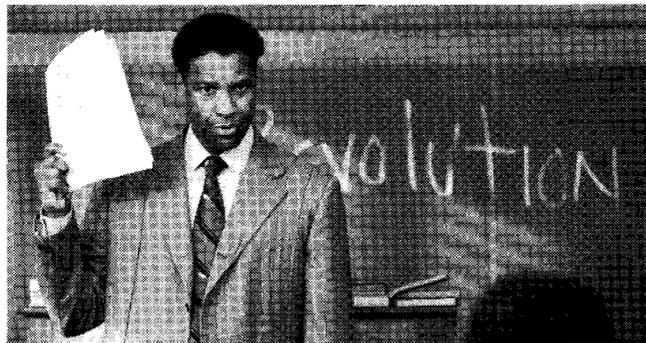
*The Great Debaters* drives home the hardships faced by even relatively elite black students and intellectuals—the “talented tenth”—in the Jim Crow South. Farmer’s father, religion professor James Farmer Sr., the first black person in Texas to earn a PhD, is threatened with death by two impoverished white farmers while driving through the countryside with his family because Farmer accidentally hit their pig with his car. His son resolves to stand up after he sees his educated father forced to grovel before illiterate whites.

Tolson, on the other hand, is obviously

# Communist Organizing in the Jim Crow South



## What’s Not in *The Great Debaters*



Young Worker (top); Weinstein Company

**Top: “Smash the Barriers!” illustration from the Young Communist League’s *Young Worker* in 1930. Above: Denzel Washington as Melvin B. Tolson in *The Great Debaters*.**

some sort of radical, perhaps even a Communist, and he actively opposes racial injustice. In one scene, the young Farmer follows Tolson as he sneaks out in the middle of the night to organize an integrated sharecroppers union, and barely escapes arrest as the police raid the meeting. Later, the police track down Tolson after torturing some of the sharecroppers, arrest him at Wiley and drag him to jail. For an audience not familiar with the everyday violence, oppres-

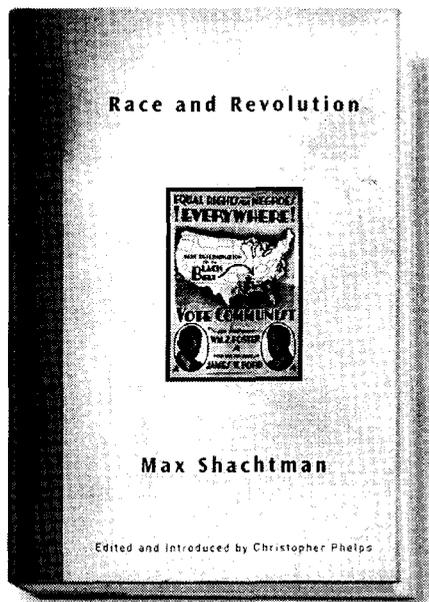
sion and humiliation at the core of Jim Crow segregation, the movie provides a glimpse.

### Black Rights and the Reformist Left Today

*The Great Debaters* opened during the 2007 holiday season, but there should be no doubt that it was made for the 2008 presidential election campaign. The heroes of the film, Tolson and his protégé Farmer, are obviously designed to evoke Barack Obama. The audience is supposed to see Obama, who claims that the civil rights movement “took us 90 percent of the way” toward racial equality, as the modern-day Great Debater, triumphing over historic racism through hard work. It is an echo of Booker T. Washington, who over a century ago preached accommodation to the racist status quo by telling impoverished blacks to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Trade-union bureaucrats, black bourgeois politicians, reformist leftists and others seized on economic and social discontent and peddled support to Obama and the “lesser evil” capitalist Democratic Party—the other party of war and racism. The Communist Party’s *People’s Weekly World* (30 December 2007) wrote, “A film that rings as true and powerful as ‘The Great Debaters’ may have an effect on the 2008 election primaries.” After Obama won the elections, the *People’s Weekly World* headlined a November 6 online statement, “Dawn of a New Era.”

Workers World Party’s paper (1 February) called the movie “magnificent” because it “puts everything in context.” The message *Workers World* draws is that “liberation is not to be won through electoral bourgeois politics, but is to be waged and won through open class struggle.” This is rich coming from an organization that has repeatedly supported black Democrats, from Jesse Jackson in the 1980s to New York City councilman Charles Barron in recent years. Workers World called for a vote to Cynthia McKinney, a former



**“Communism and the Negro,”** written by then-Trotskyist leader Max Shachtman in 1933 (published by Verso in 2003 as *Race and Revolution*), emphasized that black workers would be vital part of working-class movement. **Right: Packinghouse workers strike in Chicago in late 1930s. CIO organizing drive built mass industrial unions by uniting black and white workers.**

Democratic Congresswoman and the 2008 presidential candidate for the capitalist Green Party. After Obama’s win, *Workers World* (13 November) enthused, “Millions in Streets Seal Obama Victory.”

Genuine Marxists do not support any capitalist party or politician—Democrat, Republican, Green or “independent.” The working class must forge a class-struggle workers party that fights for workers revolution. Capitalism is a system based on exploitation of labor, and, in the U.S., a unique and critical mainstay continues to be the subjugation of the black population at the bottom of society.

The veteran American Trotskyist, Richard S. Fraser, wrote in his 1955 work, “For the Materialist Conception of the Negro Struggle”: “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” (reprinted in *Marxist Bulletin* No. 5 [Revised], “What Strategy for Black Liberation? Trotskyism vs. Black Nationalism”). We of the Spartacist League base our program for black liberation upon Fraser’s perspective of revolutionary integrationism, premised on the understanding that black freedom requires smashing the capitalist system and constructing an egalitarian socialist society. As we wrote in “For a Workers America!” (WV No. 908, 15 February):

“This program of revolutionary integrationism is a fight to assimilate black

people into an egalitarian socialist order, which is the only way to achieve real equality. While we fight against all aspects of racial oppression, we point out that there is no solution to that oppression short of a social revolution. This program is in sharp counterposition to the program of liberal integrationism—what American Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon once derided and denounced as ‘inch-at-a-time’ gradualism—which is based upon the deception that black freedom can be achieved within the confines of the racist capitalist system. It is also in sharp contradiction to the petty-bourgeois utopian program of black nationalism and separatism, which rejects and despairs of united multiracial class struggle to abolish this racist capitalist system. Instead, black nationalism seeks to make a virtue of the racial segregation and ghettoization of black people that is seen as unchangeable.”

### The Great Depression in the Jim Crow South

*The Great Debaters* is a well-made movie. But in its paeans to dedication and debate, it downplays the real *social struggle* that was going on in the U.S. in the 1930s, including by black people in the South. The Great Depression exposed the brutal irrationality of capitalism—in stark contrast to the industrial achievements of the USSR—as it threw millions of workers into starvation and misery internationally, including in other imperialist countries. Germany, which was defeated in World War I, was especially rocked by crises, culminating in the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazis in 1933. Only the betrayal by the Stalinist and Social Democratic misleaders allowed the Nazis to

come to power unopposed and smash the organized working class in order to save capitalism. A few years later, the Stalinists went on to play an aggressive counter-revolutionary role in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, slaughtering revolutionary fighters in order to appease the “democratic” imperialists and head off proletarian revolution in Spain. Nonetheless, millions of workers, peasants, students and intellectuals joined Communist and social-democratic parties internationally, trying to find a way out of the apparent dead end of capitalism and fascism.

The catastrophic impact of the Great Depression on the U.S. working class was keenly felt by its most oppressed section, black workers. The unemployment rate of black workers exceeded white joblessness by 30 to 60 percent. Even though millions of black people moved to the industrial North and Midwest during the “Great Migration,” which began with World War I, and many others moved to growing Southern cities, half of American blacks still lived in the rural South at the start of the Depression. Southern agriculture was in decline before the Depression hit. “By 1933 most blacks could neither find jobs of any kind nor contracts for their crop at any price,” as noted by historian Harvard Sitkoff in *A New Deal for Blacks*. “A specter of starvation haunted black America.”

Southern agriculture in the 1930s was, even by contemporary bourgeois standards, economically backward. It retained significant remnants of the slave system. The Civil War, America’s second bourgeois revolution, had smashed the slave

system, paving the way for the development of industrial capitalism in the U.S. as a whole. But after the betrayal of Reconstruction by the Northern bourgeoisie, “the Negro was left in the South in the indefinite position of semi-slavery, semi-serfdom and semi-wage slavery” as then-Trotskyist Max Shachtman put it in his 1933 piece “Communism and the Negro” (reprinted by Verso in 2003 as *Race and Revolution*).

Sharecropping and tenancy formed the labor backbone of Southern agriculture. The sharecropper worked in lieu of wages for a share of the cash crop and “furnishings” (food allowance, housing, etc.). The tenant farmer worked land on which he paid ground rent with a share of the crop in lieu of cash. Sharecroppers and tenants found themselves more in debt every year, and could not leave the land until they had paid off their debts. Even when cotton prices rose, they were cheated by white landowners and merchants. According to Sitkoff, “Over two-thirds of the black farmers cultivating cotton in the early thirties received no profits for the crop, either breaking even or going deeper in debt.”

Sitting atop all this was the system of Jim Crow. Designed to prevent blacks from voting, becoming educated or fighting for their rights, Jim Crow was the systematic legal segregation of black people in the South, enforced by legal and extralegal violence. When blacks did challenge Jim Crow—either by personally refusing to follow its rules or, more rarely, by organizing—they faced racist terror, whether by the local sheriff or the Klan (who were often one and the same). At least 3,000 black people were lynched between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the dismantling of Jim Crow in

the 1960s. Shachtman summarized the position of black farmers in 1933:

“In a word, to all intents and purposes hundreds of thousands of Negroes in the South today occupy, both in economic as in the political sense, the position of serfs and peons, tied to the land, life and limb at the disposal of the landlord, whose semi-feudal sway is maintained with the aid of the sheriff, the courts, the elaborate system of social and political discrimination, and, when necessary, the law of Judge Lynch. The white sharecroppers and tenants are not very much better off.”

Poor white farmers were also horribly oppressed economically. Southern agriculture remained dependent on the cash crop cotton and cheap labor, and where cheap labor is in abundance technology will lag. In 1929, less than 10 percent of all Texas farms had tractors. The rural South was still mired in primitive farming techniques, illiteracy and poverty. During the 1930s, the price of cotton plummeted. In 1929, cotton sold for 18 cents per pound; in 1933, for less than 6 cents per pound. By the Depression, with the South sinking further and further into misery, the ruling class as a whole was desperate to modernize this decrepit system, which could only be done under capitalism through the immiseration of untold numbers of black and white rural toilers.

The United States in the 1930s was an advanced industrialized capitalist country with a powerful working class. By the Depression, textile, iron, coal, steel and chemical industries were developing in the South. In the North, powerful industrial unions formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) that broke away from the ossified American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions. The CIO organized all workers in a particular industry, regardless of their ethnicity or race—a significant improvement from the color bar of many AFL unions.

In the 1930s, large sections of the industrial working class in the U.S.—black and white, native-born and immigrant—became more militant and radical, fighting to build the CIO, often under the leadership of Communists and other leftists. However, thanks in large part to the Stalinists and social democrats, the incipient radicalization of labor was diverted into Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Democratic Party. During the Second World War, the Communist Party subordinated the struggles of workers and black people to U.S. imperialism’s war effort, falsely portraying this interimperialist war as a struggle against fascism. In contrast, the Trotskyists, while standing for the unconditional military defense of the Soviet degenerated workers state during World War II, opposed all the imperialist com-



Schomburg Center

### Melvin B. Tolson

batants in that carnage—a position for which Trotskyists were imprisoned in 1941 under the Smith Act.

### Who Was Melvin B. Tolson?

Every reviewer gives passing mention to the movie’s insinuation that the real-life Melvin B. Tolson was a “Communist,” “radical” or “self-described socialist.” During the 1930s, Tolson had his feet in two different worlds—one foot was in the world of the aspiring black middle class of Wiley College, and the other foot was in the world of the black dispossessed masses of the rural South. In the 1940s and later, Tolson was most famous for his poetry, including “Dark Symphony” (1939) and *Harlem Gallery* (1965). In the early 1930s, he lived in Harlem while working on his Columbia University master’s thesis on the Harlem Renaissance. There he met black radicals like poet Langston Hughes, who would be his lifelong friend. He taught English and speech at Wiley for over 20 years. In 1947 he moved to Langston, Oklahoma, where he taught at Langston University and was mayor from 1954 to 1960. He died in 1966.

During the Depression, Tolson not only sympathized with radicalism but courageously struggled to implement his radical ideals in the Jim Crow South. There is no concrete evidence of what, if any, political organization Tolson joined in the 1930s. One historian argued that “although he heard the siren song of communism and felt that capitalism was the great force pulling his people down, he never joined the Communist Party and remained loyal to the social gospel of the Methodist Episcopal Church” (Gail K. Beil, “Melvin B. Tolson—Texas Radical,” in *The East Texas Historical Journal* [2002]). In the 1930s and 1940s, Tolson



Beinecke Library

Jamaican-born poet **Claude McKay** at Communist International’s Fourth Congress in Moscow, 1922.

had a column in the *Washington Tribune*, "Caviar and Cabbage," that gives a sense of his politics. In 1939 he wrote:

"The Negro would not have escaped from chattel slavery if it had not been for radicals of all classes, isms, ologies, and sects. Don't forget that. For 150 years before the Civil War, radicals kept up a continuous fight for Negro freedom. Many of them were lynched....

"After the World War, white radicals came to the defense of the Negro in larger and larger numbers."

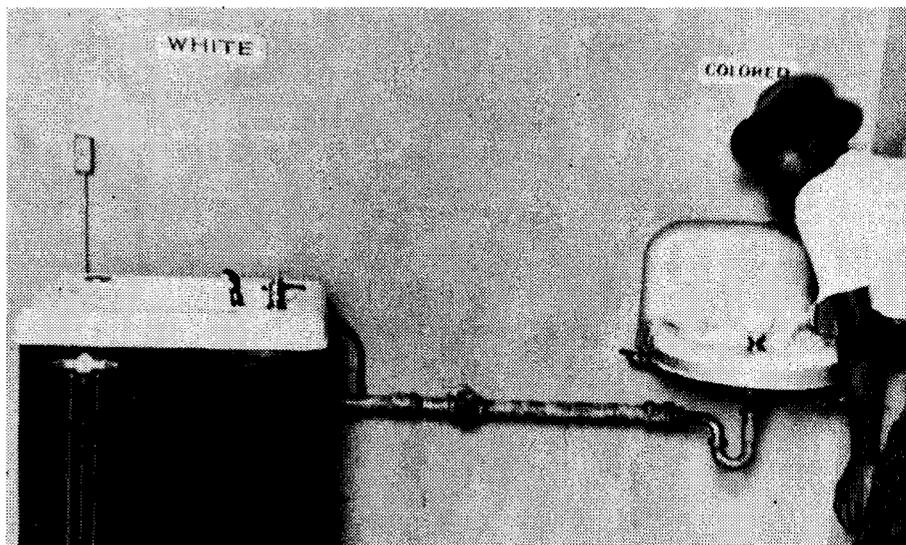
—"The Negro and Radicalism,"  
*Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the Washington Tribune, 1937-1944* (1982)

The son of an itinerant Methodist minister, Tolson was an eclectic Christian socialist. He wrote: "Jesus didn't believe in economic, racial, and social distinctions.... You talk about Karl Marx, the Communist! Why, don't you know Jesus was preaching about leveling society 1,800 years before the Jewish Red was born?" Tolson may have found some consolation in his Christian beliefs, but in reality religion is, to use Marx's phrase, the opium of the masses. In place of the struggle for socialist revolution, it substitutes a quest for eternal salvation to be found in a mythical "afterlife."

In the 1930s, Tolson was involved in organizing sharecroppers, though not much is known about this. According to Robert M. Farnsworth, one of Tolson's biographers, "Sometime in the thirties, he actively organized sharecroppers, both white and black, in southeastern Texas. He protected his wife and family from the details of his activities, but they knew he was involved" (Afterword to *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*).

What little screen time *The Great Debaters* gives to the sharecroppers' struggle is sanitized to give credence to liberal and reformist pressure politics. There is the scene of sheriff-led vigilantes breaking up a sharecroppers' meeting, burning down the meeting place and later beating information out of one sharecropper that leads to the arrest of Tolson. In the movie, Professor Farmer reclaims his dignity, and the respect of his son, by coming to Tolson's aid while black and white sharecroppers protest outside the jail. The CP's *People's Weekly World* (5 January) hailed this scene, declaring, the "Rev. Farmer stands tall as a man of the people."

If anything, this scene *underplays* the danger of organizing black farmers in the South—and hence Tolson's courage. In the fall of 1919, amid numerous anti-black race riots throughout the country, white sheriff's posses and federal troops in Phillips County, Arkansas, killed as many as 300 black sharecroppers over several days who had organized to demand



Elliot Erwit

**Jim Crow South: Segregated drinking fountains in North Carolina, 1950.**

that white landowners pay them a fair price for cotton. After the massacre, the local and state government arrested hundreds, and 12 blacks were sentenced to death. (This is described in the recent book by Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation* [2008].)

At the same time, this scene misrepresents the role of the black petty bourgeoisie (represented by Farmer Sr.) under Jim Crow. While most rankled under the humiliation and oppression of Jim Crow, others materially benefited from segregation and opposed militant struggle. One can look at the fate of Clifford James, a supporter of the Communist-organized Share Croppers Union (SCU) in Alabama. After being attacked by a deputy sheriff and other whites, James walked to the hospital of the Tuskegee Institute, which had been founded years earlier by Booker T. Washington. After dressing James's wounds, the doctor notified the sheriff, who threw James in jail, where he died!

### Struggles in the "Black Belt" South

There are several other dramatic scenes in *The Great Debaters*. One example is a closing scene of the debate with Harvard, in which Farmer Jr. argues that it is "a right, even a duty to resist" unjust laws "with violence or civil disobedience. You should pray I choose the latter." This message of the fictionalized debate is clearly intended for today's consumption, to read back the pacifism of Farmer and Martin Luther King Jr. into the 1930s. Blacks fighting against Jim Crow and capitalist exploitation in the South did not live in a peaceful world: they faced a campaign of terror, both legal and extralegal. The right

to armed self-defense was key to the fight for black rights. Black veterans, including from both world wars, were often in the forefront of struggles against Jim Crow and of the Southern civil rights movement in the 1950s.

Furthermore, the movie distorts the facts of the debate. As Timothy M. O'Donnell, a professor at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia, pointed out in a review of the movie, not only was the culminating debate at the University of Southern California and not Harvard, "the 1935 Wiley team debated the national intercollegiate debate topic about arms sales to foreign countries and not segregation or civil disobedience; they debated both sides of the proposition, not just the side of truth and justice.... Finally, by all accounts, Farmer was—if anything—the alternate in the match against USC—and never did have the opportunity to give the 'winning' last rebuttal." Nor does the movie mention the fact that Farmer later served as Assistant Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under Richard Nixon!

Communists were in the forefront of fighting for black workers and farmers and against racial oppression and lynch law terror during the 1930s—putting this struggle on the agenda for the first time since the Populist movement in the 1890s and trying to link it to the newly formed industrial unions. For decades, most of the American labor movement and the left had ignored the special oppression of black people. Most early trade unions linked to Samuel Gompers' AFL organized only skilled, white workers—or, if they accepted black members, organized segregated locals. Trade-union bureaucrats like Gompers and right-wing social democrats like Victor Berger were openly

racist. Socialist Party (SP) leader Eugene V. Debs and others in the left wing of American socialism rejected racist ideology and stood for working-class unity. But Debs did not actively promote the fight for black equality, seeing it as a diversion from the fight for workers interests. Debs famously declared that socialism had “nothing special to offer the Negro.”

The infant American Communist movement, which split from the SP in 1919, also failed to pay attention to the fight for black liberation. As James P. Cannon, an early Communist leader and later the founder of American Trotskyism, noted, the Communist International (Comintern) in Lenin and Trotsky’s time forced American Communists to address the question of black oppression:

“The influence of Lenin and the Russian Revolution, even debased and distorted as it later was by Stalin, and then filtered through the activities of the Communist Party in the United States, contributed *more than any other influence from any source* to the recognition, and more or less general acceptance, of the Negro question as a *special* problem of American society—a problem which cannot be simply subsumed under the general heading of the conflict between capital and labor, as it was in the pre-communist radical movement....

“Everything new on the Negro question came from Moscow—after the Russian Revolution began to thunder its demand throughout the world for freedom and equality for all national minorities, all subject peoples and all races—for all the despised and rejected of the earth.”

—“The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement,” *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (1962)

### Arkansas farm workers listening to speaker at meeting of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, circa 1934.

U. of North Carolina (photo); Encyclopedia of the American Left



Prior to 1930, the CP had less than 200 black members, but that year 1,000 black people joined the party. The CP was active in numerous struggles. One of the most famous was the Scottsboro Case, in which Communists led the struggle to free nine black youths who were framed up in 1931 for raping two white girls on a freight train and were jailed in Scottsboro, Alabama. Despite their clear innocence, a local court found eight of them guilty and sentenced them to death. (The judge reluctantly declared a mistrial for the ninth, since seven members of the jury had insisted on the death penalty even though the prosecutor had asked for life imprisonment because he was a 13-year-old; nonetheless, he remained in jail until 1937.) The CP, through its defense arm, the International Labor Defense, rapidly rallied to the defense of the Scottsboro youths and turned their case into an international symbol of the horrors of Southern lynch law. (The Scottsboro defendants were not executed, but were given long prison sentences; the last of the defendants was not pardoned until 1976.)

CP work among black people in the early 1930s took place in the context of the so-called “Third Period,” in which the Stalinists declared that the final collapse of capitalism was imminent and that reforms were no longer possible. As it did on all questions, the Stalinization of the Comintern led to disorientation on the black question. The 1928 Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, applying the dogma of “two-stage revolution” to the so-called “Black Belt” in the American South, promulgated the slogan of “self-

determination” for the (nonexistent) “Negro nation.” This was nonsense. Black people are not a nation that is being forcibly assimilated, but an oppressed race-color caste forcibly segregated at the bottom of American society. Black struggles have historically been for integration, not separation. As we wrote in “The CP and Black Struggles in the Depression” (*Young Spartacus* No. 25, September 1974):

“While the CP of this period was deformed by dishonesty, political zig-zags and egregious departures from Marxism, nonetheless in the area of black work the 1930’s represents the CP’s heroic period. Despite the erroneous ‘Black Belt’ theory and the call for ‘Negro self-determination’ in this territory (a call which was never raised agitationaly but remained part of the CP’s written propaganda), the CP’s work in practice combined a proletarian orientation with an awareness of the strategic need to fight racial oppression throughout all layers of American society, especially to address the problems of poor and unemployed blacks.”

### Heroic Communist Work in the South

*The Great Debaters’* fleeting images of Tolson’s organizing highlight the difficulties and dangers of organizing sharecroppers in the Depression South. Both the Socialist and Communist parties attempted to organize tenants and sharecroppers to demand better pay and treatment from landowners and merchants. Both faced bloody repression from those who wanted to prevent black and white sharecroppers from organizing. The most famous of these groups is the SP-led Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU), which was heavily backed and financed by liberals and the clergy. Under the tutelage of SP leader (and Presbyterian minister) Norman Thomas, it reached national prominence, including by lobbying President Roosevelt’s administration for reforms.

The STFU laid claim to be the first fully integrated Southern union. But the STFU’s concept of integration was for whites to hold primary leadership while blacks held secondary positions. If whites objected to a common union local with blacks, they were allowed to set up whites-only locals. As Shachtman, in “Communism and the Negro,” noted of the Socialist Party: “The fact that the Negro masses in the United States occupy a *special* position, that they constitute a distinct racial caste of pariahs, is conveniently ignored by the Socialist theoreticians.” The STFU never raised a single demand in support of black rights. The 1934 founding of the STFU was a godsend for the liberals, clergy and petty-bourgeois black leadership seeking to dampen the seething discontent rising up in the South.

For its part, the CP built the Share Croppers' Union, which organized thousands of evicted black farmers as well as cotton pickers and was largely centered in Alabama. The struggle to organize the SCU was conducted in a state of perpetual civil war with both "legal" and extralegal armed vigilante groups. For example, in 1931 at Camp Hill, Alabama, the local sheriff led a posse and attacked a meeting on union organizing and the Scottsboro Case. The same posse also attacked the home of a local sharecropper leader. In 1932 the SCU was again in a defensive battle when a local landlord attempted to seize the property of an indebted sharecropper in Reel-town, Alabama. Determined SCU members fought off the local sheriff and his posse.

By 1935, the SCU claimed some 12,000 members; when it tried to merge with the STFU, the Socialist leaders refused out of anti-Communism. The SCU not only fought to free the Scottsboro youths, it also raised demands for social equality, equal pay for equal work (including for women), improved schools and extension of the school year, abolition of poor farmers' debt and resurrected the emancipated slave demand of 40 acres and a mule. As a black-led union, the SCU also sought with great difficulty to recruit rural whites to its ranks. It was of significance that in counties where the SCU was active, the CP would receive hundreds of votes within an all-white electorate when elections were held. Those impoverished whites who dared not join a black-led union demonstrated their solidarity by voting for the CP candidates when and where they could.

### The New Deal in the Rural South

After the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Stalin and the Comintern soon abandoned the sectarianism of the "Third Period" and sought desperately to form class-collaborationist popular-front alliances with "progressive" elements of the bourgeoisie. As Leon Trotsky emphasized, the Popular Front was not a tactic, but an expression of the anti-revolutionary program of Stalinism, tying the working class and oppressed to their exploiters under a bourgeois program in order to prevent proletarian revolutions. The American version of the Popular Front meant seeking alliances with the pro-capitalist CIO union bureaucrats like John L. Lewis and the capitalist Democratic Party of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt's New Deal, today hailed by most liberals and leftists, was an attempt to protect U.S. capitalism against the growing radicalization and labor struggle. New Deal reforms such as the National Labor Relations Act,



Tamiment Institute Library

**Communist Party campaign poster, 1932. Despite CP's erroneous theory of black "self-determination," Communist militants fought for integration and against racist oppression.**

which made it easier to organize CIO unions, or the Works Progress Administration, which carried out public works, were aimed at stabilizing capitalism by tying the new, powerful industrial unions to the capitalist system.

Key to Roosevelt's plan was forging the "New Deal coalition," which included pro-Communist labor organizers, liberals and black leaders in the North, and racist Dixiecrats and Klansmen in the South. The role of Communists and unionists was to be a loyal opposition to "progressive" capitalists like Roosevelt. The end result of their work was to tie workers and the oppressed tighter to their class enemy, the bourgeois Democratic Party, and stave off the independent political organization of the working class. To this day, the trade-union bureaucracy and black misleaders, dutifully tailed by the fake left, still push support to the Democratic Party "lesser evil." By helping to tie the new CIO unions to the Democratic Party, and using its considerable authority among blacks to support Roosevelt and U.S. imperialism in World War II, the CP played a crucial role in protecting the capitalist system and channeling dissent back into bourgeois politics. This is the real crime of the Stalinist CP, which betrayed the revolutionary aspirations of its working-class base.

In the South, the Popular Front was especially criminal. New Deal policies hurt black sharecroppers directly. The Agricultural Adjustment Act paid farmers not to farm in order to eliminate excess supply and raise food prices. In 1933, ten

million acres of cotton were destroyed and six million pigs were killed in an attempt to stabilize the capitalist market. That the bourgeoisie would do this in the middle of a worldwide Depression speaks volumes about the irrationality of the capitalist system. In the South, this meant paying the white landlords while black tenants and sharecroppers starved. There is no official count of the thousands of poor black and white families driven off the land and into starvation as a result of Roosevelt's New Deal alliance with Jim Crow Democrats in the South, the Dixiecrats.

Black people in the 1930s correctly saw the Democratic Party as the party of the old slavocracy and Jim Crow. Though by the end of Reconstruction the Republicans had abandoned their short-lived commitment to black rights, pursuing their class interests as a party of big business, they were still seen as the "Party of Lincoln" and a lesser evil to the Democrats. In the 1932 elections, over two-thirds of black voters voted Republican. But by 1936, 76 percent of black voters in the North voted for Roosevelt, thanks in part to illusions in the Democrats pushed by both the trade-union bureaucracy and the CP.

Speaking of the South, where the Democratic Party was openly segregationist and supported Jim Crow, the CP Central Committee's Southern representative argued: "It is entirely within the field of practical politics for the workers, farmers and the city middle class—the common people of the South—to take possession of the machinery of the Democratic Party, in the South, and turn it into an agency for democracy and progress" (quoted in Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* [1990]). Seeking a popular-frontist bloc with Democrats in the South, the CP liquidated the SCU in 1937 and retreated from the struggle in rural areas. (The SCU's agricultural worker members were urged to join a CIO union, and its tenant farmer members the National Farmers Union.) For example in Alabama, CP work became centered on the Birmingham "Right to Vote Club," which was dedicated to voter registration and education in the Deep South, where blacks had long been disenfranchised.

### The Civil Rights Movement

Much of the acclaim for *The Great Debaters* involves depicting the debate team as precursors to the civil rights movement a decade later, a link that James Farmer makes clear. In the movie, he is shown witnessing the racism of Jim Crow, and then, in the last debate, defending nonviolent protest. At the end of the film, we are told that he was a leader of



New York Times

During Harlem cop riot in 1964, Spartacists initiated rally in New York City garment district to mobilize labor in defense of ghetto masses.

CORE, an early civil rights group. Presumably, then, the civil rights movement represented the culmination of the struggle to eliminate racial injustice and uplift the “talented tenth.”

The courageous struggles of the black and white foot soldiers of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s played an instrumental role in overturning Jim Crow. The creation of a Southern black proletariat fundamentally eroded Jim Crow segregation, which was based on the isolation and powerlessness of blacks in the rural South. The bourgeoisie eventually acquiesced to legal equality in the South, in part because, as protesters showed the world the reality of America's democratic pretensions at home, Jim Crow became an embarrassment to U.S. imperialism's posture as the defender of “democracy” and “human rights” in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, the industrial and military powerhouse of the non-capitalist world.

The struggle for black equality was intersected by growing domestic opposition to U.S. imperialism's losing counter-revolutionary war against Vietnam's workers and peasants. The potential for a revolutionary transformation of American society was palpable. But from its onset, the civil rights movement was dominated by a black middle-class leadership allied to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. The aim of liberal-pacifist leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Farmer was to pressure the Democratic

administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to grant formal, legal equality. Yet the myth of the civil rights movement as monolithically pacifist and dominated by King ignores that the struggle against segregation also produced more militant forces, such as Robert F. Williams, who advocated and practiced armed self-defense (see, for example, “Robert F. Williams: Fighter Against Klan Terror,” *WV No. 737*, 2 June 2000).

In the 1960s, the Spartacist League, despite our small forces, intervened into the civil rights movement and put forward the perspective of a class-struggle fight for black freedom. As we said in our Programmatic Statement, “For Socialist Revolution in the Bastion of World Imperialism!”:

“In our intervention into the civil rights movement, the Spartacist League raised the call for a South-wide Freedom Labor Party as an expression of working-class political independence and the need to mobilize the labor movement to fight for black emancipation. This was linked to a series of other transitional demands aimed at uniting black and white workers in struggle against the capitalist class enemy, like organizing the unorganized and a sliding scale of wages and hours to combat inflation and unemployment. We called for armed self-defense against racist terror and for a workers united front against government intervention, both in the labor movement and in the use of federal troops to suppress black plebeian struggles. This program is no less urgent today.”

The bankruptcy of the liberal program of the civil rights movement's leadership was revealed when the movement swept

out of the South and into the North, where black people already had formal legal equality. The struggle for a fundamental change in conditions of life in the ghettos—for real equality, for jobs, decent housing and adequate schools—collided head-on with the realities of American capitalism. The upsurge of “revolutionary” black nationalism in the late 1960s, best represented by the Black Panther Party, was a response to the frustrated expectations of the Northern civil rights struggles. Those struggles promised much but left unchanged the hellish conditions of life in the inner-city ghettos that are rooted in the capitalist profit system. As an expression of despair, black nationalism, which rejects united multi-racial class struggle, would deny blacks their birthright: the wealth and culture their labor has played a decisive role in creating.

### “Racial Uplift” and the Black Petty Bourgeoisie

*The Great Debaters* represents a take on the old theme of “racial uplift”—the belief that a talented black petty bourgeoisie can by hard work and dedication transcend the evils of racism and achieve justice. In the words of Denzel Washington, this is not a film about “racism in Texas in 1935. It's what these young people did about it...to overcome whatever obstacles were in their way.” It is this very aspect of the film that has made it popular among both black and white critics. Roger Ebert, film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, called it “the feel-great movie of the year” and black journalist Herb Boyd described it as “a feel-good movie (and the underdogs win)” and an “uplifting film that most African Americans gladly embraced.”

“Racial uplift” is the same theme that W.E.B. Du Bois raised in the late 19th century in arguing against Booker T. Washington, who promoted the servile acceptance of segregation. Du Bois argued that it was the responsibility of the educated black petty bourgeoisie to “uplift” black people under capitalism. In a 1903 article, he stated:

“The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”

Du Bois' thesis was based on the acceptance of capitalism. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he defended “the rule of inequality:—that of the million black youth, some were fitted to know and some to dig; that some had the talent and



Blanquart/Detroit Free Press

**Striking UAW workers at American Axle, April 2008. Multiracial proletariat, under revolutionary leadership, has power to smash capitalist exploitation through socialist revolution.**

capacity of university men, and some the talent and capacity of blacksmiths." The point of education, he wrote, was to "teach the workers to work and the thinkers to think."

*The Great Debaters* articulates the liberal-integrationist view promoted by mainstream civil rights groups that black equality can be achieved under capitalism. In a scene that attracted the attention of all leftist reviewers, a Wiley debater in a contest with a white college team declares, "My opponent says today is not the day for whites and coloreds to go to the same college.... No, the time for justice, the time for freedom, and the time for equality is always, is always right now!" By showing their skills and intelligence, the "talented tenth" are supposed to break down the barrier of racial injus-

tice. But what is left unsaid speaks volumes to the class divisions among the oppressed black population.

The black students at Wiley certainly faced a racist world where even distinguished PhDs like Farmer could be killed with relative impunity. One of the more powerful—and accurate—scenes comes when the team narrowly escaped being lynched while on a rural road in the South. The college debating circuit was segregated, with many white universities refusing to debate blacks. Nonetheless, black colleges such as Wiley, Morehouse and Howard University were founded by church institutions to primarily train clergy and teachers, the core of the black petty bourgeoisie. Political protest was forbidden—as shown by the elder Farmer's negative reaction to Tolson's radicalism.

For the overwhelming majority of black people, exploited and oppressed as sharecroppers and tenants, the halls of Wiley College might as well have been Mars.

From the movie, one would get the idea that debate can change the world. The official Web site of the movie declares, "Believe in the power of words." But racial oppression is fundamentally not a question of bad ideas in people's heads that they can be argued out of. It is based on the workings of American capitalism. In reality, the material conditions for most black people have continued to deteriorate. While Jim Crow is dead, the majority of black people, as a race-color caste segregated at the bottom of society, face brutal daily racist subjugation and humiliation, by whatever index of social life one might choose—joblessness, imprisonment, lack of decent, integrated housing. As the economy crashes into recession, blacks are disproportionately affected.

At the same time, black workers are a strategic part of the proletariat in urban transport, longshore, auto, steel, and they are the most unionized section of the working class. They form an organic link to the downtrodden ghetto masses. Being strategically located in the economy and facing special oppression, black workers led by a multiracial revolutionary party will play a vanguard role in the struggles of the entire U.S. working class. Class-conscious black workers, armed with a revolutionary program, will play a central role in the building of the workers party necessary to sweep away the capitalist system of exploitation and racial oppression. ■

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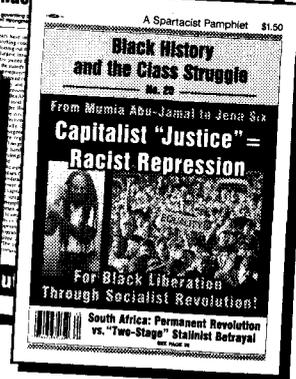
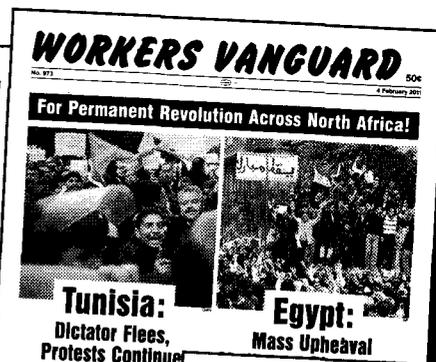
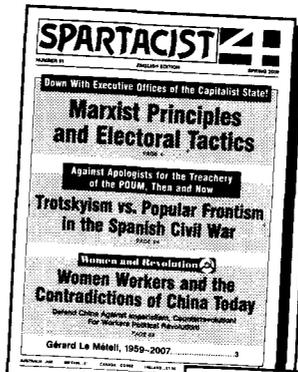
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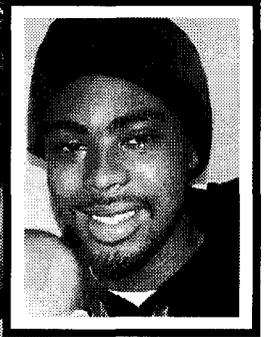
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# Racist Police Terror U.S.A.



Atkins/SF Chronicle

**Oakland, 7 January 2009: Army of riot cops beat, tear-gassed and shot protesters with rubber bullets as hundreds demonstrated against cop killing of Oscar Grant.**



Johnson Family

## Oscar Grant Executed in Cold Blood, Black Oakland Under Siege

OAKLAND—The coldblooded execution of Oscar Grant III, a young black apprentice grocery butcher and father of a four-year-old girl, by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) cop Johannes Mehserle in the early morning hours of New Year's Day threw a spotlight on the deadly police terror that is a fact of life for black people in racist America. The video images taken by horrified BART passengers showed Mehserle stand over Grant, methodically draw his Sig Sauer P226 semiautomatic and fire into Grant's back as another cop held him face down with his hands behind his back. At protests after the brutal killing, demonstrators have carried signs reading "We Are All Oscar Grant" (see "Oscar Grant Killed in Cold Blood by BART Cop," *WV* No. 928, 16 January).

The killing of Grant in Oakland, where liberal black Democrat Ron Dellums is mayor, brutally exposes the hoax that the election of a black man, Barack Obama, as U.S. president represents progress toward black equality. Underlining the fallacy of such illusions, in Chicago police

killed two black men during a five-day period in March, while the NYPD killed two people in April. Obama's "stimulus package" for the moribund U.S. economy includes plans to spend billions to beef up the police by hiring 100,000 more thugs in blue: any prospect of a decent job is fading fast for millions of laid-off workers and unemployed youth, but the ruling class has plenty of money to pay its hired guns to intimidate and repress the ghetto masses and those who might protest being thrown on capitalism's scrap heap.

"When is this going to stop?" cried a black man outside Grant's memorial. "I'm sick of people acting like we deserve what we get, that because we are black, they can shoot us in the back and get away with it." More than 1,000 people, largely black and Latino, turned out for the memorial on January 7. Later that night, protesters took their justified outrage to the streets of Oakland, where they were met by an army of Oakland cops (OPD) equipped with riot gear, helicopters and an armored vehicle. The cops fired tear

gas and rubber bullets at the protesters and arrested more than 100 people. Among those arrested and slapped with felony charges were David Santos, a 16-year-old supporter of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), and JR Valrey, a KPFA programmer and journalist for the *San Francisco Bay View* who was trying to photograph the police violence. Drop all charges against the anti-racist protesters!

Along with the mailed fist of state repression came the velvet glove: the cops' masters, from Dellums to California Attorney General Jerry Brown, stepped in to try to dampen the flames of protest with calls for an investigation of Grant's killing. Behind them in trying to keep the peace was a cabal of black preachers and the newly formed Coalition Against Police Executions (CAPE), which hasn't been heard from since late February. Echoed by the cringing reformist left, CAPE advanced various schemes for police reform while appealing for redress to state agencies and officials, from Dellums and Brown to the Feds.

The Labor Black League for Social

Defense, which is fraternally allied with the Spartacist League, intervened in the protests over the killing of Oscar Grant to fight for a class-struggle perspective. A January 12 LBL statement, "Mobilize the Power of the Multiracial Unions in Protest!" (reprinted in *WV* No. 928, 16 January), declared:

"The hard truth is that there will be no end to police brutality short of the destruction of this entire system of capitalist exploitation and racial oppression. But a massive protest based on the organized muscle of the labor movement would give the cops and their capitalist masters some pause. And it would drive home the point that the interests of the working class are inseparably linked to the defense of the ghettos and barrios, the defense of immigrant rights and the fight for black freedom."

What prevents labor from waging such fights in its own defense and on behalf of all of the oppressed are the suicidal illusions in the possibility of reforming the system that are pushed by the patriotic, pro-capitalist union bureaucrats. The labor tops promote such illusions above all by chaining the working class politically to the class enemy through support to the capitalist Democratic Party.

### "Reforming" the Repressive Apparatus of the State

The capitalist politicians had scarcely dried their crocodile tears after the cop killing of Grant when four cops were killed in a March 21 shootout in the streets of the East Oakland ghetto. The SWAT team had charged into that deadly confrontation with 26-year-old black parolee Lovelle Mixon, who was also killed. A fifth cop was wounded in the shootout: Pat Gonzales, who in 2007 killed 20-year-old Gary King, shooting him in the back in the street near King's home. In 2008, the trigger-happy Oakland cops gunned down five more young black and Latino men.

Now, from Oakland City Hall to the California governor's office and right on up to the White House, the bourgeois politicians have closed ranks to salute the "heroism" of the police amid cries to strengthen the repressive apparatus of the state. In a chilling and ominous display of police power, reminiscent of Nazi Third Reich Nuremberg rallies, thousands of cops from all over the country marched into Oakland's Oracle Arena for a March 27 memorial. They were joined by California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Democratic Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, liberal black Congresswoman Barbara Lee and other politicians.

The consummately corrupt and brutal Oakland Police Department is being rehabilitated and the memory of Oscar Grant buried under an avalanche of demands for more police patrols, stricter parole guide-

### 14 January 2009: Spartacist League and Labor Black League for Social Defense at Oakland protest against racist cop terror.



lines and harsher jail sentences. The capitalist media and the entire spectrum of established black "leaders" are also screaming for more stringent gun control laws to strengthen the state's monopoly of violence. We defend the basic democratic right to bear arms: No to gun control!

A frenzy is being whipped up on behalf of the cops. A column by retired San Francisco Deputy Police Chief Kevin Mullen in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (29 March) chillingly made clear the rulers' contempt for the ghetto masses: "For sure, fix the parole system and, while you're at it, pour money into the schools and fix the mental-health system as well. But unless the hate and grievance peddlers are stilled, and inner-city attitudes evolve, not much will really change."

According to an AP dispatch, "one of the most affecting tributes" at the pro-cop media event came from Captain Edward Tracey, commander of the SWAT team. "These were my men," Tracey said. "They died doing what they loved: riding in motorcycles, kicking in doors, serving in SWAT." In his condolences, President Obama added, "Their loss reminds us that the work to which they dedicated their lives remains undone." So many doors to kick down, so many minority youth to shoot, so little time.

Even amid the outpouring of support for the dead cops, some 500 people came out to the funeral for Lovelle Mixon. Flowers and condolence messages were laid at a memorial site for him, and one text message captured a cry of rage and defiance against the police: "Us: 4—Them: 1." The black-oriented press, talk radio and various blogs testify to the divisions among the black population over the role of the police, with some dreaming of

getting the cops "out of the black community," while others imagine ways to make the cops less racist or less violent.

Mehserle, the BART cop who faces murder charges in the killing of Oscar Grant, conveniently got his preliminary hearing date postponed, with his lawyer claiming distress over the death of the four OPD cops. The International Socialist Organization (ISO) bleats that this only reinforces the need to press "for the police to be held accountable in Oscar's death." But Mehserle's arrest, which was promoted by the ISO, the RCP, the Party for Socialism and Liberation and the "By Any Means Necessary" coalition, was only meant to quell protest. The cops aren't going to be held "accountable" for their crimes for the simple reason that their purpose, together with that of the courts and the prisons, is to enforce the rule of the capitalist exploiters through the violent suppression of the working class, blacks and all the oppressed. Even in the increasingly unlikely event that Mehserle is thrown behind bars, the purpose will simply be to give the state's armed thugs a more "democratic" facade.

Oakland and the cities surrounding it have served as a virtual laboratory for the liberal schemes advanced by CAPE and the reformist left, such as police "civilian review boards." This con game started some 36 years ago when Berkeley established the first police review board in the country. Of course, that never stopped Berkeley cops from blowing away black people, like grandmother Anita Gay, shot down on her own front porch in February 2008. The Oakland Citizens' Police Review Board (CPRB) was established in 1980 following an OPD killing spree that

wiped out nine black people the previous year. One of those killed, Charles Briscoe, was an International Association of Machinists shop steward at the Alameda Naval Air Station, then a major industrial concentration of integrated, unionized workers. Five hundred of Briscoe's union brothers and sisters jammed an Oakland City Council meeting, making palpable the potential for mobilizing the social power of the multiracial working class against cop terror. The CPRB was established to head off any such possibility and to whitewash the OPD with the illusion that they can be reformed to serve "the people."

### The Class Divide in the Racial Divide

Writing of the young black man who shot the four Oakland cops, an article in the black newspaper the *San Francisco Bay View* (24 March) noted: "Lovellette Mixon was America's worst nightmare: the Black man with nothing to lose." Mixon grew up on the mean streets of the East Oakland ghetto, cast off like countless thousands of black youth in the inner cities of this country whose lives are deemed worthless by America's capitalist rulers.

During World War II, when shipbuilders in the Oakland region desperately needed their labor, untrained and often semiliterate black youth recruited from the rural South were, in a matter of months, taught to read and write and became skilled apprentices. Today, the shipyards are barely a dim memory, and the factories that once thrived in the area were shut down in the 1980s deindustrialization of America. The black ghetto poor who once served as a "reserve army of labor" to be maintained, albeit minimally, are now written off by American capitalism as expendable. Like Lovellette Mixon, the most likely "future"

for black inner-city youth is jail or an early death at the hands of the cops, one of their peers or the many diseases of poverty that are rampant.

At a meeting in Oakland of clergy, city leaders and the cops to "create an action plan to address youth violence," an adviser to Dellums decried spending time and effort on "people who are unskilled, uneducated and end up in prison" (*Oakland Tribune*, 25 March). This was echoed in an opinion piece in the 29 March *San Francisco Chronicle* by black liberal Brenda Payton. Speaking of her neighborhood just up the hill from "Oakland's killing fields," Payton contrasts the good people there, with their neighborhood meetings, block parties and Christmas caroling, to the "violence and crime bred from ignorance, family breakdown and lack of opportunity" just blocks away. Another piece, by a former resident of Oakland, now a director of juvenile detention in Washington, D.C., opined: "A leading cause of street violence is the lack of trust between the community and law enforcement. The tension in Oakland since the murder of Oscar Grant had amassed into a powder keg and it ignited. Whether Mixon lit it intentionally we may never know, but it was lit. And now, before it gets even worse, a deliberate, public, sincere healing is needed in Oakland."

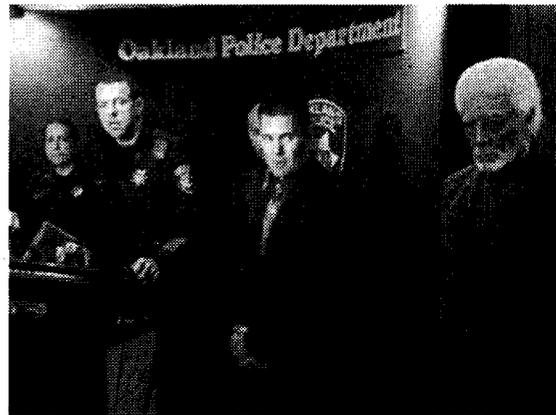
Here is the real face of CAPE's appeals for community "healing centers" and police reform, embraced by Dellums and other black elected officials—to rehabilitate the cops as "servants" of the community so that they can more effectively go after the "criminal" black youth in the ghetto. This is the voice of the black petty bourgeoisie, a small but significant layer who were the main beneficiaries of the limited gains of the civil rights movement

as well as of the later "war on poverty" programs aimed at pacifying the ghetto upheavals of the mid 1960s. Barack Obama is representative of the layer of petty-bourgeois blacks who got their piece of the action either by administering these programs or by pushing through narrowly opened doors to privileged spheres that were previously barred to black people. Obama's move into the Oval Office was prefigured by decades of big city black mayors, who were put into office precisely to put the lid on social struggles.

A 29 March opinion piece in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, titled "Speak Out Again, Mr. President," appealed to Obama to replay his "More Perfect Union" speech in Oakland in order to bridge "Oakland's racial and social divides." That speech was an effective demonstration of Obama's credentials to become Commander-in-Chief of U.S. imperialism, as he used a little bit of truth—acknowledging America's roots in slavery and racial oppression—the better to push the big lie that racism and inequality are just past history. Obama's speech denounced welfare, conciliated racist opposition to affirmative action and condemned black people for "complicity in our condition," echoing the line of Booker T. Washington, who over a century ago told blacks to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps (that is, if they had any).

Writing of the racist killing of a black Howard University student by black cops in 2000 in majority-black Prince George's County, outside Washington, D.C., black journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates nailed the political sensibilities of much of the black middle class: "Just as affluent white people aren't too interested in the plight of poor whites, neither are affluent blacks especially concerned with their brothers

Macor/SF Chronicle



Left: In menacing show of force, thousands of cops packed Oakland's Oracle Arena for 27 March 2009 memorial to four cops who died in shootout. Above: Black Democratic mayor Ron Dellums (far right), liberal face of racist police terror, at March 21 press conference.



Left: Drug bust. Right: Democratic Party huckster Al Sharpton marking "crack house" in 1986. Rulers' "war on drugs" is a racist war on blacks, other minorities.



in the ghetto—in fact, they may be even more eager to distance themselves from the ghetto than white people are trying to distance themselves from the trailer park" (*Washington Monthly*, June 2001).

But in racist America, even those blacks who have "made it" are still branded by the color of their skin. Mayor Del-lums, chief executive officer of Oakland, who has probably done more to expand the OPD than any recent mayor, was barred from speaking at the memorial to the cops. Despised by a police force that hasn't forgotten his association with the Black Panther Party (BPP) many years ago, he sat silent on the podium, humiliated amidst a sea of armed cops, while columnists in the local press ominously intoned that he got what he deserved.

And today the Brenda Paytons, so uneasy at being only one block away from "Oakland's killing fields," could also themselves be one paycheck away from sharing the situation of their less affluent black brothers and sisters. Close to 70 percent of black middle-class households have no net financial assets, and a report by the Pew Research Center states that 45 percent of their children end up "near poor."

### Down With the Racist "War on Crime"!

Heightened cop terror has been the handmaiden of a drive for gentrification, particularly in the West Oakland ghetto, which butts up against the downtown area. An "anti-crime" crusade was initiated by the previous Democratic Party mayor, Jerry Brown. Following his mayoral election in 1998, Brown presided over the OPD "Riders," who rampaged through West Oakland, torturing and framing up their victims. The Riders were so notorious that three of them were put on trial, only to be acquitted on all counts. Under Del-lums, more cops have been put on the streets with the purpose of making Oakland safe for a new influx of well-heeled petty-bourgeois elements. Once, these people would have been overwhelmingly white; but Oakland now has a significant

layer of black professionals, executives and government administrators whose bread and butter depends on keeping the black ghetto masses down.

The upscale black petty bourgeoisie regards "crime" as the scourge of Oakland and wants more cops for their own protection. They see the ghetto masses as "bringing down the community," a sentiment also spread from the church pulpit and too often shared within the black working class. Blaming the black poor for their own oppression is equally the program of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, which has long offered to police housing projects in the ghettos. At an Oakland meeting to protest the killing of Oscar Grant, Farrakhan took black protesters to task for marching only against Oakland District Attorney Tom Orloff and not protesting "when day after day we are killing each other."

The desperate conditions of life in the vast ghetto wastelands of America have also produced a reactive glorification of lumpenism, gang warfare and other pathological behavior among inner-city youth. How could it be otherwise? There are no jobs. Parents have been cut off welfare. Whatever social infrastructure existed—schools, hospitals, community centers—was gutted long ago. While slashing any and all known social programs benefiting the ghetto poor, billions have been poured into prisons. In California, one out of every 12 black men in their twenties is behind bars in the state's overflowing prisons—the majority of them snared under the racist "war on drugs." In a society where the rate of joblessness among ex-cons is more than 75 percent and rates of rearrest nearly 45 percent, Lovelle Mixon was a marked man with little future except jail or the morgue.

An elementary demand, part of the Ten-Point Program of the Labor Black League, is for the decriminalization of drugs, which would take the money and thus the crime out of drug dealing. But to really change the systematic demonization and degradation of black youth trapped in ever more hellish conditions requires shattering the entire system of racist American capital-

ism, in which the subjugation and segregation of the majority of the black population at the bottom of this society is rooted. Only then will it be possible to eliminate the material roots of black oppression through the integration of black people into an egalitarian socialist society based on a collectivized economy, with jobs and quality housing, health care and education for all.

### "Community Control of the Police"—A Liberal Hoax

Arguing that the solution to police terror "is not simply removing individual racist police officers," an article in the *San Francisco Bay View* (26 March) opines that the solution is "a police force that comes from within the oppressed community and that is democratically controlled by that community." It points to the "American roots" of this demand in the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party of 40 years ago.

The best of a generation of radical black nationalists, the Black Panther Party was born in Oakland in response to the failure of the liberal-led, pro-Democratic Party civil rights movement to challenge the oppressive conditions of life for blacks in the ghettos when it came North in the mid 1960s. In the late '60s, the BPP heroically organized armed patrols of the Oakland ghetto against cop terror. But while subjectively revolutionary, the Panthers, like other components of the New Left, identified the organized working class with the ossified, racist Cold War trade-union bureaucracy atop the AFL-CIO; dismissing the workers as "bought off," they saw the ghetto poor as the vanguard of revolution. Absent a Marxist program, the Panthers, under the pressure of events, especially state terror, adopted explicitly reformist politics, such as the "breakfast for children" program and the call for community control of the police, which combined liberal illusions in the bourgeois state with dreams of ending black oppression through "control" of ghetto institutions. (For more on the BPP, see *Marxist Bulletin* No. 5 [Revised], September 1978.)

Even if it could be accomplished, black “control” of the inner cities would not put an end to endemic poverty, joblessness, crime, gutted housing and broken-down schools. The liberation of black people in America requires a massive reallocation of wealth and resources, which is possible only with the expropriation of the bloodsucking capitalist class as a whole and the creation of a workers state where production is based on human need, not profit. The capitalist state cannot be taken over and used for this purpose but must be destroyed and replaced with a very different kind of state where those who labor rule. The multiracial working class, including its strategic black component, is the only class with the social power and objective interest to smash the rule of the bourgeoisie and its system of exploitation and vicious racial oppression. To lead this struggle requires a revolutionary workers party built in unwavering opposition to all the state agencies and political parties of the capitalist class enemy and in unwavering commitment to the fight for black freedom as the key to breaking the chains of capitalist wage slavery in America.

### Democratic Party: Graveyard of Labor/Black Struggle

In the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party stood up to the racist violence of the trigger-happy cops, soon bringing down upon them the fury of the capitalist state. Under the impact of murderous repression which took the lives of 38 Panthers, the BPP lurched to the right and split in 1971. The wing led by Huey Newton used the Panthers’ authority to build up the Democratic Party’s base in Oakland. Bobby Seale ran for Oakland mayor as a Democrat in 1973. Five years later in 1978 the city’s first black mayor, Lionel Wilson, took office, putting an end to a half-century of control of Oakland by the right-wing Republican Knowland regime. By 1983, conditions for blacks were worse than ever as unemployment and cop terror mounted. That year, when the Spartacist League ran Martha Phillips as a candidate for Oakland City Council, we wrote: “The city of Oakland is itself the best argument against the Democratic Party.”

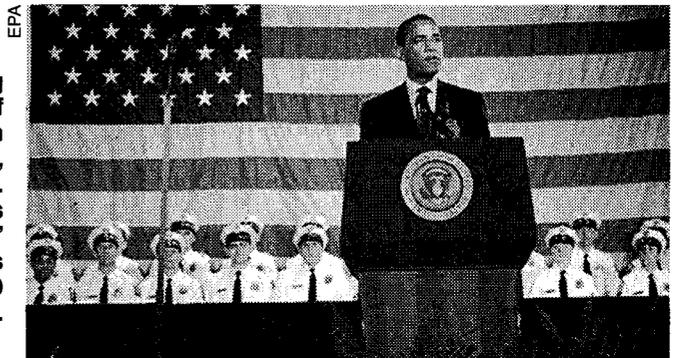
Not accidentally, Ron Dellums played a key role in husbanding the Panthers into the Democratic Party. He is the embodiment of the Bay Area “progressive” black/labor coalition whose purpose has been to divert working-class and black struggle away from any challenge to capitalist rule. Getting his start as a community organizer during the heyday of the 1960s anti-poverty programs, he served to keep the antiwar movement safe for the capitalists by helping to channel it into Democratic Party

electoralism. Elected to Congress in 1970, he actively sought appointment to the House Armed Services Committee, where he worked to repackage the imperialist military as a force for “human rights.” Dellums is best known as the force behind the 1986 amendment for divestment from South Africa adopted by the U.S. Congress over Reagan’s veto. This piece of legislation was a signal that the U.S. rulers were willing to let their longtime allies, the brutal apartheid government, go down to defeat...so long as what got installed in

Scandalously, CAPE joined Dellums in bad-mouthing the “violent” protesters.

As the Bay Area LBL wrote in its January 12 protest statement: “The mass outrage against cop terror needs an organized political expression, and not one that strengthens the hand of the Democratic Party, the political tool of the very capitalist rulers whose interests the cops ‘serve and protect’.” The Bay Area’s multiracial unions—longshore, municipal and transit workers—can strike a powerful blow against the racist killers in blue. To shut

**Obama speaking at graduation of police recruits in Columbus, Ohio, 6 March 2009. President’s “stimulus package” promises billions to hire 100,000 more cops.**



its place was a regime of black front men (led by the formerly outlawed African National Congress) to oversee the same exploitation of the mainly black working masses for the benefit of the white ruling class and its imperialist big brothers.

In a recent interview on National Public Radio, Dellums was asked what it was like moving from Congress to the local stage. He replied that the local stage was not new to him, “but it is different... You’re the chief executive officer, so it’s the executive branch.” Unlike parliamentary talk shops such as the U.S. Congress, the executive officers of the government have the job of running the racist capitalist state (see “Marxist Principles and Electoral Tactics,” *Spartacist* [English-language edition] No. 61, Spring 2009). Just as Obama is now Commander-in-Chief of U.S. imperialism, it is Dellums who commands the racist OPD and slashes the jobs and wages of city workers. In 2007, this supposed “friend of labor” moved against Waste Management sanitation workers fighting a union-busting lockout by threatening to make the city’s garbage collection non-union.

Obscenely, Dellums was a keynote speaker at CAPE’s January 14 protest against the killing of Oscar Grant. In response to news of the arrest of Meherle, Dellums declared: “You guys were able to make the system bend to the will of the people.” This was CAPE’s reward for having organized squads of marshals, including city workers mobilized for this purpose by their union tops, to prevent protesters from “getting out of hand.”

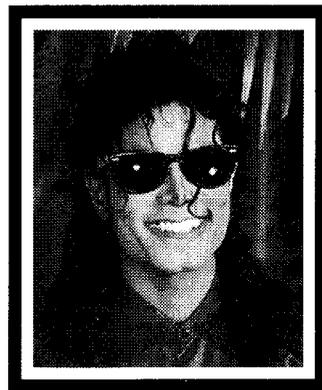
down the city and port of Oakland for a day would do more for the victims of police brutality than a thousand demonstrations pleading for “accountability.” Black workers who are a vital part of the Bay Area unions are an equally vital link to the ghetto masses. But the central obstacle to mobilizing labor’s power is the pro-capitalist bureaucrats who chain the unions to the Democratic Party and push the lie that workers and bosses have common “national interests.” Far from mobilizing against police terror, they have organized these hired thugs for capitalism into the unions. The SEIU, the same union that organizes BART maintenance workers and Oakland city workers, includes the BART cops! As the LBL Ten-Point Program demands: “*Cops, prison guards and security guards out of the unions!*”

The hard truth is that the only way to eliminate police brutality is to do away with the system of racist American capitalism, for which the “gang in blue uniforms” is the front line of defense. A multiracial, revolutionary workers party that champions the cause of all of the oppressed can be forged only in political combat against the misleaders of labor and their leftist outriders. Led by such a party, the victorious workers revolution will shatter the power of the racist rulers and their state. Only then will justice be meted out to Meherle and his ilk and the basis laid for eradicating all inequalities based on class and race and for using the wealth of this country and all the world for the benefit of those whose labor produced it. ■

# The Man in the Mirror

# Michael Jackson

# and Racist America



Los Angeles Times

On June 25, black megastar and musical icon Michael Jackson died at his home in Los Angeles. The “King of Pop,” as he has been known for decades, was one of the most successful recording artists of all time and has remained hugely popular throughout the world. Following his death, there were spontaneous gatherings of fans dancing to his music in Harlem and doing the “moonwalk” or holding tributes as far away as Mexico City, Hong Kong and Paris. Rio de Janeiro’s mayor announced the construction of a statue of Michael Jackson in the slums where he filmed one of his videos to “They Don’t Care About Us.” In Algiers, hundreds of singers and dancers from across the African continent performed the Jackson 5’s “Blame It on the Boogie.”

The tragedy of Jackson’s death is that an extremely influential music career was driven to the brink of destruction by a savagely racist and puritanical witchhunt spanning more than a decade. The mass hysteria whipped up against Jackson over charges of “child molestation” was an indictment of this anti-sex, bigoted capitalist society, where being an eccentric black celebrity is enough for the state to try to frame you up with something. The stunning hypocrisy of the bourgeois media—which hounded and scapegoated Jackson as a “pedophile” when he was alive, even after he was acquitted of all charges, but then teemed with adulation and tributes after he died—was captured by an article in the *Los Angeles Times* (27 June): “The tabloids that had baited him mercilessly, dubbing him ‘Wacko Jacko’ for his erratic behavior, increasingly strange looks and accusations of child molestation, were suddenly effusive in their praise of a man ‘who provided the soundtrack to a billion lives.’”

## Victim of Racist Vendetta

During his highly publicized career—which soared when he was only eleven years old as the lead singer of the Jack-

son 5 under Motown Records, through his solo career as a songwriter, musician and performer up until age 50—Michael Jackson was famous not only for his talent and versatility, but also for challenging both racial and sexual identities. In the spirit of other “crossover” artists like Chuck Berry—who was one of the first artists to perform to multiracial audiences—Jackson was known for breaking down racial barriers and was the first black artist to get heavy airplay on MTV.

But the “inexcusable” racial barrier that he attempted to break down was his appearance. Whether due to vitiligo or to skin bleaching, the fact is that his gradual “whitening” and plastic surgeries did nothing to make him less black in the eyes of racist America—a twisted confirmation of the color-caste nature of black oppression. No money in the world, no changes to your “racial” appearance, could ever change the fact that, if you are born black, capitalist America will make sure to try to put you in your place. In a country where the white supremacist ideology of racial “purity” resulted in the “one drop of black blood” rule, Jackson’s physical transformation became a transgression that the bourgeois media and “public opinion”

would not let him get away with.

There is a real connection among blacks to someone who, no matter what he did, always had to respond to this society’s expectations of what a black person should look like, act like and sleep with. Even in death, the mud continues to be slung against this enormously talented and idiosyncratic man, with most black people defiantly coming to his defense. In the last few weeks, it was not rare for TV and radio commentators to ask why black people seem to identify with Michael Jackson since he “looked white.” Rabidly vile Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly ranted on his show *The O’Reilly Factor* against blacks seeing Jackson as their own when he looked white and “chose to have white children.” In pure O’Reilly fashion, this was a bitter and unfiltered expression of the American bourgeois psyche.

## Race and Sex in America

As we stated in our article “Stop Vendetta Against Michael Jackson!” (*WV* No. 818, 23 January 2004): “The Jackson case represents an intersection of blatant anti-gay bigotry, the reactionary state-enforced stigma against intergenerational sex, and racial prejudice.” The intense

Fans sing and dance to the music of Michael Jackson during tribute at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, 30 June 2009.



vilification of Michael Jackson served the bourgeoisie's aim to whip up hysteria over race and sex, which is all too common in a country where blacks (famous or not) are frequently indicted on false charges involving sex. In 1913, black boxer Jack Johnson was arrested because his relationships with white women were deemed to violate the Mann Act against transporting women across state lines for "immoral purposes." In 1960, black rock 'n' roll artist Chuck Berry was also convicted under the Mann Act for transporting an underage girl across state lines. More recently, R&B singer R. Kelly was dragged through the courts on sex-related charges. Frenzy about black male sexuality is a common thread in American culture, long used as a justification for lynch rope terror.

Many black establishment figures who wouldn't normally go near a contentious "sex" issue have felt obliged to come out in Jackson's defense. The day after Jackson's death, black Representatives Jesse Jackson Jr. and Diane Watson asked for a moment of silence in the House of Representatives in Michael Jackson's memory, with at least one Congressman storming out in protest. When Democratic Representative Sheila Jackson Lee put forward a resolution proclaiming Jackson "an American legend, musical icon and world humanitarian," it was promptly killed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, to the pleasure of Republican Representative Peter King. King infamously called the media coverage of Jackson's death an "orgy" and ranted on a YouTube posting about Jackson being a "pedophile" and a "pervert."

Michael Jackson was the victim of a depraved social order with a degenerate and cruel sense of "morality." And all of these politicians—black or white, Democrat or Republican—are staunch defenders of that very social order, i.e., American capitalism.

### America's Puritanical Values

As Michael Jackson was twice dragged through the courts over accusations of child sexual abuse, we defended him through his legal trials and tribulations. The cases relied on hearsay, contradictory testimony and zero physical evidence. As we stated in "Michael Jackson Defeats Racist, Anti-Sex Vendetta" (WV No. 851, 8 July 2005):

"Jackson steadfastly maintains that he has been asexual in his relations with boys, which is certainly possible—but for us, that is irrelevant. The state's vendetta against Jackson rested upon anti-sex laws that we oppose on principle....

"Sex is a natural activity for humans—even children. We believe that in any kind of sexual relations, the guiding

principle should be effective consent, regardless of age, gender or race. That is, if those involved have effective knowledge and desire to do whatever it is they will, that should be the end of it. We oppose arbitrary and reactionary state interference in such intimate matters."

Our steadfast defense of privacy and sexual freedom, more generally across the board and more specifically in the Michael Jackson case, has earned us the contempt of the liberals and the reformist left, who groove on being the "morality police" when sexual matters are involved. The most extreme demonstration of this was when our comrades in Germany were excluded from a conference called "Socialism Days" hosted by Sozialistische Alternative Voran (SAV), the sister group of Socialist Alternative in the U.S., both of which are associated with Peter Taaffe's Committee for a Workers' International (see "German Taaffeites Exclude Defenders of Michael Jackson," WV No. 847, 29 April 2005). For the Taaffeites, anything that doesn't conform to bourgeois society's chauvinist and repressive values deserves political censorship. Outrageously, the Taaffeites slandered our position in the Michael Jackson case as "defense of rapists" and "relativizing child abuse"! Whether explicitly or implicitly, much of the left was happy to jump on the "strange means

guilty" bandwagon around the Jackson case, thus demonstrating their embrace of prudish bourgeois morality and their fundamental loyalty to the current social order.

Michael Jackson's sex life was nobody's business but his own. But not unlike the countless people branded "sex offenders" in this country who have committed no crime and hurt no one and yet whose lives are made a living hell under bourgeois laws and media hysteria, Jackson had to withstand the bourgeoisie's attempts to railroad him for falling outside the norms of this society. Today, after his death, the media is replete with discussions over his finances, custody of his children and the raid on his doctor's office for suspected manslaughter.

Black Democrat Al Sharpton is a political hustler who specializes in corralling black anger at racist injustice into support for the capitalist Democratic Party. But at Jackson's elaborate, lavish and emotional memorial, he had a moment of honesty, stating: "I want his three children to know, wasn't nothing strange about your daddy. It was strange what your daddy had to deal with." The fact that the very gifted Michael Jackson was one of the entertainment world's biggest sources of scandals and attacks was not an indication of what he did, but of the sick society in which he lived. ■

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**No. 54, Spring 1998**

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# South Africa: Mobilize Trade Unions Against Anti-Immigrant Terror!



Dlangamandla/Beeld



Neil McCartney

**Left: Injured seek refuge at local clinic after anti-immigrant violence in Alexandra and other townships. Right: Crowd attacks immigrant outside Alexandra clinic, 12 May 2008.**

JOHANNESBURG, May 19—As pogromist attacks against immigrants continue into their second week, 22 people in the Johannesburg area have been killed, according to official figures, and many more maimed and raped, while thousands have been driven from their houses, shacks and shops. Three people have been burned to death. The attacks began on May 11 in Alexandra, an impoverished black township of several hundred thousand people, as mobs targeted immigrants mainly from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi. Later in the week, the attacks spread to Diepsloot and other townships before erupting in Johannesburg's central business district yesterday.

In the midst of the anti-immigrant terror, Spartacist South Africa, section of the International Communist League, issued a leaflet calling for the country's powerful trade unions to mobilise in defence of

immigrants and to unite all the poor in a fight for jobs and quality housing for all. It was distributed at a May 17 rally that drew a few hundred people protesting rising food prices, the Zimbabwe elections and xenophobia. The rally was called by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and backed by the South African Communist Party (SACP), the Anti-Privatisation Forum and other reformist and liberal organisations.

Even government spokesmen acknowledge that the root cause of the pogroms lies in anger over the desperate conditions in the townships that persist 14 years after the demise of apartheid. But it is the Tripartite Alliance government of the African National Congress (ANC) and its partners in the SACP and the COSATU union bureaucracy that is responsible for these conditions. There have been continual protests in townships throughout the country

over the lack of service delivery—i.e., electricity, housing, water and sewage systems. The SACP and COSATU misleaders have to date refused to mount any kind of mass protest or labour mobilisation to combat the attacks on immigrants.

The violence has been abetted by the police who, even as they flood into the townships, are carrying out their own vicious attacks in residential areas and on the streets. After hundreds of people swarmed into an Alexandra police station seeking protection, Home Affairs minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula announced on May 14 that the government would not deport “illegal” immigrants at this time. The very next day, police in Olifantsfontein, near the Tembisa township, arrested 32 immigrants they had “rescued” who lacked documentation. Asked about the minister's statement, a police spokesman replied, “We are only doing our job.”

**Break with the Tripartite Alliance!  
For a Black-Centered Workers Government!**

Outside Soweto two days later, police stopped a taxi van and demanded that two women they considered "too dark" to be South African show inoculation marks to supposedly prove their citizenship.

The scope of the attacks points to the danger of far wider violence pitting black African groups against each other and against coloureds [mixed-race] and other minorities. In Alexandra, Zulu speakers have reportedly been involved in attacks against not only immigrants but also South Africans who speak Venda, Xhosa, Shangaan or other languages. Interethnic hostilities were reinforced under white-supremacist apartheid rule. But anti-immigrant terror and tribal divisions are also enduring features of the neo-apartheid capitalist order under the Tripartite Alliance. The Somali Association of South Africa reports that 471 Somalis have been murdered since 1997. Dosso Ndessomin, a refugee from the Ivory Coast who represents the Coordinating Body for Refugee Communities, told the *Mail & Guardian* (16 May): "It starts off as xenophobia and when they're finished dealing with the foreigners, they turn to tribalism. Trust me, that will be much, much worse than anything we are seeing now."

In putting forward the call for a black-centred workers government, we noted in our 1997 pamphlet "The Fight for a Revolutionary Vanguard Party: Polemics on the South African Left":

"Widespread expectations for better housing and jobs cannot be met; even simple democratic demands such as the right to an education for all children or the right of women to birth control and abortion are denied to the overwhelming majority by social inequality and lack of facilities. If the masses' frustration does not find expression along *class* lines it will fuel and embitter every other kind of division."

We reprint below the Spartacist South Africa leaflet issued on May 15.

\* \* \*

In the latest wave of anti-immigrant violence sweeping South Africa, lynch mobs in Alexandra township have killed five people and wounded and raped scores of others since May 11. One of those killed, a South African, had refused to take part in the attacks. Thugs demolished shacks and stole personal belongings. After more than 1,000 people, mainly from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, fled to the Alexandra police station for protection, the cops announced they would demand identification papers, posing the threat of deporting "illegal" immigrants. From Tshwane (Pretoria) to the Eastern Cape, Somalis, Zimbabweans and others have been killed in similar mob attacks, while the government continues its anti-immigrant roundups and steps up repres-

sion along the border with Zimbabwe.

The situation cries out for a mobilisation of trade-union power to stop these attacks! From the mines and farms to the motor industry, immigrant workers have been integral to the economy and labour movement in South Africa. Spartacist South Africa, section of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist), demands: Full citizenship rights for *all* immigrants! No deportations! The pogroms against immigrants in desperately impoverished Alexandra have spilled over into attacks on Venda-speaking and darker-skinned South African blacks. Different layers of the oppressed are put at each others' throats to deflect anger from the real enemy: the white capitalist class, with its black front men. But for the unions to champion the cause of immigrants and the poor requires a political struggle against the pro-capitalist misleaders of COSATU [Congress of South African Trade Unions], which is dominated by the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the NACTU and FEDUSA labour federations.

The bourgeois African National Congress (ANC) and the COSATU bureaucrats mouth pious phrases against "intolerance" and the "frustration" of the poor. But it is the ANC/SACP/COSATU Tripartite Alliance government that oversees neo-apartheid capitalism, under which the overwhelming majority are locked in grinding poverty and black people remain on the bottom. The poor in this country, and hundreds of millions around the world, are faced with starvation from rising food prices, which are at bottom caused not by shortages but by price-gouging and other capitalist profiteering.

Since 1994, the Alliance government has helped spawn repeated xenophobic outbreaks in which immigrants are used as scapegoats for mass unemployment, poverty and crime. Last year alone some 250,000 people were deported. Actions like the January police raid on the Central Methodist Church, long a haven for refu-

gees, only encourage mob attacks as in Alexandra. At the May Day rally in North West, ANC president Jacob Zuma cloaked the call to crack down on immigrants with empty words of sympathy, saying that "the ANC government will naturally take strong measures to restrict illegal immigration" in line with the "human rights ethos of our country"!

As under apartheid, the capitalist state in "democratic" South Africa defends the rule and profits of the Randlords—and their senior partners on Wall Street and in the City of London—against the oppressed black, coloured and Indian toilers. To hold the popular front together, the SACP reformists provide the ideological glue of the "national democratic revolution," which puts forward the nationalist lie that all black people—from rich businessmen like Tokyo Sexwale to Alexandra squatters—have common interests. This obscures the fundamental *class* divide in the service of containing proletarian struggle.

The COSATU tops, the SACP and the rest of the reformist left treacherously paint the cops as "fellow workers" and "comrades." The SACP's own Charles Nqakula is the minister of cops. The police are at the core of the capitalist state, an instrument of oppression of one class by another. In February 2001, cops attacked thousands of squatters and residents of Alexandra along the Jukskei River who were evicted in scenes that brought to mind apartheid-era forced removals. Earlier this year, mobs attacking "foreigners" in Atteridgeville, outside Tshwane, were aided by police who, according to the victims, "stood back and, indeed, encouraged the violence" (*Mail & Guardian*, 28 March). In Alexandra this week, cops broke up attempts by immigrants to defend themselves. Meanwhile on May 13, cops in Tshwane fired rubber bullets and stun grenades at up to 300 protesters from the SAMWU municipal workers union, which was on strike, near an award ceremony for Nelson Mandela that included government

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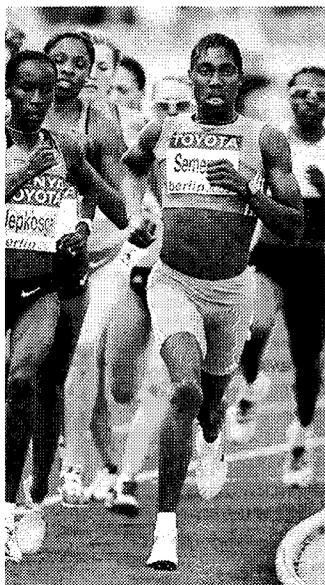
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# Caster Semenya—Leave Her Alone!

## Racist, Sexist Furor Over South African Runner



Getty

JOHANNESBURG, September 7—At last month's world athletics (track and field) championships in Berlin 18-year-old Mokgadi Caster Semenya, a black woman from an impoverished village in rural South Africa, achieved a stunning victory in the women's 800-metre race, running the fastest time this year with a huge lead over her competitors. Her accomplishment was all the more impressive given what transpired just before she ran the final: the world media was informed by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) that Semenya was

being subjected to "gender verification" testing. After Semenya won the gold medal, an IAAF spokesman announced that she would be stripped of the medal if tests showed that she was not a woman.

Caster Semenya was able to become a world champion athlete despite growing up in a country where the degraded status of women is reflected in traditional practices such as *lobola* (bride price) and polygamy, which reduce women to property to be bought and sold into marriage. Yet it was in Berlin that she faced the ultimate humiliation at the hands of athletics

officials. One striker said, "What is there to celebrate when we go to sleep each night on an empty stomach?" (*Daily Sun*, 14 May). *Cops out of the unions!*

Zimbabweans, who make up much of the estimated three to five million immigrants in South Africa, continue to flee unbearable conditions of poverty, exacerbated by imperialist economic pressures, and the violence of the bourgeois-nationalist Mugabe regime. In the current elections, both the Mugabe regime and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) of Morgan Tsvangirai, which is backed by white farmers and the imperialists, represent the class enemy of the proletariat. South African president Thabo Mbeki has been propping up Mugabe, while the COSATU and SACP leaderships implicitly or explicitly back the MDC.

In this context, the Durban SATAWU dock workers union, affiliated with COSATU, refused to unload a Chinese ship carrying arms for Zimbabwe last month. As revolutionary Marxists, we oppose this military aid, whose only purpose would be to aid Mugabe in crushing his internal opposition. But we do not support this boycott, which was anything but the paragon of labour solidarity it was proclaimed to be by left groups and labour bureaucrats around the world. The "labour action" in Durban—carried out jointly *with the cops*—and the subsequent international boycott of the ship were in line with the anti-Mugabe campaign orchestrated by London and Washington.

During her recent visit to southern Africa, U.S. assistant secretary of state Jendayi Frazer praised the unions involved for creating a "leadership moment." This from a mouthpiece of the most murderous state power in history and the foremost enemy of the world proletariat! The hue and cry over the arms shipment also coincided with the reactionary "Free Tibet" campaign against the Chinese deformed workers state. The International Communist League stands for the unconditional military defence of China against imperialism and capitalist counterrevolution while fighting for proletarian political revolution to oust the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The South African proletariat, which is exploited by a capitalist class whose holdings extend throughout southern Africa, has the social power to liberate not only the downtrodden masses in this country but those of the entire region groaning under neocolonial misery. But it cannot realise this potential when it is chained to its exploiters through the Tripartite Alliance nationalist popular front. The same COSATU tops who willingly put their union at the service of the bourgeois MDC have done nothing to mobilise union power in defence of Zimbabwean immigrants or the township poor. *Break with the Tripartite Alliance!* To unite workers against their class enemy, what's needed is a class-struggle fight for *jobs for all* through a shorter workweek at no loss in pay, for massive wage increases to combat poverty and rampant inflation, for afford-

able, quality, integrated housing for all. The burning needs of the masses will not be realised short of the overthrow of South African capitalism, a system based on white privilege and the superexploitation of black labour. Spartacist South Africa fights to build a Leninist-Trotskyist vanguard party, which would act as a tribune of the people. Defending all of the oppressed and exploited in the struggle for proletarian state power, such a party would cut through the ethnic hatreds born of the horrendous poverty produced by superexploitation.

We fight for a *black-centred workers government* which would include a full role and democratic rights for coloureds, Indians and those whites prepared to live under such a government. We do not regard as sacrosanct the borders that were drawn up by the colonialists, which have no correspondence with tribal or ethnic groupings. Our program is for a *socialist federation of southern Africa*, in which there will be an equal place for all the myriad peoples of the region. As we wrote in "South Africa: For a Black-Centered Workers Government!" (*Workers Vanguard* No. 911, 28 March): "The expropriation of the bourgeoisie would begin to lay the material foundations for social equality. But this perspective can only be fully realised through the extension of socialist revolution to the most advanced capitalist countries and the establishment of a collectivised, planned world economy." Reforge the Fourth International, world party of socialist revolution! ■

officials and doctors who wanted to prod and poke her young body to determine whether she had an “unfair advantage” over her competitors because she is not female enough. The treatment of this athlete, who has struggled to overcome the barriers of race, sex and class in neo-apartheid South Africa, has ignited a firestorm of indignation and protest from all quarters in this country, and beyond. It has been aptly described as a modern-day version of the abuse of Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was taken to Europe in 1810 to be studied and exhibited as an anthropological and sexual curiosity (“the Hottentot Venus”) and whose brain and genitals remained on display in the Paris Musée de l’Homme until at least 1974.

The IAAF is well aware that there was nothing questionable about Semenya’s performance, which was slower than that of the woman gold medalist in last year’s Olympics. The vilification of Semenya, in which the Afrikaans newspaper *Rapport* had a hand, has everything to do with race and sex. As Semenya’s mother bluntly stated, “They’re just jealous because they don’t want black people improving their status” ([London] *Guardian*, 23 August).

Black South African athletes suffered “double apartheid” for many years. Under the system of apartheid segregation, the country’s white capitalist rulers denied most black athletes the material and legal means to participate in organised sport at the national and international level. This isolation was exacerbated by the international boycott of everything South African promoted by anti-apartheid liberals throughout the 1960s to ’80s. While apartheid formally ended in 1994, when Nelson Mandela became South Africa’s first black president, sport, like other aspects of life, still reflects the poverty and deprivation of the oppressed non-white masses.

### The Politics of Biology

In Caster Semenya’s case, the most advanced forms of medical testing, including genetics and endocrinology, are to be used to supposedly determine her sex. The IAAF states that it is not accusing Semenya of knowingly cheating by trying to pass for a woman. Instead, according to their cruel logic, they are checking whether, unbeknownst to her and her family, she is not really female. As some have pointed out, Semenya’s rapid improvement as an athlete can be explained in large part by the fact that last year she moved from a rural backwater with virtually no sporting facilities and enrolled as a student of sport science at the University of Pretoria, where for the first time she received high-quality training as a runner.

Semenya is hardly unique among

women athletes in having what is deemed a “masculine” appearance. Legendary Mozambican 800-metre champion Maria Mutola was dogged throughout her career by similar speculation that she was not really female. Compare this with the treatment of white South African runner Zola Budd who was described merely as “tomboyish.” But even when it comes to the question of “sex determination,” research shows that one in 1,000 people are born with an “intersex” condition (“The Gender Trap,” guardian.co.uk, 30 July 2008). According to the Intersex Society of North America, the term “intersex” is used to describe a variety of conditions in which a person’s sexual anatomy doesn’t fit the typical medical definitions of male and female. There are also chromosomal and adrenal anomalies

1968 at around the same time that anabolic steroid use by athletes came under scrutiny. Much of the hysteria against steroid use and accusations of cheating by having men compete as women were whipped up against the former Soviet degenerated workers state, as well as the East European deformed workers states, as part of the anti-Communist Cold War. Czech runner Jarmila Kratochvilova was dogged by gender and steroids accusations after setting the world record in Semenya’s event in 1983, a record which still stands. Such anti-Communist accusations of cheating also did the rounds in the bourgeois press around the Olympic Games in China last year, such as the imputation that China had lied about the age of some of its champion female gymnasts.

Anti-Communism also plays a role in

**Friends and relatives of Caster Semenya gather outside her home at impoverished village of Ga-Masehlong outside Polokwane.**



that are sometimes described by this term. As Alice Dreger, a professor of medical humanities and bioethics at Northwestern University, pointed out to the *New York Times*: “It turns out genes, hormones and genitals are pretty complicated. There isn’t really one simple way to sort out males and females. Sports require that we do, but biology doesn’t care. Biology does not fit neatly into simple categories, so they do these tests.” Dreger said, “But at the end of the day, they are going to have to make a social decision on what counts as male and female, and they will wrap it up as if it is simply a scientific decision” (“Gender Test After a Gold Medal Finish,” 19 August).

In fact, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) abolished universal gender testing after the Atlanta games in 1996, where eight women “failed” the tests but were cleared after challenging the results. Seven of these women were found to have an intersex condition. Such gender testing in Olympic sports began in

the attacks on Caster Semenya. An article in the *Mail & Guardian* (28 August) focuses on one of her coaches, Ekkart Arbeit, who was the head coach of the athletics team of the former DDR (East Germany) and a key target of the furor whipped up over the “doping” of athletes. Such accusations were used to deny the enormous advantages of the planned economies of the bureaucratically deformed workers states, where capitalism was overthrown. As Katarina Witt, the world champion East German figure skater, recalled, “The state provided for me.... Skating is rather expensive, and in East Germany all the equipment and the time on the ice that you needed were provided” (*Times* online, 25 May 2003).

The IOC and IAAF have continued the practice of “gender testing” if a complaint is made about a particular athlete. These tests are supposed to be kept private, but in Semenya’s case she and her coaches were clearly pressured by IAAF officials to have her drop out of the competition prior to the final, including by

making public the accusation that she is not a woman. The IAAF has managed to take to truly grotesque levels the regular humiliation Caster Semenya has been subjected to here in South Africa, such as bathroom inspections demanded by rival teams in local athletics competitions. Today it was reported that after Semenya returned from the African championships in Mauritius in July, she was given gender tests that she thought were just standard drug tests. Her coach, Wilfred Daniels, has resigned and apologised to the athlete for the way he and Athletics South Africa, the sport's national governing body, had handled the whole debacle. The devastating consequences of such high-tech "gender testing" as the IAAF practices were seen in the case of Santhi Soundarajan, an Indian runner whose brief hope of lifting her family out of dire poverty in the state of Tamil Nadu was shattered after she "failed" a gender test and was stripped of an Asian Games 800-metre medal in 2006. Soundarajan subsequently tried to commit suicide.

The cruel and twisted treatment of Semenya and other athletes before her who have faced scrutiny for not looking sufficiently "feminine" is an expression of the reactionary sexual stereotyping upheld as the norm in capitalist society. These stereotypes along with entrenched male and female gender roles flow from the institution of the family, which is the main social source of oppression of women, youth and homosexuals in class society. The institution of the family, along with organised religion and traditional authority, serves as a key prop for the capitalist system of exploitation and oppression by instilling subservience to authority and ensuring that the task of rearing the next generation of wage slaves falls largely on the shoulders of the domestic slaves, women. Anything that deviates from the family "ideal" is thus viewed as a threat to social order, whether it be gay sex or giving women control over reproduction through access to contraception and abortion.

The consequences of not conforming to these reactionary sexual stereotypes are often quite brutal in South Africa, where women suspected of being lesbians are targets for "corrective rape" as with the gang rape and murder in 2008 of former women's soccer star and gay rights activist Eudy Simelane ("Raped and Killed for Being a Lesbian: South Africa Ignores 'Corrective' Attacks," guardian.co.uk, 12 March). This murder echoed that of AIDS activist Gugu Dlamini in 1998 by a rabid mob who beat her senseless for having the courage to talk openly about her disease and sex life. In Durban in 2007, Zandile Mpanza was

stripped naked and paraded by a group of men who then burnt her house down for violating a rule against women wearing pants in the area of their hostel. South Africa has one of the highest rates of rape in the world, and for those women who even try to report the crime, the result is generally further humiliation at the hands of the police and the courts.

Such violent abuse is the most extreme reflection of the degraded status of women more generally in South Africa, which is also measured in high rates of HIV/AIDS infection and death among women, with a high maternal mortality rate along with infant mortality that has worsened since 1990. The intersection of racial, sexual and class oppression in South Africa is in many ways epitomised by the legions of black women who toil in the most menial of domestic service and cleaning jobs in the wealthy, white suburbs, just as they did under apartheid.

### For a Black-Centred Workers Government!

South African athletics officials along with the Tripartite Alliance government have vigorously protested the treatment of Caster Semenya, with Parliament planning to lodge a complaint with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights because the gender tests constituted a "gross and severe undermining of rights and privacy." The government organised a "hero's welcome" for Semenya and other gold medalists upon their return to the country along with a meeting with the president, Jacob Zuma. The justified outrage over the abuse of Semenya is predictably being used by the capitalist government of the bourgeois-nationalist African National Congress (ANC) and its partners, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the COSATU trade-union bureaucracy, to whip up a frenzy of nationalist pride, complete with "anti-imperialist" rhetoric. Yet it is these very same leaders who for 15 years have administered a system of neo-apartheid capitalism in South Africa, where the economic order continues to be based on white privilege and the superexploitation of the overwhelmingly black working class by the Randlords and their imperialist partners.

The misleaders of the working class in the SACP and COSATU bureaucracy seek to obscure the reality that they themselves are responsible for maintaining the capitalist system which perpetuates racial, national and women's oppression. The SACP/Young Communist League and COSATU spokesmen piously preach the need to defend women's rights, while defending a bourgeois constitution that enshrines the authority of tribal chiefs and

elders who enforce a benighted social order in rural areas. That practices such as abducting women into marriage continue in some parts of the country gives a sense of how fraudulent the SACP's purported "national democratic revolution" really is. What we wrote ten years ago remains true today:

"While the African National Congress-led bourgeois-nationalist government of Nelson Mandela has put on paper some of the broadest liberal democratic laws—striking down prohibitions on homosexual sex, legalising abortion and promising free health care to pregnant women and their children—all these legal provisions amount to a cruel hoax.... This capitalist government cannot and will not deliver on promises of quality health care for women, housing, jobs, education or anything else the population desperately needs."

— "Brutal Murder of South African AIDS Activist,"  
*Workers Vanguard* No. 706,  
5 February 1999

The only road forward in addressing the triple oppression of race, sex and class faced by black women in South Africa is that of permanent revolution. Genuine national and social liberation will be realised only through the expropriation of the capitalists and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. We fight for a *black-centred workers government*. There can be no justice in South Africa until the non-white majority has power in a workers state that would unite the many black tribal- and language-based groups along with the Coloured (mixed-race) and Indian populations, with ample room and full democratic rights for those whites who would join in building a society based on genuine equality. Proletarian revolution will put the enormous wealth of this country at the disposal of the workers and poor. Only by extending socialist revolution internationally, especially to the imperialist centres, and building a world socialised planned economy can the material conditions of life for the masses of southern Africa and the rest of the neocolonial world be lifted up to a level of material abundance for all.

Such a revolutionary overturn will make it possible to eliminate the material roots of women's oppression: to replace the institution of the family with socialised childcare and housework, thus freeing women from domestic servitude. This is the program that Lenin and Trotsky's Bolshevik Party sought to carry out in the young Soviet workers state following the October Revolution of 1917. Our task is to build a revolutionary workers party like the Bolshevik Party that will act as a tribune of the people, a defender of all the oppressed, to lead the fight for socialist revolution as part of a reformed Trotskyist Fourth International. ■

reprinted from *Workers Vanguard* No. 955, 26 March 2010

# From Slavery to Mass Incarceration

# Black Liberation and the Fight for a Socialist America

We print below, in slightly edited form, a Black History forum given in Oakland, California, on February 27 by Spartacist League Central Committee member Reuben Samuels.

Welcome to Lockdown America. As I speak, over 7.3 million men, women and children are in jail or prison or on parole or probation. The U.S. may not manufacture many automobiles now, but with less than 5 percent of the world's population, it leads with one-quarter of the world's prisoners. There is a direct relation between these two facts, as displayed by the charts showing the steady decline in manufacturing jobs since World War II and the massive increase in the prison population since 1980.

Of the 2.3 million men, women and children behind bars, 70 percent are black or Latino. At the time of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, 100,000 black people were behind bars. Today there are over 900,000 blacks stuffed into America's overcrowded dungeons. Fifty-five years after *Brown* promised equal educational opportunity, five times as many black men are in prison as in four-year colleges and universities.

Some worry about life after death. For us the question should be, is there life after birth? Death row political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal was right when he said in his February 7 commentary, "When Young People Are the Enemy":

"How a society treats its poorest, least defended children is a measure of its madness." Last August, the *New York Times* (10 August 2009) reported: "About two-thirds of the nation's juvenile inmates ... have at least one mental illness, and are more in need of therapy than punishment." One out of every four incarcerated Latino children is held in an adult prison. You're not old enough to screw, drink or buy a cigarette, but you're old enough to be sent away to the state pen, where young prisoners are especially vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse.

Meanwhile, the U.S. prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, is still open for business, and U.S. imperialism's black Commander-in-Chief Barack Obama has ramped up the number of secret, Special Forces-run, black-site torture chambers for his Afghanistan surge. Transparency, anyone? The esteemed Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), who saw the inside of tsarist prison camps in Siberian exile, put the question this way in *The House of the Dead*: "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." In California, 80 percent of incarcerated women are mothers. Last October the ACLU hailed it as a victory when the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled six to five that a jury should decide if a woman in late-stage labor needs to be shackled to her bed during delivery, a common practice in America's dungeons.

Imprisonment for black males without a high school education tripled between 1978 and 1998 to **59 percent**, whereas the rate for blacks with some college **decreased** from 6 to 5 percent—even though the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. last year demonstrates that the fate of educated black people is anything but secure in racist capitalist America. Nevertheless, those middle-class blacks who have turned their backs on the ghetto poor have found their spokesman in Obama, who disses black fathers with statements like, "what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child—but the courage to raise one." This, as one in four black children by age 14 loses a father to prison.

Last February, Cornel West, the sometime Obama booster, popular hip-hop professor of religion at Princeton and member of the Democratic Socialists of America, ventured down to the Garden State Youth Correctional Facility near Trenton, New Jersey. In the spirit of the newly inaugurated president Obama's hope-hype, he told a select audience of 200 young inmates:

"In the midst of 244 years of slavery, when they had no control over land, territory, no rights, they held together in the dark and raised their voices to create the spiritual."

He then asked: "You all still listen to the spiritual, don't you?"

We still ain't got no land, no job either, dad's in jail, the bank's got the house, but we've still got spirituals. No wonder Karl

Marx called religion the opium of the people—and the pushers in the pulpits do no hard time.

### The Civil Rights Movement

Black Columbia University professor Manning Marable, a leader of the Committees of Correspondence, called mass black incarceration “the great moral and political challenge of our time.” How to meet this challenge? In an August 2000 piece titled, “Racism, Prisons and the Future of Black America,” Marable looks back to:

“the black freedom struggle of the 1960s [that] was successful largely because it convinced a majority of white middle class Americans that Jim Crow was economically inefficient, and that politically it could not be sustained or justified. The movement utilized the power of creative disruption, making it impossible for the old system of white prejudice and power to function in the same old ways it had for decades.”

From the outset, the civil rights movement was dominated by a black middle-class leadership represented by Martin Luther King Jr. The aim of their “creative disruption” was to pressure the Democratic administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to grant formal, legal equality. They did, in part because Jim Crow had become an embarrassment to U.S. imperialism’s posture as the defender of “democracy” against the Soviet degenerated workers state.

The bankruptcy of the civil rights movement’s leadership and its liberal program was revealed when the movement went North, where black people already had formal legal equality. As the French writer Anatole France wrote about legal equality in the late 19th century: “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets,

and to steal bread.” The struggle for a fundamental change in conditions of life in the ghettos—for real equality, jobs, decent housing and adequate schools—collided head-on with the economic realities of American capitalism.

### Revolutionary Integrationism

From slavery to convict labor, from the chain gang to the assembly line, American capitalism has been built upon the lash-scarred backs of black labor. Any organization that claims a revolutionary perspective for the United States must confront the *special oppression* of black people—their forced segregation at the bottom of capitalist society and the poisonous racism that divides the working class and cripples its struggles.

Counterposed to liberal integrationism, which holds that black equality can be achieved within the American capitalist system of racial subjugation and ruthless labor exploitation, we advocate *revolutionary integrationism*: the understanding that black freedom requires smashing the capitalist system and constructing an egalitarian socialist society. This perspective is also counterposed to petty-bourgeois black nationalism and black capitalism, an ideology of defeatism that would deny blacks their birthright: *the wealth and culture their labor has played a decisive role in creating*. As Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky told his American supporters in 1939: “We must say to the conscious elements of the Negroes that they are convoked by the historic development to become a vanguard of the working class.”

### Early America and Slavery

The capitalist ruling class is also acutely aware of this fact. Shortly after

this republic was founded, the black slaves of the French colony that is now Haiti, roused by the French Revolution, were organized into an armed force that won their freedom by defeating Europe’s mightiest armies, inspiring slave rebellions throughout the Americas.

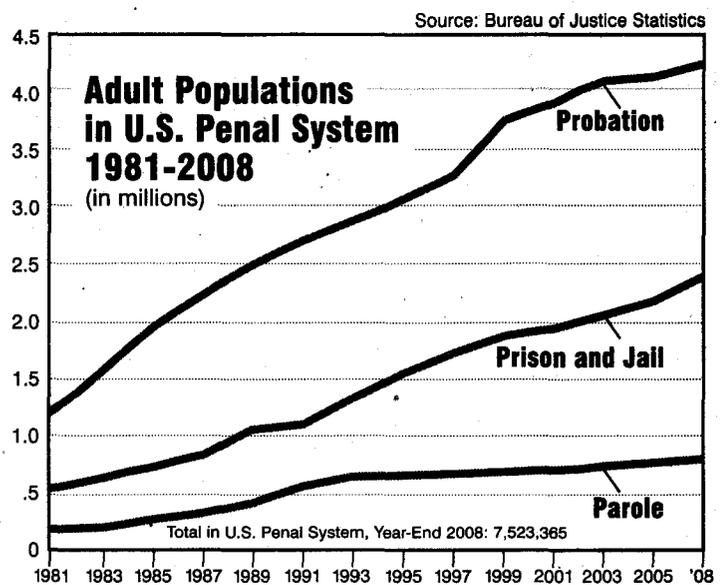
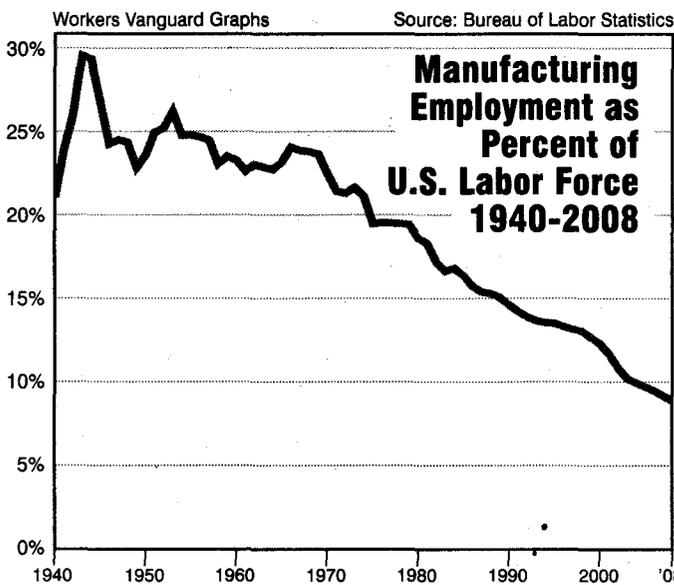
Since then, if not before, America’s rulers have been haunted by the spectre of black insurrection and social revolution. The payback to Haiti was 200 years of political isolation, economic depredation and military occupation. The response at home: the incarceration and criminalization of black people that is woven into the very fabric of this country.

In 1793, the same year that slavery was abolished in Haiti, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in the U.S., which would vastly expand both the scope and the profitability of the Southern plantation-based slave economy. The surplus value extracted through the oldest form of exploitation would fuel the birth of industrial capitalism in the U.S. and, with it, capitalism’s gravedigger, the proletariat.

Also in 1793, Congress passed the first national crime bill, the Fugitive Slave Act. The law fleshed out the slave-catching clause in Article 4, Section 2, of the recently ratified U.S. Constitution—that very document that President Obama as a candidate claimed “had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law.”

### The Bourgeois State and the Civil War

The instrument for criminalization and incarceration is the state, an instrument of organized violence for the suppression of one class by another. Friedrich Engels explained in *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) that





Ebony

Above: Civil rights protests in 1950s and 1960s helped shatter Jim Crow segregation but could not attack roots of racial oppression in American capitalism.

the state consists “not merely of armed men [like the police and army], but also of material adjuncts, prisons, and institutions of coercion of all kinds.” Writing at the dawn of modern imperialism, he described how this state or public power “grows stronger, however to the extent that class antagonisms within the state become exacerbated and adjacent states become larger and more populous. We have only to look at our present-day Europe, where class struggle and competition for conquests have raised the public power to such a level that it threatens to swallow the whole of society and even the state.”

By the time Engels was writing, he could have added the United States. How apt that Thomas Hobbes, writing in 1660 after the English Civil War, named his classic work on the state, *The Leviathan*, after the most diabolical of biblical monsters. No exploiting class but the bourgeoisie has built such monstrous institutions of coercion, suppression and destruction—this Leviathan that swallows up the whole of society—in order to struggle to the death to avoid leaving the stage of history.

It was not words of eloquent moral suasion, or freedom protests and petitions or “creative disruption” that crushed the slaveowning Confederacy in the Civil War, but the Union Army—two and a half million strong, including the decisive mobilization of 200,000 black soldiers and sailors. The Civil War—the Second American Revolution—was the last of the world’s great bourgeois revolutions that began with the English Civil War of the 17th century and included the French Revolution of the 18th century.

### Reconstruction and Betrayal

Yet the Civil War was a *bourgeois* revolution, with all the contradictions that

implies. A barbaric and archaic system of exploitation had been overthrown. But what would replace slavery? The ensuing period of Radical Reconstruction, imposed on the South with Union army bayonets, was the most democratic and egalitarian period in American history. Public schools were established where previously it had been a crime punishable by death to teach blacks to read and write. It gave us the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, which overturned the notorious 1857 *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision that declared blacks “so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

But Northern capital eyed the devastated South not as a laboratory for a radical-democratic experiment, but as an opportunity to profitably exploit Southern resources and cheap labor. Cotton was still king in the South and Northern textile mills obtained nearly all their cotton from the South, from which they produced \$100 million worth of cloth a year.

The Compromise of 1877, which withdrew the last Union troops from the South, sealed the betrayal of black freedom. Reconstruction governments were overthrown and in the late 19th century replaced with governments based on Jim Crow lynch law terror. The precise number of lynchings will never be known. One generally accepted figure is that of the 3,943 lynchings between 1880 and 1930; 3,220, or 82 percent, had black victims.

The death penalty, where judges in black robes supplant racist mobs in white sheets, is the lynch rope made legal. A suit brought before the Supreme Court by black Georgia death row prisoner

Warren McCleskey showed that black people in Georgia convicted of killing whites were sentenced to death 22 times more frequently than those convicted of killing blacks. In rejecting McCleskey’s appeal in 1987, the Supreme Court openly acknowledged that to accept his premise would throw “into serious question the principles that underlie our entire criminal justice system.” We can all agree with that. *McCleskey* has been called the *Dred Scott* decision of our time. We say: *Abolish the racist death penalty!*

### Class War vs. Convict Lease

To recreate the cheap labor so coveted by Northern and Southern capital, the freed slave had to be forced back into bondage, especially on the plantations. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which codified emancipation, also contained the exception with which to forge new chains for the freed black:

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except* as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.” [emphasis added]

Under that exception, every former slave state passed a plethora of laws that criminalized vagrancy, loitering, gambling, using “obscene language,” homosexuality, bigamy, “miscegenation.” These were punishable by long sentences or a fine so high no poor man could pay it, so that the convict was “leased out” for a term of labor to pay off the fine.

As an 1892 letter published in the Washington, D.C. *Evening Star* pointed out:

“The lease system brings the state a revenue and relieves it of the cost of building and maintaining prisons. The fact that the convicts labor is in this way brought into direct competition with free labor does not seem to be taken into account. The contractors, who get these laborers for 30 or 40 cents per day, can drive out of the market the man who employs free labor at \$1 a day.”

—Quoted in Ida B. Wells, ed.,  
*The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition* (1893)

Just as slave labor in the Caribbean helped fuel the industrial revolution in England, it was convict labor that would lay the foundation for the growth of industry in the South (even as the South remained largely agricultural). Slavery was inhuman. But as the chattel slave was an expensive piece of “property,” there were some economic deterrents to the regular use of the most extreme forms of plantation brutality. No such limit existed for convict labor. According to David M. Oshinsky’s *Worse Than Slavery* (1997), much of the railroad system in the South was built by leased convicts packed in

rolling iron cages moved from job to job, working in such hellish conditions that they rarely survived past two years.

Coal fueled the advance of industry in the South, employing black and white together under hellish conditions. There was a popular saying that down in that inferno all are black, even though the dirtiest jobs were reserved for those who started off the shift with coal-colored skin. Despite deep race-hatred elsewhere, those conditions mandated biracial solidarity in bitter class war.

The Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company (TCI) deployed convict labor from 1871 in eastern Tennessee coal fields. Free miners were organized by the Knights of Labor. When their contract expired in April 1891, TCI locked them out and brought in convicts to break the union. There ensued two years of class war. Armed miners up to 3,000-strong marched to stockades holding convict laborers, overwhelmed the guards and released the convicts, sometimes burning the stockades to the ground.

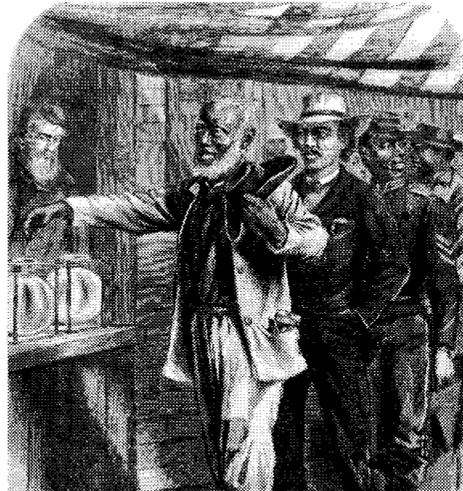
The miners were finally outgunned and outnumbered by a state militia reinforced with army Gatling guns and field artillery. Defeated on the battlefield, the miners nevertheless celebrated something of a victory when the convict lease was not renewed, and TCI was forced to pull up stakes and move its headquarters to Birmingham, where it also operated mines with convict labor. That saga is the subject of Douglas Blackmon's Pulitzer Prize-winning best seller *Slavery by Another Name* (2008). In Birmingham, also, the deployment of convict labor met with fierce resistance by the besieged biracial United Mineworkers, a history unfortunately downplayed by Blackmon.

The post-Reconstruction "Redeemer" governments, based on open black disenfranchisement and Jim Crow terror, made the legal pretense of the horrendous convict lease system unnecessary. In Tennessee, the state simply took over the mines and worked them with prison labor. In 1912 Alabama also took over the TCI mines and worked them with convict labor for another 16 years. Elsewhere in the South, Blackmon writes:

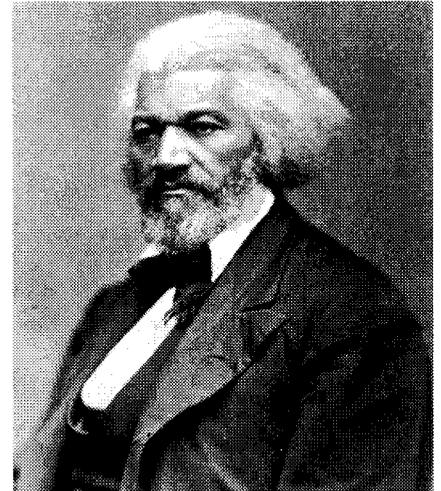
"As African Americans across the region were ground into political and economic penury, the difference in the costs of legally enslaved and free, but impoverished, labor narrowed dramatically...."

"Moreover, while thousands of state prisoners in Georgia, the Carolinas, and other states were no longer leased to private corporations, they were being forced into an 'improved' method of coercing labor and intimidating African Americans—the chain gang."

In Mississippi and Louisiana, abolition of convict leasing was part of a



Harper's Weekly



Frederick Douglass House

**Left: Southern black men voting in 1867, during Reconstruction period. Right: Frederick Douglass, pre-eminent revolutionary abolitionist.**

"reform" package that had as its purpose the complete triumph of white supremacy in political affairs. There, the massive Parchman and Angola prison plantations were made state institutions. Today Angola State Prison is the largest maximum security prison in the country. With long rows of stooped black bodies working under the hot sun, and armed overseers called "trustees" at the end of each row, chattel slavery underwent a 20th-century renaissance.

If I have concentrated on the South it is because its Jim Crow laws and black codes, and not the early 19th-century Quaker vision of the pen as a place of penitence and rehabilitation, shaped the prison boom of the 1980s and 1990s.

### American Imperialist Decline

The militant class struggle of the 1930s that built the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) finally integrated black labor into powerful industrial unions, if only at the bottom of the workforce. World War II not only pulled the United States out of the Great Depression but intensified the "Great Migration" of millions of Southern blacks to Northern industrial cities. During the war, it took only 90 days to turn illiterate black rural youth, whose only experience had been chopping weeds in cotton fields, into literate apprentices with high-grade industrial skills. A black proletariat was being forged, strategically integrated into basic American industry, representing the link between the anger of the ghetto and the power of organized labor.

With its imperialist competitors like Japan and Germany devastated, the U.S. emerged from World War II the pre-eminent capitalist power, producing one half of the world's goods. That pre-eminence continued well into the 1950s.

With profits fat, at least industrial workers were able to achieve some real gains, but not without hard class struggle. At the same time, as U.S. imperialism's Cold War against the Soviet Union was being launched, and following a massive postwar strike wave, the power of the state to police and shackle labor was magnified. The Taft-Hartley Act outlawed the secondary boycott and banned Communists and other leftists from serving as union officers. In 1955, the AFL and CIO were fused under a homogenized leadership of Cold War fanatics. It was no accident that U.S. union membership began to decline in the mid 1950s, having reached its historic peak in 1954. In 1959, 500,000 steelworkers struck for 116 days; they only returned to work under government intervention and Taft-Hartley injunction. As Leon Trotsky had warned:

"Monopoly capitalism is less and less willing to reconcile itself to the independence of trade unions. It demands of the reformist bureaucracy and the labor aristocracy, who pick up the crumbs from its banquet table, that they become transformed into its political police before the eyes of the working class."

—"Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay" (1940)

Meanwhile, America's imperialist competitors were rebuilding their plants with the latest technology and much higher productivity. By 1960, U.S. per-hour manufacturing costs were three times those in Europe and ten times those in Japan. Because of increased competition and overproduction, prices were falling worldwide by the early 1970s. But in the U.S. during the same period, the rate of worker compensation increased as strike activity soared. Thus, the rate of profit fell for non-financial corporations from a peak of 10 percent

in 1965 to less than 6 percent in the second half of the 1970s, *a fall of more than a third*.

The struggle for black equality in the 1950s broke the back of the Cold War anti-Communist consensus and in the 1960s intersected growing opposition to U.S. imperialism's losing war against the Vietnamese workers and peasants. While the bourgeoisie was willing to permit the gradual abolition of *legal* segregation and a little upward mobility for a small layer of blacks, it unleashed a campaign of "white backlash" and police terror aimed at reining in and suppressing the struggle for black freedom.

Vicious police repression in major U.S. cities precipitated black ghetto eruptions across the country, which were reflected in widespread disaffection among black soldiers in the U.S. military. Meanwhile, working-class upheavals shook America's allies: France in 1968, Italy in 1969 and Portugal in 1974-75. These reverberated across the Atlantic. In the U.S., when 210,000 postal workers walked out in 1970, defying a federal strike ban, President Nixon called out 26,000 National Guard and Army troops to scab. But only 16,000 showed up; to say they were worse than useless would be an understatement. The potential for an explosive and revolutionary transformation of American society was evident. Once again the spectre of black and red haunted the country's rulers.

The response was the bipartisan "war on crime" launched in 1968 by the "Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act," passed under Democratic president Johnson and a Democratic Congress. The Cold War domestic Counter-intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which originally targeted the Stalinists and Trotskyists, was now expanded to include the New Left, black radicals and other social activists. The militant

Black Panther Party in particular was in COINTELPRO's crosshairs. The Panthers represented the best of a generation of black activists who courageously stood up to the racist ruling class and its kill-crazy cops. In 1968, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover vowed, "The Negro youth and moderate[s] must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teachings, they will be dead revolutionaries." Under the ruthless COINTELPRO vendetta, 38 Panthers were assassinated and hundreds were railroaded to scores of years in prison hellholes—and many are there today, like Mumia Abu-Jamal.

### A Lumpen Vanguard?

Unfortunately, the Panthers, along with most of the New Left, rejected the organized working class as the agent of black freedom and socialist revolution. Inspired by the Caribbean-born black psychiatrist and nationalist Frantz Fanon, the Panthers turned to the most wretched and the most despised layer of black ghetto youth to be the vanguard of the black struggle. The underlying ideology of the Panthers was that of Fanon: that the most oppressed are the most revolutionary. But, in fact, the lumpenproletariat in the ghetto, removed from the means of production, has no real social power. Moreover, as Marx noted in his 1850 work, *The Class Struggles in France*, this layer, which also includes prostitutes and pimps and petty thieves who mostly prey on workers, is "thoroughly malleable, as capable of the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices as of the basest banditry and the foulest corruption."

Incarcerated black militants served as a transmission belt for social protest into America's penitentiaries, which are but a concentrated expression of racist, capitalist barbarism. What such heroic figures as Malcolm X and George Jackson demon-

strate is that some individuals, politicized and radicalized by their own experiences, *transcend their background to choose a social solution to their oppression*. As a black supporter wrote us from Soledad Prison some 33 years ago, "For the bulk of the lumpenproletariat its social and economic stake in capitalist society—its largely parasitic relationship *within* capitalist society—is dependent upon the continuance of such an economic system."

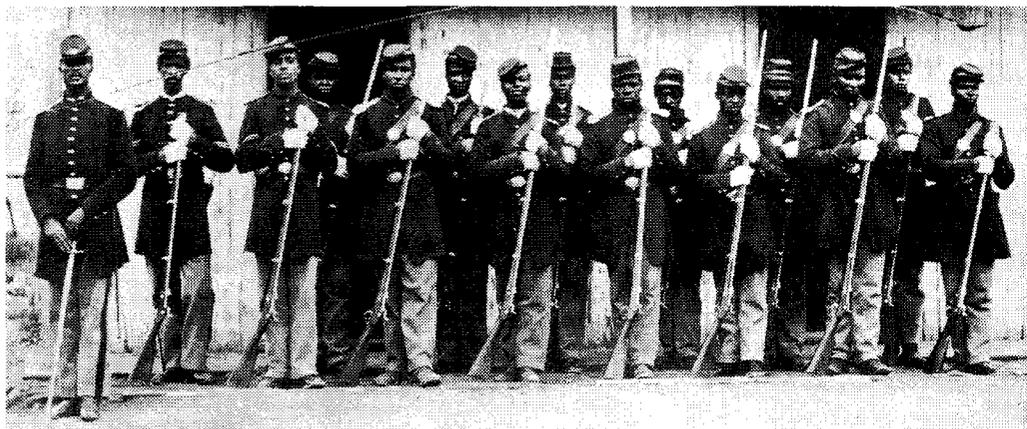
### One-Sided Class War

Back on the economic front, the decline of American industry was accelerated by its aging capital stock. New investment went not into retooling and modernization of industry, but into speculative capital or into moving American plants to the low-wage, non-union South and low-wage countries abroad. Organizing the South meant taking Jim Crow racism and the Democratic Party head-on—anathema to the pro-Democratic Party labor tops. International class solidarity with superexploited workers abroad, whose conditions were enforced by brutal U.S.-backed, anti-Communist dictatorships, meant taking on the Cold War establishment, of which the labor bureaucracy was still very much a part.

The labor bureaucrats supported the election of Georgia Democrat Jimmy Carter, who openly proclaimed the virtues of "ethnic purity." In 1979 Carter appointed Paul Volcker as chairman of the Federal Reserve, the same Volcker who is now Obama's point man on economic "reform." After his appointment by Carter, Volcker gave away his game plan for reversing Wall Street's declining rate of profit in a *New York Times* (18 October 1979) interview: "The standard of living of the average American has to decline.... I don't think you can escape that." The Fed chairman proceeded to drastically tighten the money supply,



Bettmann



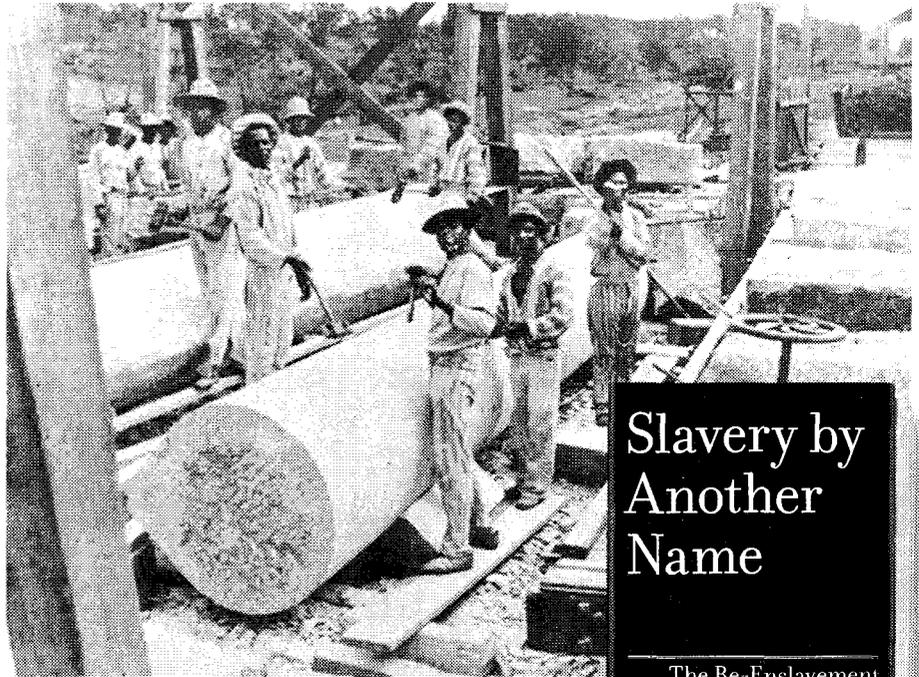
Library of Congress

**Left: Scarred back of slave. Right: Soldiers of 107th U.S. Colored Infantry at Fort Corcoran near Washington. Nearly 200,000 black Union soldiers and sailors helped turn tide of Civil War.**

forcing interest rates up to 16.4 percent and driving economic activity down, creating what was then the worst recession since the Great Depression. The Iranians were blamed—some things never change. It was not the ayatollahs in Tehran but the people running Wall Street and the Fed who were responsible.

To let folks know what was coming, Ronald Reagan launched his 1980 presidential campaign from Philadelphia, Mississippi, with a ringing endorsement of “states rights” before a cheering crowd of some 10,000 whites. Philadelphia, which as you may recall was the setting for the film *Mississippi Burning*, is where civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney were murdered 16 years earlier. Obama’s admiration for Reagan, after “all the excesses of the 1960s and 1970s,” should be seen in this context.

Soon after taking office, Reagan fired over 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, a blow from which the labor movement has not recovered. Volcker stayed on as Fed chief, while unemployment reached 10.8 percent at the end of 1982. In the “miracle of the free market,” growing unemployment and the industrial reserve army replace the overseer’s whip and the trustee’s gun to discipline and drive down the wages of the working class. In addition, the ranks of the industrial reserve army were swelled with the profound deindustrialization that began under Carter and accelerated under Reagan. Between 1980 and 1985 the Department of Labor estimated that some 2.3 million manufacturing jobs disappeared for good.



Texas State Library & Archives Commission

**Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Douglas A. Blackmon chronicles inhuman exploitation of convict labor. Above: Leased prisoners constructing granite columns for the Texas State Capitol in mid 1880s.**

## Slavery by Another Name

The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II

DOUGLAS A. BLACKMON

As auto plant after auto plant closed, Detroit lost half its population during the '80s. By 1990, this once-proud center of industrial might and multiracial class struggle was 80 percent black and the poverty rate was 33 percent.

### The “War on Drugs”

The economic whip of unemployment was augmented by the vast expansion of police powers and prisons under the bipartisan “war on crime” and “war on drugs.” In 1973, New York State governor Nelson Rockefeller launched the harshest drug laws in the country, with mandatory minimum sentences of 15 to life for selling two ounces or possession of four ounces of heroin, morphine, coke or cannabis. As WV reported in “New York Tinkers with Rockefeller Laws: Down With the Racist ‘War on Drugs!’” (WV No. 949, 1 January), these laws, which have recently undergone some paltry reforms, provided a blueprint for similar draconian laws across the country. By the 1980s, the “war on drugs” was a major contributing factor to the historic rise in the prison population. From a figure of about 40,000 people incarcerated in prison or jail for a drug offense in 1980, there has since been a 1,100 percent increase to more than 500,000 prisoners today, with black people accounting for more than 60 percent of drug convictions.

Democrats, and especially black Dem-

ocrats, have been among the most fervent drug warmongers. The Rainbow/PUSH Coalition’s Web site, referring to the “war on drugs” and other government policies, brags that “long before” they “became accepted public policy positions, Reverend Jesse Jackson advocated them.” And taking the “war on drugs” global has long been Al Sharpton’s mantra. He declared: “We have to use trade leverage to go after the countries that produce the drugs—who openly allow drugs to be in their economy—and put them out of business.” Obama, as well as Bush before him, has used the pretense of the global “war on drugs” to build military bases and back death squads in Colombia and wage murderous repression on both sides of the Mexican border (see “Mexico: Down With ‘Drug Wars’ Militarization!” WV No. 953, 26 February). Thanks, Al.

While some reformist outfits bewail the blatant racist profiling by the drug police, most do not raise the elementary democratic demand to decriminalize drugs. Indicative of this is a catchy chant from the Revolutionary Communist Party that only a somewhat demented Maoist could learn to love: “The war on drugs is a war on the people. The fascist crackdown is worse than crack.”

A recent article in Progressive Labor’s paper, *Challenge* (3 March), actually equated drug treatment centers with police terror and capitalist exploitation,

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opining: "Having drug clinics in a mainly black and Latino neighborhood is no solution for health care, and is a result of the ruling class' racist attempt to oppress workers." As for the reformism-at-a-snail's-pace International Socialist Organization, now that even Republican California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has called for a debate on legalizing marijuana, they have come out for it as well—but don't hold your breath.

As we wrote in *WV* No. 949, we support any mitigation of the Rockefeller or other drug laws. But no amount of tinkering will change the reactionary nature of these laws or their racist enforcement. We oppose all laws against "crimes without victims"—such as drug use, prostitution, gambling and pornography. Such laws are at bottom designed to maintain social control. By removing the superprofits that come with the illegal, underground nature of the drug trade, decriminalization would also reduce the crime and other social pathology associated with it. We oppose drug testing in the workplace, which employers use to cow the entire workforce and weed out militants.

There is a saying as true as it is old: There is nothing so bad that a cop can't make it worse. Yes, drug addiction can be a terrible thing, but addiction is a medical problem. As anyone can attest who has worked with addicts and understands the physiology and psychology of addiction, nothing creates or aggravates addiction faster than the stress and trauma of police and prison. That is why overcrowded prisons are a breeding ground for drug addiction, just as they are breeding grounds for communicable diseases.

By targeting prostitutes and drug addicts, the state also targets those who are at high risk for HIV, and one in every four Americans living with HIV passes through a prison. As of 2005, blacks and Latinos represented 71 percent of all new

AIDS cases and the majority of people living with HIV/AIDS.

### Immigrants and Incarceration

It took a Civil War to smash slavery and create the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship not only to blacks but also to the children of immigrants born on American soil. While the American ruling class has always used racial and ethnic divisions to keep working people and the oppressed divided, the truth is that immigrant rights and black freedom either go forward hand in hand, or they fall back separately.

Today, some 400,000 immigrants pass through wretched detention facilities, some dying through sheer lack of medical attention and then "disappearing." No wonder the Obama administration, like Bush's, even refuses to make legally enforceable rules for immigration detention. We demand full citizenship rights for all immigrants, no matter how they made it here.

At the same time, an estimated 5.3 million Americans are denied the right to vote because of laws that prohibit voting by people with felony convictions, including 1.4 million black men. In Florida, over 30 percent of black men can't vote. We categorically oppose every instance of black disenfranchisement. Full voting rights for prisoners and convicted felons!

In 2007, before the current economic crisis, the National Institute of Justice found that 60 percent of all felons remain unemployed a year after their release. We say: abolish every one of California's 210 laws and regulations that prevent felons from getting jobs or licenses—even to be a barber, an interior designer or a guide dog trainer. Strike down criminal background checks for employment applications! Full access for ex-cons to all public services, like public housing!

At the same time, we oppose so-called "Second Chance" or "Ex-Offender" programs, which are meant to replace union

jobs and exploit ex-cons as cheap labor with no benefits or protection. One such program was recently instituted in Chicago transit (see "Down With Racist, Anti-Union 'Ex-Offender Apprentice' Scheme!" *WV* No. 923, 24 October 2008). We say: Equal pay for equal work! Organize ex-cons like anyone else into the unions with full union wages, benefits and protection!

### Impulse to Genocide

As the first to be fired and the last to be hired, black people were always over-represented in America's industrial reserve army. But now the ravages of decaying American capitalism are driving many black workers out of the productive economy and into the ranks of the lumpenproletariat as an outlaw caste.

In the 1990s, Washington and California led the states in passing "Three Strikes Laws," which established mandatory sentences for a third felony conviction. The '90s also saw the resurrection of post-Civil War "black codes" in the form of so-called "quality of life," "zero tolerance" and "anti-gang" laws and policies. These laws criminalized black and Latino youth, often for minor acts of misbehavior, and the poor and the homeless for their poverty. Following the so-called "'90s boom" of the Democratic Clinton administration, by 2000 one out of every three black men in their 20s was in prison or unemployed. As we wrote in the article "Lockdown U.S.A." (*WV* No. 618, 10 March 1995): "The bourgeoisie's vicious drive to imprison and execute the ever-increasing numbers of ghetto youth reflects a sinister impulse to genocide against a layer of the black population."

Black Panther Party supporter, former Communist Party member and UC Santa Cruz professor Angela Davis has written: "Taking into account the structural similarities and profitability of business-government linkages in the realms of military production and public punishment,



Reuters

**Detroit: General Motors world headquarters looms above makeshift homeless shelter, March 2009 (left). Hard-hit residents line up to receive food supplies, December 2008.**



Getty

the expanding penal system can now be characterized as a 'prison industrial complex'."

—“Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex,” *ColorLines* (Fall 1998)

Following the Civil War, as we have seen, racist incarceration was used to force freedmen back onto the plantations or into the mines as convict laborers. But to treat today's prisons as profit centers—when in fact the main activity is enforced inactivity punctuated by grotesque violence—disguises their core role as institutions of organized class repression and prettifies the irrational, rotting capitalist system they represent and defend. SCI-Greene, the Pennsylvania Supermax where Mumia Abu-Jamal is locked down 23 hours a day on death row, is not a profit center, although it is just as indispensable to the defense of the predatory

must do our best to defend and extend it against all the ravages of American capitalism and the treachery of the pro-imperialist union bureaucracy. For black workers remain indispensable to a revolutionary rejuvenation of American labor—and does it need rejuvenating!

### Education and Revolution

A call for the March 4 “Day of Action to Defend Education” asks: “But if there’s money for wars, bank bailouts, and prisons, why is there no money for public education?” In his autobiography, the former slave Frederick Douglass quoted his former master that to educate a man “would forever unfit him to be a slave.” That is why it was a crime punishable by hanging to teach slaves to read or write. Visit inner-city schools today and you wonder if those codes are still in effect. Right now putrescent

part of the perspective for the overthrow of disintegrating capitalism, which threatens the whole culture of mankind, and its replacement with a centrally planned socialist economy on a global scale. Only that will make accessible the fruits of human culture to be fully utilized for the benefit of humanity at large.

If that seems utopian, look at the Cuban deformed workers state for only a foretaste of what is possible. We stand for the unconditional military defense of Cuba because there the capitalists were thrown out of power—although a proletarian political revolution remains on the agenda to get rid of the Stalinist bureaucrats running the country. From this former sugar colony, 400 doctors, whose entire education and training was paid for by the state, are now in Haiti providing top quality medical services to earthquake victims.

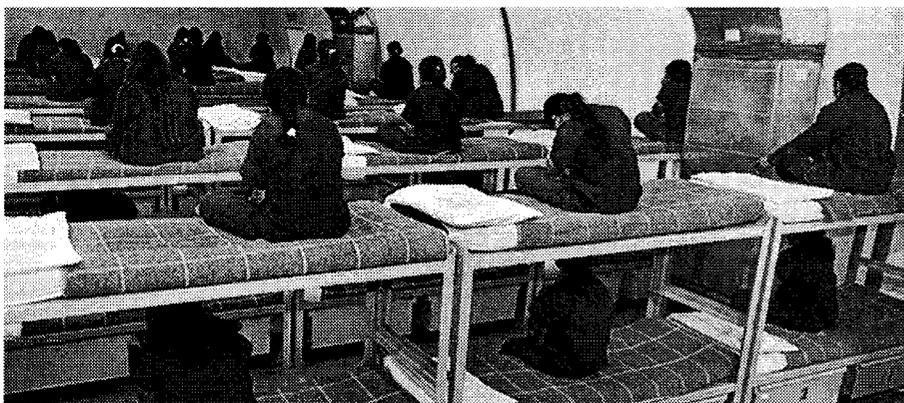
Marxism rejects the religious dogma of punishment, whether it is retributive or penitential. What is utopian is thinking you can reform the capitalist Leviathan and abolish its dungeons without overthrowing the whole damn capitalist-imperialist system. Only then can we consign the modern instruments of torture, incarceration and death to the museum, alongside the rack, the pillory and the whipping post.

### For a Revolutionary Workers Party

Shortly after the end of the American Civil War, Marx wrote in *Capital* (1867): “Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.” You will find those words on the membership cards of our Labor Black League for Social Defense.

You are not going to get labor and black freedom by backing the Democratic Party of racism and imperialist war. Yes, they claim to feel your pain, and the reformists push Democratic Party lesser-evilism. When the Democrats get into office they can do greater evil with lesser resistance. And you’re not going to get any satisfaction with those green-washers of capital and pacifiers of the people, the Greens or the Peace and Freedom Party either.

Don’t buy the substitute, the imitation or the fake. Let’s get on with the immensely difficult and challenging task in this post-Soviet trough of building the kind of party needed for the inevitable social and class battles ahead, one that is proletarian, internationalist and revolutionary. Free Mumia Abu-Jamal! Finish the Civil War! Break with the Democrats! Build a workers party that fights for a socialist future!■



**Women detainees at immigrant detention center in Texas, 2007. Homeland Security officials forced them to turn their backs to visiting media.**

profit system as the 82nd Airborne.

Black lumpenization is not some racist conspiracy between the White House and Wall Street, but part of the normal workings of the capitalist marketplace. As described by Marx in his renowned work, *Capital* (1867):

“The greater the social wealth...and, therefore, also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army... But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to its torment of labour. The more extensive, finally, the lazarus-layers of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. **This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.**” [emphasis in original]

Since 2000, the U.S. has lost another five million manufacturing jobs. The existence of a strong, skilled black proletariat is the product of an exceptional conjuncture in American history, and we

American capitalism has no need to educate working-class or poor youth; it has no room for those skilled black apprentices that filled the shipyards during World War II. Many of the black and Latino youth for whom the bourgeoisie cannot provide a future end up in prison.

Our Spartacus Youth Clubs demand free, quality public education for all, from preschool to postgrad, and a living stipend so working people and the poor—and felons—can afford college. We demand a massive expansion of remedial and bilingual education for inner-city schools and neighborhoods. But equal and adequate education is rendered meaningless if the majority of blacks and other socially downtrodden people are excluded from using the results by a decaying social order that has consigned three generations of black youth to the scrap heap.

Labor has created the social wealth that has made human culture, science and technology possible. That is why we insist that the struggle for equal education is

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**For Black Liberation Through Socialist Revolution!**

# The Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement



AP photos

**Birmingham, Alabama, 1963: Demonstration against Jim Crow segregation (left). Civil rights protesters attacked by cops (right).**

We print below a *Black History Month Forum* given in the musicians union hall in New York City on February 20 by Workers Vanguard Editorial Board member Paul Cone.

With pictures of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie—the fathers of bebop jazz—looking upon us I thought it would be appropriate to recall a short story called “Bop,” first published in 1949 by the great writer Langston Hughes. Through his character, Jesse B. Semple, Hughes describes the origins of bebop. According to Semple, it’s “From the police beating Negroes’ heads. Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, ‘BOP! BOP!... BE-BOP!...MOP!...BOP!’... That’s where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro’s head into them horns and saxophones and piano keys that plays it.”

That was written on the cusp of the

civil rights movement. With some modifications, Semple’s observations are no less applicable today. The billy club has been replaced by the retractable truncheon, the revolver has been replaced by the semi-automatic and the cops have added the Taser stun gun to their arsenal. In the first nine months of last year, nearly half a million men, women and children were subjected to the degrading “stop and frisk” by New York City cops—**84 percent** of them black or Hispanic. As Hughes’ character, Semple, pointed out, “White folks do not get their heads beat *just for being white*. But me—a cop is liable to grab me almost any time and beat my head—*just for being colored*.”

Welcome to our Black History Month forum. We study the history—often buried—of the struggles for black freedom, which are strategic for the American socialist revolution. Our pamphlet series

is named *Black History and the Class Struggle* precisely to express the inextricable link between the emancipation of the proletariat and the fight for the liberation of black people in the U.S.

We meet here today a little over a year after Barack Obama became the first black president of the U.S.—the Commander-in-Chief of the most rapacious imperialist power on the planet. Obama governs on behalf of the capitalist class, whose rule is maintained on the bedrock of black oppression. Obama’s election was hailed by bourgeois pundits and reformist “socialists” alike as the realization of Martin Luther King’s “dream”—a dream that, as King put it in his famous speech at the 1963 March on Washington, was “deeply rooted in the American dream.” Malcolm X saw things quite differently: “I’m one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the

**Break with the Democrats!  
For a Revolutionary Workers Party!**

22 million black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy.... I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare" ("The Ballot or the Bullet," 3 April 1964).

While Wall Street barons wash down lobster dinners with 25-year-old single malt Scotch—paid for by government bailouts—the past year has seen the devastation of the lives of many workers: the loss of jobs, homes, savings and medical coverage, hitting the black population disproportionately hard. I work near 125th Street in Harlem and regularly pass an ever-increasing number of apparently homeless and obviously desperate people asking for help to buy a cup of coffee or some food; blaring from the loudspeakers set up by merchants is Obama's voice boasting of "change we can believe in."

Obama has beefed up the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, threatened crippling sanctions against Iran; he has built on the police-state measures implemented first by Bill Clinton and enhanced by George W. Bush in the name of the "war on terrorism," and escalated attacks and repression against immigrants. Before the election, the Spartacist League declared: "McCain, Obama: Class Enemies of Workers, Oppressed" (WV No. 923, 24 October 2008). We gave no support to any bourgeois candidate, Democrat, Republican or Green like Cynthia McKinney, a former Democratic Party Congresswoman supported by reformists like the Workers World Party.

Just as the reformists' forebears followed King to John F. Kennedy's Oval Office, today's reformists deliver their followers to Obama's doorstep. *Workers World* (27 November 2008) proclaimed Obama's election "a triumph for the Black masses and all the oppressed." Today, Larry Holmes still recalls the "shock and

elation" while watching Obama's inauguration (*Workers World*, 18 February). The International Socialist Organization (ISO) enthused in their *Socialist Worker* (21 January 2009): "Obama's victory convinced large numbers of people of some basic sentiments at the heart of the great struggles of the past—that something different is possible, and that what we do matters." To the extent they have any influence, what the reformists do is prop up illusions in the capitalist Democratic Party.

### The Demise of Jim Crow

The title of this forum is a bit of a misnomer. It's not narrowly about the Cold War. I want to try to explain a bit the context in which the mass struggles for civil rights took place. In the Programmatic Statement of the Spartacist League, we wrote regarding the civil rights movement:

"The bourgeoisie eventually acquiesced to the demand for legal equality in the South, both because Jim Crow segregation had grown anachronistic and because it was an embarrassment overseas as American imperialism sought to posture as the champion of 'democracy' in the Cold War, particularly in competition with the Soviet Union in the Third World."

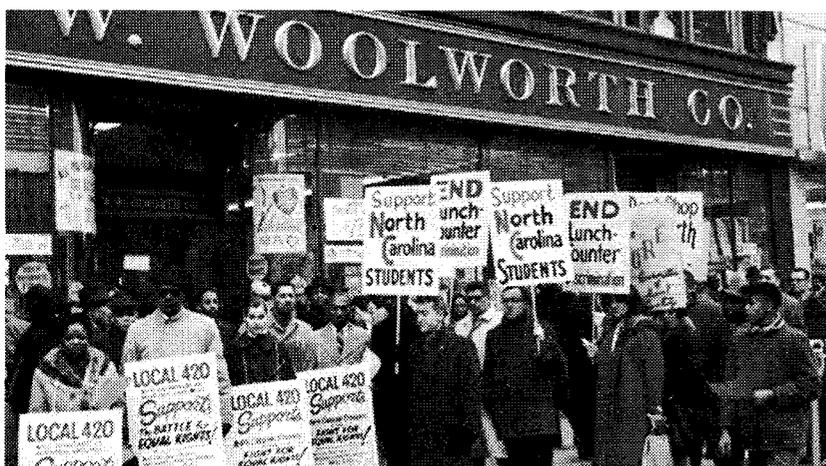
And that is roughly what I will be talking about. But not yet.

As Marxists, we see the motor force of history as the struggle between oppressor classes—today, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production like the banks, land and factories—and the oppressed classes. Under capitalism, this is the proletariat, workers who have nothing but their labor power, which they sell to the capitalists in order to live. Capitalism is an irrational system based on production for profit, born "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" as Marx put it in his classic work

*Capital* (1867). The capitalist rulers, who claim the banner of "freedom" and "civilization," have carried out mass murder and torture on an immense scale in their drive to secure world markets, cheap labor and raw materials. And history has shown that this system cannot be made to be more humane or the imperialist rulers more peace-loving. Nor can capitalism provide for the needs of the world's masses, despite the vast wealth it possesses.

In order to preserve their class rule, the tiny capitalist class has at its disposal the vast powers of the state—which at its core is made up of the army, cops and courts—and means of ideological subjugation through the schools, press and religion. The capitalist state cannot be reformed to serve the interests of workers and the oppressed. On the road to revolution, it must be smashed by the revolutionary proletariat, and a workers government established in its place.

A key prop of capitalism is to keep the working class divided along ethnic and racial lines, which in this country means foremost the segregation of black people. We fight for black freedom on the program of revolutionary integrationism: while the working class must fight against all instances of racist oppression and discrimination, genuine equality for black people in the U.S. will only come about through the smashing of capitalism, preparing the road to an egalitarian socialist order. This perspective is counterposed to liberal integration, which is premised on the utopian notion that equality for black people can be attained within the confines of this capitalist society founded on black oppression. It is also counterposed to go-it-alone black nationalism—a petty-bourgeois ideology of despair which at bottom accepts the racist status quo.



Bettmann photos

Left: Unionists picket Woolworth's in New York City, 1960, as part of national campaign in solidarity with Southern civil rights sit-in movement. Right: Civil rights activists sit in at a lunch counter to protest segregation in Jackson, Mississippi, 1963.

Freedom for blacks in the U.S. will not come about without a socialist revolution. And there will be no socialist revolution without the working class taking up the fight for black freedom. As Karl Marx wrote shortly after the Civil War, "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

Our model is the Bolshevik Party of V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky that led the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. This was the greatest victory for the working people of the world: it gave the program of proletarian revolution flesh and blood. The proletariat seized political power and created a workers state based on soviets (workers councils). The young workers state eliminated laws discriminating against women and homosexuals and recognized the right to self-determination of the many peoples oppressed under tsarist/capitalist rule. The Soviet government proclaimed the right of working people to jobs, health care, housing and education.

The Russian Revolution was not made solely for Russia, but was seen as the opening shot of a necessarily international struggle of labor against the rule of capital. It was an inspiration to the oppressed masses of the world and had a direct impact on the struggle of black people in the U.S. The American rulers have always seen a connection between the Russian Revolution and the struggles of black people in the U.S.—and rightly so. The Bolshevik Revolution was popular among wide layers of urban blacks and even among moderate black newspapers and organizations. The *Messenger*, published by prominent Socialist Party member A. Philip Randolph, who would later become a vicious anti-Communist, captured this sentiment with articles like, "We Want More Bolshevik Patriotism" (May-June 1919).

It was the intervention by the Communist International in the 1920s that turned the attention of the American Communists to the necessity of special work among the oppressed black population—a sharp break from the practice of the earlier socialist movement. After the Russian Revolution, J. Edgar Hoover railed that "a certain class of Negro leaders" had shown "an outspoken advocacy of the Bolshevik or Soviet doctrines," had been "openly, defiantly assertive" of their "own equality or even superiority" and had demanded "social equality" (quoted in Robert Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America: 1870 to the Present* [1978]). The government immediately put together an apparatus of surveillance, harassment and terror that would be a model for the later FBI COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence

**Robert F. Williams (center) with other members of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP chapter, 1957. Williams was suspended from NAACP in 1959 and driven out of the country in 1961 for organizing black armed self-defense against Klan terror.**



John Herman Williams

Program) in the 1950s through the 1970s. COINTELPRO meant massive wiretapping, burglaries and surveillance against even tame civil rights leaders like King, and the killings of 38 members of the Black Panther Party and imprisonment of hundreds more. As Martin Dies, head of the witchhunting House Committee on Un-American Affairs declared in the mid 1940s, "Moscow realizes that it cannot revolutionize the United States unless the Negro can be won over to the Communist cause" (quoted in Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War* [1986]).

From the beginning, the young Russian workers state was surrounded and besieged by hostile capitalist countries. The Revolution prevailed in a bloody civil war against the counterrevolutionaries and the forces of 14 invading capitalist powers. But the poverty, backwardness and isolation of the country, especially following the defeat of the 1923 German Revolution, laid the ground for the development of a bureaucratic caste, led by Stalin, which expropriated political power from the working class. The nationalist outlook of the bureaucracy was given expression in Stalin's proclamation in the fall of 1924 of the anti-Marxist "theory" that socialism—a classless, egalitarian society based on material abundance—could be built in a single country, and a backward one at that. In practice, "socialism in one country" came to mean opposition to the perspective of workers revolution internationally and accommodation to world imperialism—leading to the sellout of revolutionary opportunities—and in particular the propping up of capitalist rule in West Europe after World War II.

Despite the profoundly deforming

bureaucratic means employed by the Stalinist regime, which undermined the Bolshevik Revolution's gains, state ownership of the means of production and economic planning made possible the transformation of what had been an impoverished, backward, largely peasant country into an industrial and military powerhouse within the span of two decades. The Soviet Union provided a military counterweight to U.S. imperialism, making possible the survival of overturns of capitalism in East Europe and the social revolutions in China, North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam.

We fought to the end to defend the Soviet degenerated workers state against imperialism and counterrevolution, while at the same time fighting for a proletarian political revolution to oust the Stalinist misrulers and restore the working class to political power. Today, we continue to defend the remaining deformed workers states of China, Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea. The counterrevolutionary destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991-92 was a world historic defeat, not merely for the working people of the former Soviet Union but also for the international working class. The collapse of the USSR has meant U.S./NATO imperialist slaughter from the Balkans to Iraq and Afghanistan—accompanied by devastating attacks on the workers and oppressed minorities domestically.

## The Civil Rights Movement

We study past struggles—victories and defeats—in order to politically arm ourselves and the proletariat for future battles. There are very few historical conjunctures in which a small Marxist propaganda group with a few hundred members could within a few years have transformed itself into a workers party leading

a significant section of the proletariat. The South in the early 1960s offered such a rare opportunity.

The mass mobilization of black people in the Southern civil rights movement, and the subsequent Northern ghetto rebellions, disrupted and challenged the racist American bourgeois order. It shattered the anti-Communist consensus and it paved the road for the mass protest movements that followed—against the U.S. dirty war in Vietnam, for the rights of women, gays, students and others.

The civil rights movement achieved important—though partial—gains for black people largely in the realm of *formal* democratic rights whose main beneficiar-

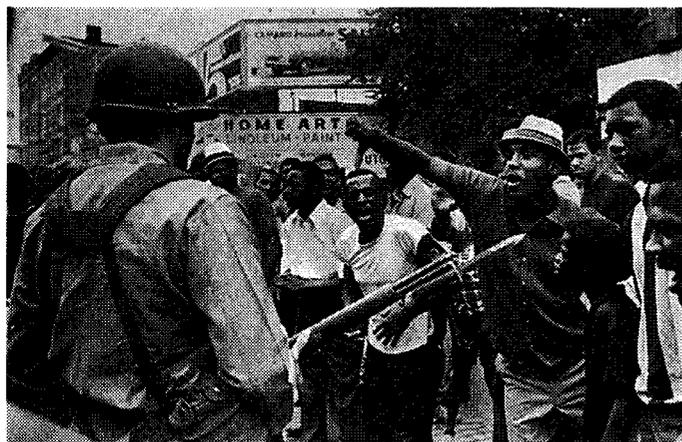
decomposing American social democracy like Bayard Rustin and Michael Harrington as well as by the Stalinized Communist Party (CP)—worked to keep the civil rights movement within the confines of bourgeois reformism and the Democratic Party. And this they did very well. Ultimately, millions of youth, whose opposition to racist oppression and growing animosity toward U.S. imperialist deprivations were leading them to seek revolutionary solutions, were channeled into the Democratic Party of racism and war. In his classic work in defense of the Bolshevik Revolution, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918) Lenin nailed Karl Kautsky, the granddaddy of the

wasn't a participant in these events like some of my comrades. A lot of my focus that year was on the upcoming Dodgers/Yankees World Series; the Dodgers swept them. But even at that age and younger, I was surrounded by the images of the assassination of Medgar Evers, Mississippi governor Ross Barnett blocking the steps of the University of Mississippi to blacks, the burning churches, the vilification of one of my childhood idols, Muhammad Ali, when he appeared with Malcolm X by his side after winning the heavyweight title. I recall the fear that Malcolm generated, seen in the eyes and heard in the voices of the bourgeois press corps and politicians, who in turn embraced the same conservative civil rights leaders whom they earlier castigated for wanting to move "too fast." I also remember the cities in flames, starting with Harlem in 1964.

Largely ignored by accounts of that period is the ferment in the North, where black people had already attained the formal rights blacks in the South were fighting for. But discrimination in housing was public policy. In New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee and other cities of the North, black newcomers were forced into overcrowded ghettos, where they paid high rent for rat-infested slums; black children were sent to inferior schools, and black adults had few job opportunities and few, if any, public facilities. By 1962-63, there were as many protests in the North and West as in the South—for jobs, an end to segregated housing, and for school integration.

Fueling this rage was the grim reality that the economic advancement of much of the black working class—which came with wartime employment, U.S. industrial dominance and, most importantly, unionized jobs—was coming to an end. Between 1947 and 1963 Detroit lost 140,000 manufacturing jobs. In New York City, over 70,000 garment industry jobs were lost in the 1950s. The same was happening to meatpacking workers in Chicago and longshore, warehouse and shipbuilding workers in Baltimore, Newark, Oakland and Philadelphia. In large part this was because the capitalists were increasingly moving production to the South. Much of the industrial Northeast and Midwest was soon rendered rotting hulls. This was largely a product of the union tops' failure to organize the South—a failure that stemmed from the anti-Communist purging of militant organizers during the Cold War, the union tops' allegiance to the Democrats and failure to take up the fight for black rights.

On 13 May 1963, in solidarity with



**Newark ghetto upheaval, 1967. Poverty, unemployment and racist cop terror helped trigger ghetto explosions in the North in the 1960s.**

ies have been a thin layer of the black petty bourgeoisie. Public facilities were desegregated, black people won the right to register to vote in the South, and mandated school segregation was outlawed. But the liberal-led civil rights movement did not and could not challenge the root cause of black oppression. The hellish conditions of ghetto life—the mass chronic unemployment, racist cop terror, crumbling schools, poverty and hunger (the "American nightmare")—which remain the lot of the mass of black people nearly 50 years after the Civil Rights Act was adopted are rooted in American capitalism. The civil rights movement smashed its head against this fact when it swept out of the South and into the North in the mid 1960s.

From its onset, the civil rights movement was dominated by a black middle-class leadership allied to Democratic Party liberalism. The aim of this leadership—whose most effective exponent was King—was to pressure the Democratic Party administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson to grant formal, legal equality to blacks in the South. Walter Reuther's United Auto Workers (UAW) and Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—assisted by elements of the

later social democrats and reformists:

"Even in the most democratic bourgeois state the oppressed people at every step encounter the crying contradiction between the *formal* equality proclaimed by the 'democracy' of the capitalists and the thousands of *real* limitations and subterfuges which turn the proletarians into *wage-slaves*. It is precisely this contradiction that is opening the eyes of the people to the rottenness, mendacity and hypocrisy of capitalism. It is this contradiction that the agitators and propagandists of socialism are constantly exposing to the people, *in order to prepare* them for revolution! And now that the era of revolution *has begun*, Kautsky turns his back upon it and begins to extol the charms of *moribund* bourgeois democracy."

If you didn't live through it, I think it's hard to appreciate how tempestuous and volatile this period was, and how the struggle for black rights dominated domestic politics for over a decade. That era has become sanitized in movies, newspapers, books and the accounts of many of its participants—even former militants from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party, who are today comfortably ensconced in the Democratic Party.

Now I'll confess, I was a bit young, only ten years old at the time of the March on Washington, for example, so I

blacks in Birmingham, Alabama, who were fighting back against the racist terrorists and in protest against brutal cop terror in their city, some 3,000 black teenagers in Chicago pelted cops with bricks and bottles. In New York City, 1963 and 1964 saw thousands of Harlem tenants forming tenants councils, withholding rent and winning services and repairs from the slumlords. This was met with a vicious bourgeois campaign of racist hysteria. The purpose was, as we wrote at the time, “preparation and justification for the smashing, through police terror, of the coming stage of the Negro rights struggle” (“Negro Struggle in the North,” *Spartacist* No. 2, July-August 1964). In July of 1964, New York City cops exploited the protests against the police killing of 15-year-old James Powell to justify a full-scale offensive to smash every sign of these struggles. Such cop terror as that in Harlem would trigger many of the ghetto upheavals that took place in over 300 cities over the next three years. In New York, as the cops sealed off Harlem, we Spartacists launched the Harlem Solidarity Committee, which organized a protest of 1,000 in the garment district.

Adding to the civil rights movement’s turbulent character was the fact that activists were on a daily basis forced to confront and grapple with questions of where their movement was going. Such questions ultimately bring to the fore the nature of the capitalist state, class divisions in society, the “rottenness, mendacity and hypocrisy of capitalism”—leading to the heart of the question of reform vs. revolution. This played out in the first instance in the issue of armed self-defense or the strategy of “non-violence,” which was the calling card of King. For this, King won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. This prize itself has no noble history. It was also later awarded to such peace-loving people as Menachem Begin, Henry Kissinger, Jimmy Carter and now Barack Obama.

In 1960, Trotskyist activists got a firsthand view of how the question of armed self-defense was perceived by student activists during a visit to Southern black campuses shortly after the student sit-in movement was launched at the Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth’s in February. While the student militants were for peaceful picketing—perfectly correct as they were outnumbered—the influence of pacifist ideology was slight, and, notably, the students undertook self-defense measures to protect their campus and themselves from the racist terrorists.

Armed defense of meetings of black activists in the Klan-ridden South had been a well-established tradition, stem-

ming not least from the efforts of the Communist Party to organize sharecroppers in the 1930s. This had been a necessary measure to make sure such gatherings took place without anybody being killed. This tradition however was anathema to the accommodationist wing of the civil rights movement led by King. Be clear: this question was not an issue of whether or not an individual whose home or family was under attack would repel the invaders. In a well-known 1959 statement, King himself acknowledged this basic human impulse. The issue was quite different. By pledging non-violence, the civil rights leaders were pledging allegiance to the white power structure, asserting that the movement could not go beyond the bounds set for it by the liberal wing of the ruling class represented by the Democratic Party. To say that the civil rights movement had the right to defend itself against racist terror was to say that you didn’t accept the rules of the capitalist ruling class and its racist “democracy.”

The ISO portrays King’s statement as part of a “debate” with black militant leader Robert F. Williams. This was no “debate.” King’s statement was used by the NAACP leadership in suspending Williams as president of the Monroe, North Carolina, chapter. Williams was targeted by the state and ultimately driven out of the country in 1961 for organizing black self-defense against KKK terror. To King’s argument that “violence” by black Americans “would be the greatest tragedy that could befall us,” Williams responded, “I am a man and I will walk upright as a man should. *I will not crawl!*” (quoted in Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, 1999). We defended Williams. In 1965, the SL initiated a fund-raising campaign for the defense of the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Bogalusa, Louisiana, who also organized armed self-defense. In doing so we advanced our class perspective—the revolutionary mobilization of the working class independent of the capitalist rulers.

During the civil rights movement, as government forces, not only the Southern municipalities but at the federal level, either stood by or facilitated the beatings of activists, the question of the nature of the capitalist state was brought to the fore. In part, dealing with such issues accounted for the receptivity among students to Marxist literature during that 1960 trip to the South I just referred to. Notable as well was the absence of the social democrats and Stalinists, which also provided openings for Marxists, and the distrust by many student activists of the adult leader-

ship groups that acted as a brake on the movement—specifically including King and preachers identified with him.

## The RT’s Fight for Revolutionary Integrationism

It is during these years that our organization originated as the Revolutionary Tendency (RT) opposition within the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). (Among the founders of the RT were the former editors of the Trotskyist *Young Socialist*, who had initiated a nationwide campaign of picket line protests at Woolworth’s in support of the Greensboro sit-in.) Our strategic perspective was to transform the left wing of the civil rights movement into a revolutionary workers party capable of leading much of the black working class and impoverished petty bourgeoisie in the South.

The SWP had for decades been the Trotskyist party in the U.S. It maintained a revolutionary course through the difficult World War II years and the immediate period thereafter. In 1941, under the thought-crime anti-Communist Smith Act, 18 Trotskyists and Minneapolis Teamsters leaders were sent to prison by the Roosevelt administration for their opposition to the imperialist slaughter of World War II. During the war, the SWP took up and publicized the defense cases of black soldiers victimized for opposition to Jim Crow segregation. In the aftermath of anti-black riots in Detroit in 1943, they fought for flying squadrons of union militants to stand ready to defend blacks menaced by racist mobs.

In contrast, following Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Stalinist CP hailed U.S. entry into World War II in December and worked overtime to enforce the trade-union bureaucracy’s “no strike” pledge. They demanded that the black masses forsake their struggle for equality in the interest of the imperialist war effort. The SWP viewed black liberation as the task of the working class as a whole, and intervened in the struggle against racial oppression with a militant integrationist perspective. The party won hundreds of black recruits, including a major breakthrough in Detroit. However, under the intense pressure of the Cold War period, most of them left the party over the next few years.

By the early 1960s, the SWP had lost its revolutionary bearings and tailed non-proletarian class forces, seen domestically in its policy of abstention from the Southern civil rights struggle and later embrace of black nationalism. By 1965 it had become a thoroughly reformist party. As opposed to the SWP majority, the RT fought the party’s criminal abstentionism

and pointed out that the young radicals would not come to a Marxist program simply by virtue of their militancy—the intervention of a revolutionary party was necessary. Building a revolutionary vanguard necessarily meant participating in and building a revolutionary leadership in the current struggles of the working class. The RT fought inside the SWP for the party to seize the opportunity to recruit black Trotskyist cadres to their ranks. The RT put forward a series of demands linking the fight for black rights to broader struggles of the working class and addressing immediate needs such as organized self-defense and union organizing drives throughout the South.

Many SNCC activists were open to a revolutionary perspective. Shirley Stoute, a black member of the RT, received a personal invitation to work with SNCC in Atlanta, which the SWP majority had to accede to. Then they called her back to

adopted at the founding conference of the Spartacist League/U.S. in 1966:

“Ultimately their road to freedom lies only through struggle with the rest of the working class to abolish capitalism and establish in its place an egalitarian, socialist society.

“Yet the struggle of the Black people of this country for freedom, while part of the struggle of the working class as a whole, is more than that struggle. The Negro people are an oppressed race-color caste, in the main comprising the most exploited layer of the American working class.... Because of their position as both the most oppressed and also the most conscious and experienced section, revolutionary black workers are slated to play an exceptional role in the coming American revolution....

“The victory of the socialist revolution in this country will be achieved through the united struggle of black and white workers under the leadership of the revolutionary vanguard party. In the course of this struggle unbreakable bonds will be forged between the two sections of the

system, paving the way for the development of industrial capitalism in the U.S. as a whole. But after the betrayal of Reconstruction by the Northern bourgeoisie, “the Negro was left in the South in the indefinite position of semi-slavery, semi-serfdom and semi-wage slavery” as then-Trotskyist Max Shachtman put it in his 1933 piece “Communism and the Negro” (reprinted as *Race and Revolution* [2003]). Sharecropping and tenancy formed the labor backbone of Southern agriculture. Sitting atop this was the system of Jim Crow, the systematic legal segregation of black people in the South enforced by legal and extralegal violence. It was designed to prevent blacks from voting, becoming educated or fighting for their rights. When blacks did challenge Jim Crow—either by personally refusing to follow its rules or, more rarely, by organizing against it—they faced racist terror, whether by the local sheriff or the Klan (who were often one and the same). At least 3,000 black people were lynched between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the dismantling of Jim Crow in the 1960s.

Black people in the U.S. constitute a race-color caste integrated into the capitalist economy at its lower rungs while socially segregated. As historic Trotskyist leader Richard S. Fraser noted:

“Discrimination and prejudice in the rest of the United States derives directly from the southern system, feeds upon it, and like racial discrimination throughout the world is completely dependent upon it.... In every possible way it [the capitalist class] perpetuates the division of the working class by establishing throughout the entire nation the basic reciprocal relations between discrimination, segregation and prejudice which are so successful in the South.”

—“The Negro Struggle and the Proletarian Revolution” (1953), reprinted in “In Memoriam—Richard S. Fraser: An Appreciation and Selection of His Work,” *Prometheus Research Series* No. 3, August 1990

Fraser added, “the scar of race antagonism” serves to fortify and stabilize “the structure of American capitalism by dividing the population into hostile racial groups, who find it difficult to get together in defense of their common interests against the master class.”

The industrial needs of both world wars, and the murderous terror blacks faced in the South, led to mass emigration out of the South and into Northern and Western industrial centers. Rural sharecroppers were transformed into proletarians in modern mass production industries. Following the strikes in the 1930s that formed the CIO labor federation, black workers were integrated into powerful industrial unions.



Howard L. Bingham

Malcolm X with Muhammad Ali in New York City, 1963.

New York on a pretext a month later. After a bitter political fight over this and other questions, the RT was expelled from the SWP in 1963-64, going on to found the Spartacist League in 1966.

In an August 1963 document, “The Negro Struggle and the Crisis of Leadership,” the Revolutionary Tendency wrote: “We must consider non-intervention in the crisis of leadership a crime of the worst sort.” Had the SWP remained a revolutionary party and concentrated its forces in the Southern civil rights movement, it could have won to Trotskyism a large fraction of those young black radicals who eventually became black nationalists. After being expelled from the SWP, we intervened with our small forces in the civil rights movement in both the South and North. We called on militants to break with the Democratic Party. Our call for a Freedom Labor Party was an axis to link the exploding black struggle to the power of labor, North and South. As we elaborated in “Black and Red—Class Struggle Road to Negro Freedom,”

working class. The success of the struggle will place the Negro people in a position to insure at last the end of slavery, racism and super-exploitation.”

### The Rise of the Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement did not just fall from the sky. The elimination of legal segregation cannot be portrayed as an idea whose time had come, as the fulfillment of American democracy’s supposed “moral mission,” as the realization of the ideals of the Declaration of Independence or, as Martin Luther King claimed, the cashing of a promissory note from the “founding fathers” to blacks whose ancestors were enslaved. As I mentioned earlier, the Jim Crow system, designed to control and terrorize blacks in the rural South, had become anachronistic—i.e., it no longer served the needs of the U.S. bourgeoisie. This is important to understand.

The Civil War, America’s second bourgeois revolution, had smashed the slave



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**Left: 1968 Tet Offensive by North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front fighters was a powerful blow against U.S. imperialism. Right: Spartacist banner at New York antiwar demonstration, 1970. Spartacists fought for victory of Vietnamese workers and peasants.**



Spartacist

At the same time, by the 1930s, Southern agriculture in this most advanced capitalist country was still economically backward, retaining significant remnants of the slave system. In search of cheaper labor markets, and to accommodate the economic needs of World War II, American capitalism had been forced to abandon its earlier conception of the agrarian South as mainly a source of raw materials and very limited industrial development. By the Depression, textile, iron, coal, steel and chemical industries had been developing in the South. The urbanization and industrialization of the American South during and after World War II created large concentrations of black workers, and proletarianized poor agrarian and middle-class whites. This created a clear identity of interests between white and black exploited industrial workers, establishing conditions for the emergence of broader class struggle and the struggle for black freedom. The practice of landlords and sheriffs picking up isolated tenants, sharecroppers or black transients at will, and forcing them into the prison slave-labor system (powerfully depicted in the book *Slavery by Another Name* [2008] by Douglas A. Blackmon) was not very effective when dealing with black workers concentrated in factories—particularly if organized into unions.

For black people, the Deep South in the early 1950s remained a racist totalitarian police state. When black soldiers came back from integrated units in the Korean War, they swore they would no longer submit to Jim Crow. The emergence of a mass movement of blacks in the South that not only protested but also defied racist legality posed a problem for the Northern bourgeoisie, which controlled

the federal government. They could either go along with the suppression of the civil rights movement by the Southern state authorities and local governments, or they could utilize the federal government to favor policies that would introduce to the South the same bourgeois-democratic norms that existed in the rest of the country.

Dominant sections of the Northern bourgeoisie concentrated in the Democratic Party opted for the latter. They would use the federal government to pressure, but not compel, their Southern class brethren to grant democratic rights to blacks. The Eisenhower and Kennedy/Johnson administrations engaged in a continual series of compromises between the civil rights movement and Southern authorities. At the same time they did very little to prevent the violent suppression of civil rights activists by the Southern authorities and sometimes collaborated in that suppression. For instance, when asked what the government would do about attacks on civil rights activists, Kennedy answered, "We'll do what we always do. Nothing."

It is to this wing of the bourgeoisie that the leaders of the civil rights movement shackled the fight for black freedom. The bourgeoisie could acquiesce to *partial* gains for blacks—desegregation of public facilities, voter registration, as well as a degree of school integration—as these did not undermine their class rule. Moreover, continued denial of civil rights to blacks in the South was a liability to the ambitions of U.S. imperialism internationally. In short order, as the federal government granted civil rights concessions, the NAACP and other civil rights organizations and celebrities would be signing on to the Cold

War against the Soviet Union and anti-communist witchhunts at home—even as they found themselves in the gun sights of the McCarthyites, HUAC and their Southern replicas.

The Democratic Party's dominance in national politics was based on the New Deal coalition of Northern liberals and Southern segregationists. Throughout the Great Depression and World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to endorse anti-lynching legislation and the desegregation of the armed forces. Many of his New Deal programs—including Social Security—largely excluded the bulk of the black population in the South. Maintaining this New Deal coalition was a paramount concern for the Democratic Party establishment, up to and including John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s.

But in 1948, President Harry S. Truman adopted a mild civil rights platform at that year's Democratic Party Convention. Truman was motivated by the Democrats' Cold War foreign relations concerns, as well as the need to prevent a hemorrhaging of liberal votes to Henry Wallace's Progressive Party in that year's presidential election. Wallace, who had been Roosevelt's vice president from 1941-45 and then Secretary of Commerce, ran for president on the bourgeois Progressive Party ticket on a platform that called for peaceful negotiations with the Soviet Union, repeal of Jim Crow laws and legal guarantees of civil rights. Wallace was supported by the Stalinist Communist Party (CP).

Hubert Humphrey's speech at the 1948 Democratic Convention marked his national emergence as a liberal icon. He went on to become one of Washington's

most virulent anti-Communist witchhunters. Humphrey sponsored the 1954 Communist Control Act outlawing the CP and proposed to amend the 1950 McCarran Act to set up concentration camps for “subversives” in the U.S.

When Truman won the Democratic presidential nomination, a significant number of Southerners fled the Democrats to form the States Rights Party and nominated South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond for president. (The Democrats had been the racist South’s historic party well before Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, won the 1860 presidential election on a platform opposing the extension of slavery.) With the help of the black vote in Northern urban centers, Truman squeaked out an upset victory. For the most part, the Southern Dixiecrats remained a core part of the Democratic Party until the mid 1960s.

While Thurmond was trying to lead the South out of the Democratic Party, the social democrats, liberal labor tops and the CP adopted the strategy of “realignment”—i.e., driving the Dixiecrats from the party and pressuring the Democrats to fight for black rights. The social democrats were also actively trying to drive the reds out of the unions. Some of these social democrats, such as Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph and, later, Michael Harrington, would be long-time advisers to Martin Luther King.

Defending the strategy of “realignment,” UAW president Walter Reuther declared, “We felt that instead of trying to create a third party—a labor party... that we ought to bring about a realignment and get the liberal forces in one party and the conservatives in another” (quoted in David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays in the Twentieth Century Struggle*). *Labor Action*, published by Max Shachtman—who had split with Trotskyism on the eve of the Second World War because he refused to defend the Soviet Union against imperialism—declared in 1956: “The indicated strategy for labor in the coming Democratic Convention is: oust the South from the Democratic party through an all-out struggle for civil rights.” This article was written by left Shachtmanite Hal Draper, whose Independent Socialist Clubs, founded in 1964, were the precursor to the International Socialist Organization (ISO).

Years later, responding to the Black Power advocates in late 1966, Rustin stated, “The winning of the right of Negroes to vote in the South insures the eventual transformation of the Democratic Party.... The Negro vote will eliminate the Dixiecrats from the party and

from Congress...” Rustin called for “a liberal-labor-civil rights coalition which would work to make the Democratic party truly responsive to the aspirations of the poor” (*Commentary*, September 1966). Meanwhile, the CP’s Claude Lightfoot argued, “ousting the Dixiecrats from the halls of Congress” will “lay the basis for building a broad and pro-democratic and anti-monopoly coalition” (*Turning Point in Freedom Road: The Fight to End Jim Crow Now* [1962]).

The program of building “unity” with progressive capitalists in an “anti-monopoly” coalition and both working within and pushing from outside to make the Democrats fight remain the hallmark of American reformism.

In the early years of the civil rights movement in the 1950s, the then-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) insisted on the need for an independent labor party in the fight for black and workers rights. American Trotskyist leader Richard S. Fraser argued against “realignment” reformism: “The differences within the leadership of the Southern Democratic Party are tactical ones of how best to protect white supremacy.” Fraser recognized the revolutionary implications of the fight for black freedom:

“It is the Negro movement which at the present moment holds the key to the whole picture. If the Negroes should succeed in breaking away from the Democratic Party, large sections of the industrial working class in decisive sections of the country would be impelled to do likewise. The result would be the disintegration of the Democratic Party in its strategic Northern centers and its replacement by independent labor political action.”

—“Why Support for the Democrats by Reuther and the CP Helps Preserve White Supremacy,” *Militant*, 24 September 1956

Ultimately, the Democratic Party *did* get “realigned.” But not in the way the social democrats foresaw. Passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act by the Johnson administration would lead to a massive flight of Southern whites to the Republicans—the realization of the Southern strategy first devised by Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election and implemented successfully by Richard Nixon in the 1968 election. The Democrats have won barely any Southern states in national elections since. And as the Democrats spent the next 32 years pandering to that white racist vote, the reformists only deepened their commitment to “fighting the right” through the Democratic Party.

## Post-World War II Struggles

The United States emerged from World War II as the pre-eminent imperialist

power. Its European capitalist rivals were in tatters, and several of them were discredited and reviled by large sectors of the working masses for their identification with the fascists. Colonial empires were dissolving. Independence movements in turn were inspiring black activists in this country, as would the revolutionary overturns of capitalism in countries like China and Cuba.

Wartime employment and organization into CIO unions provided tremendous advances for black people. At the same time, black veterans returned to a wave of lynchings and race terror North and South. These black workers would form the core of the early civil rights movement—for example, the NAACP grew ninefold between 1940 and 1946.

In posturing as the shining defender of “freedom” and “democracy,” Washington had a distinct handicap. Despite the devastation and the loss of 27 million people during the war, the Soviet bureaucratically degenerated workers state emerged with tremendous international prestige—a military power that had liberated Europe from Nazi Germany, and a rising industrial power as well. The Soviets provided support for national liberation movements in Africa. The U.S. was widely detested as an ally of the British, French and other European colonial powers. The postwar Marshall Plan to rebuild West Europe as a bulwark against the Soviets also played a key role in preserving the colonial empires of U.S. allies—for a time. When the French African colony of Guinea voted for independence in 1958, the U.S. supported France’s retaliations and refused to recognize Sékou Touré’s government. In 1960, the U.S. opposed a United Nations resolution condemning Portugal for forced labor and brutality in its African colonies, and another censuring South Africa for its apartheid policies.

Following the 1960 Sharpeville massacre in South Africa, in which 69 black activists were killed for protesting the hated apartheid pass laws, President Eisenhower waxed on about his concerns for the white South Africans and what he called their “difficult social and political problem.” The Congo won its independence from Belgium that same year and within months Eisenhower resolved to remove its nationalist prime minister Patrice Lumumba, authorizing the CIA to try to eliminate him. Lumumba was executed in early 1961, with U.S., Belgian and UN complicity. During the Kennedy administration the CIA worked closely with South African security forces, in 1962 tipping them off to African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela’s where-

Wayne State University



Muhammad Speaks

**Cops invade Detroit ghetto during 1967 upheaval. Cartoon captures cringing pacifism of Martin Luther King, who supported suppression of 1960s ghetto explosions.**

abouts, which led to his arrest and 27-year imprisonment.

But the biggest public relations problem for the U.S. rulers was the horrific treatment of black people within their own borders. This was well known to workers, students, guerrilla leaders and government officials from Bombay to Lagos. Even U.S. imperialism's closest allies recognized the dilemma. In 1947, at the height of the Greek Civil War, with the U.S. pouring military aid to the brutal right-wing forces, Helen Vlachos, writer for the conservative Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*, traveled to the American South. She related how, after her trip, she could better understand "the bitter answer of a small Negro boy who, when asked by his teacher what punishment he would impose upon Adolf Hitler, said, 'I would paint his face black and send him to America immediately'" (Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* [2000]).

The opening verbal shot of the Cold War was British prime minister Winston Churchill's famous 1946 Fulton, Missouri, speech. I say "verbal shot" because the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the first real shots. Over 200,000 Japanese people were sent to a fiery death out of racist spite and with the purpose of intimidating the Soviet Union. Churchill, speaking at the segregated Westminster College in Truman's home state of Missouri, declared that "an iron curtain has descended across the continent." Churchill stated, "We must never cease to proclaim in fearless tones the great principles of freedom and the rights of man which are the joint inheritance of the English-speaking world and which through Magna Carta,

the Bill of Rights, the Habeas Corpus, trial by jury, and the English common law find their most famous expression in the American Declaration of Independence." Needless to say, none of these applied to black people in the South. The NAACP, the leading civil rights organization of the day, blasted Churchill's speech: "It would virtually insure continuation of imperialism.... Great Britain's policies toward colonial peoples which have been continued by the present labor government can cause only shudders of apprehension as far as Churchill's proposal of an Anglo-American coalition is concerned" (quoted in Gerald Horne, *Black and Red* [1986]). The NAACP would soon sing a different tune.

The State Department's international propaganda efforts had a sort of Joseph Goebbels quality. On one hand, the government prevented black critics from traveling abroad. Most prominent among them was the actor Paul Robeson, a supporter of the CP, whose passport was seized. The State Department also prevented unfavorable books from being stocked in its libraries overseas. At the same time, the United States Information Agency distributed pamphlets abroad, such as *The Negro in American Life*, that depicted ever-increasing harmony in race relations. This pamphlet boasted of how equality was slowly "nurtured" as compared to post-Civil War Reconstruction's "authoritarian measures" that had sought to impose equality for the newly freed black slaves in the South.

The State Department sponsored tours of black public figures to back up the lies. Whenever called upon, NAACP executive secretary Walter White would fly overseas

to sing the praises of U.S. race relations. Jazz great Dizzy Gillespie toured Africa for the State Department, as basketball star Bill Russell did in 1959. New York Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, who had earlier been elected with CP support, told the 1955 Bandung Conference of "non-aligned states" that his presence gave "living proof to the fact that there is no truth in the Communist charge that the Negro is oppressed in America" (quoted in Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*). Ultimately, Powell's "reward" for this service was to be stripped of his Congressional seat in the 1960s. Wilson Record's 1951 book, *Race and Radicalism, The Negro and the Communist Party in Conflict*, was used by the U.S. in Asia and Africa. Promoting Record's anti-Communist work, Voice of America broadcasts proclaimed, "This is the real American Negro as he is described by the distinguished Negro sociologist Wilson Record." Wilson Record was a white man, from Texas.

A number of civil rights leaders joined in the State Department's efforts. A. Philip Randolph declared his support of the Fair Employment Practices Commission in 1948. He said: "The most powerful political propaganda weapon Russian Communism now holds in its hands is discrimination against Negroes" (quoted in Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight* [2003]). Speaking at the 50th anniversary of the NAACP's founding, Walter Reuther warned that segregation "can be American democracy's achilles heel in Asia and Africa where the great millions of the human family lives" (quoted in Horne, *Black and Red*). In 1958, after a federal court judge ordered a moratorium on school

desegregation for a couple of years. Martin Luther King, Randolph, the NAACP's Roy Wilkins and others joined in a letter of protest to Eisenhower, declaring, "In our world-wide struggle to strengthen the free world against the spread of totalitarianism, we are sabotaged by the totalitarian practices forced upon millions of our Negro citizens" (quoted in Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*).

In 1949, when Randolph declared blacks would and should fight in a war against the Soviet Union, the SWP's *Militant* (26 December 1949) powerfully answered:

"By this answer he gives a go-ahead signal to the very same ruling class that is responsible for the oppression and segregation of the Negro people at home—for a war that will be a projection on the international field of the same reactionary policies that they are pursuing in the United States.... Not only the Soviet masses but American workers and Negroes have a stake in preserving this system, for its destruction in a war by U.S. imperialism would mean a new lease on life for dying world capitalism. The strengthening of capitalism in turn would mean the strengthening of all its institutions, including the institution of Jim Crow which Negroes are fighting to end."

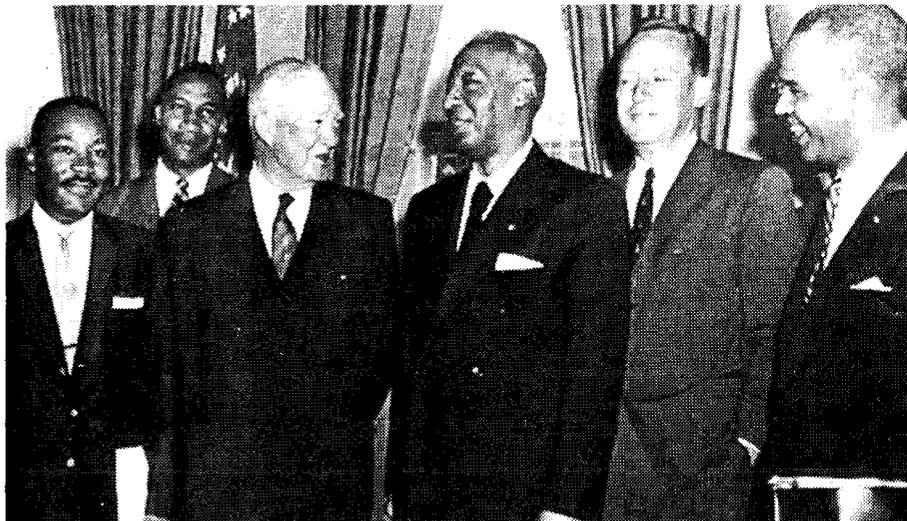
### The Cold War Attacks on Labor

The year 1946 saw the largest strike wave in U.S. history, followed by an anti-Communist purge of the unions. Key in this purge was Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers (UAW). At the same time, the imperialists, led by the Democratic Truman administration, launched the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

As early as 1947, Truman put in place a loyalty board to screen all government employees and the purge of left-wing militants from the CIO began. That same year Congress enacted the strikebreaking Taft-Hartley Act. In addition to outlawing such labor weapons as secondary strikes, it barred Communists from union office. The anti-Communist witchhunt was launched to regiment the "home front," to break the back of the militancy of the industrial unions that had been organized in the 1930s.

Some 25,000 union members, many of them key leaders of the CIO organizing drives, were purged from the labor movement, in some cases leading to the destruction of whole unions. Shachtman's Independent Socialist League supported the expulsions of the CP-led unions from the CIO. The anti-red purge installed a venal, pro-imperialist union leadership that abetted the bosses in fostering racial divisions and would preside over the decimation of the unions in coming decades.

In the South, the red purge drove from the unions a militant generation of working-



June 1958: Black leaders lobby White House following suspension of school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. From left: Martin Luther King, White House administrator E. Frederic Morrow, President Dwight Eisenhower, A. Philip Randolph, Attorney General William Rogers and NAACP leader Roy Wilkins.

class fighters for black rights. Ironically, this took place against the backdrop of "Operation Dixie," the CIO campaign to organize the South. As the experience of the 1930s had shown, this would require combining the fight for unionization with the struggle against Jim Crow. This was anathema to the CIO tops, whose Democratic Party loyalties ruled out any effort that would affront the Dixiecrats.

The anti-Communist purge targeted just about anyone seen as fighting for black rights. This in turn also levied a heavy toll on the unions. Among the questions asked of Dorothy Bailey, a black U.S. Employment Service employee, to "prove" supposed Communist sympathies, was: "Did you ever write a letter to the Red Cross about the segregation of blood?" (quoted in Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*). She was fired from her job. Black workers were asked, "Have you ever had dinner with a mixed group? Have you ever danced with a white girl?" White workers were asked if they ever entertained blacks in their home. Witnesses before the witch-hunting commissions were asked, "Have you had any conversations that would lead you to believe [the accused] is rather advanced in his thinking on racial matters?" (Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973* [1974]).

Under the 1950 Port Security Act (a precursor to the Maritime Security Act adopted a few years back as part of the "war on terrorism"), 50-70 percent of sailors and longshoremen dismissed were black or foreign-born. Purgings of black postal workers by the loyalty board were upheld by the Supreme Court.

In Birmingham, Alabama, the South's one truly industrial center and accord-

ingly a center of black—and white—proletarian power, there is a long history of investigations into the connections between blacks and reds. By the end of 1956, Virginia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina and Mississippi had adopted laws and launched investigations to harass the NAACP, while Alabama, Louisiana and Texas banned the organization's activities outright.

In 1948, the U.S. Justice Department indicted leaders and members of the CP under the thought-crime Smith Act. The SWP defended the CP, which had earlier hailed the Smith Act prosecutions of Trotskyists in the early 1940s for their revolutionary opposition to World War II. Even while under attack during the Cold War, the Stalinists did their best to poison any united action against the witchhunters. Robeson spit on the SWP's campaign for the "legless veteran" James Kutcher. Kutcher, who had lost both his legs in World War II, was fired in 1948 from his government clerk's job in Newark, New Jersey, because of his SWP membership.

By the late 1940s, in stark contrast to their statement following Churchill's speech, the NAACP had dropped even any verbal opposition to colonialism. They had ousted W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the organization's founders, following his support to the Henry Wallace presidential candidacy in the 1948 elections. For the next two decades NAACP head Roy Wilkins and lead counsel Thurgood Marshall, who went on to become the first black justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, shared information about alleged Communists with the FBI. The Harlem Branch of the NAACP had a special "Committee on Subversion."

Toadying to the forces of racist reaction did little to immunize liberal civil rights leaders from the witchhunters. Ultimately, it only emboldened them. Redbaiting was a common thread throughout the course of the civil rights movement. Despite his pacifism and pro-Democratic Party politics, King was subjected to vicious and degrading FBI surveillance, wiretapping and interference in his personal life. The wiretaps on his phone, as well as on Bayard Rustin's, were authorized by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

### The International Context

There is a lot of anecdotal material on the international effects of various events in the civil rights period and how these events caused a great deal of embarrassment for the U.S. imperialist rulers. I want to give just a few examples surrounding some of the landmark events of that time.

The international effects of the civil rights movement were made clear in the Justice Department's intervention into a series of civil rights cases, including the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which outlawed segregation in public schools. In the *Brown* case, the government submitted a "friend of the court" brief that quoted Secretary of State Dean Acheson at length: "The United States is under constant attack in the foreign press...because of various practices of discrimination against minority groups in this country." Acheson continued, "As might be expected, Soviet spokesmen regularly exploit this situation in propaganda against the United States, both within the United Nations and through radio broadcasts and the press, which reaches all corners of the world." One young activist of South Africa's African National Congress offered, "I think America has lost African friendship. As far as I am concerned, I will henceforth look East where race discrimination is so taboo that it is made a crime by the state" (quoted in Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*).

Over the next few years, black students' attempts to attend all-white schools were met with a vicious racist backlash that again reverberated across the world—most famously in the fall of 1957. When nine black students went to enroll in Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, they were met with lynch mob opposition led by the Capital Citizens' Council. The day before school opened, Democratic Party governor Orval Faubus called in 250 National Guardsmen, guns in hand, to keep the black students out. As soldiers blocked the school entrance, a racist mob

screamed at 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, "Lynch her! Lynch her!" After days of protests, Eisenhower sent in the 101st Airborne Division.

As myth has it, this was to "protect" the black students. The call for federal troops to the South was a defining issue throughout the course of the civil rights movement. We are opposed to such calls on the armed forces of the capitalist state. In an early expression of the SWP's loss of its bearings under the pressure of the Cold War, in October 1955 the party called on the government to send troops to Mississippi to defend blacks. Inside the SWP, Richard S. Fraser objected to the slogan, writing in a March 1956 document, "If we advocate that the Federal Government send them there, we will bear political responsibility for the consummation of the demand." He noted, "The most probable condition under which the Federal Government will send troops to the South will be that the Negroes hold the initiative in the struggle. As long as the white supremacists have the initiative and the lid of repression is clamped on tightly, the social equilibrium is not upset by a lynching or other terrorist actions." Fraser presciently added, "When the Negroes take the initiative it is a 'race riot' and the public security is threatened and an excellent reason is given to the government to intervene" ("Contribution to the Discussion on the Slogan 'Send Federal Troops to Mississippi,'" reprinted in "In Memoriam—Richard S. Fraser: An Appreciation and Selection of His Work," *Prometheus Research Series* No. 3, August 1990).

This was proven to be the case. Eisenhower's troops were sent to put down an upheaval of the Little Rock black population when it fought to disperse the

racist mob and defend the students. The troops restored "law and order," preventing the total rout of the retreating racists. In a pattern that would be repeated in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 and Watts, California, in 1965, King praised the troops for enforcing "nonviolence" among the black population. He sent a telegram to Eisenhower "to express my sincere support for the stand you have taken to restore law and order in Little Rock, Arkansas." He added, "your action has been of great benefit to our nation and to the Christian traditions of fair play and brotherhood" (*The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume IV: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957-December 1958* [2000]). Eisenhower had earlier conveyed his notion of brotherhood to Supreme Court justice Earl Warren, telling of his empathy for the segregationists: "These are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit alongside some big overgrown Negroes" (quoted in Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*).

Little Rock reverberated worldwide. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles complained, "this situation was ruining our foreign policy." Jazz legend Louis Armstrong canceled a propaganda trip to the Soviet Union planned by the State Department. He explained: "The way that they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell." When then-vice president Richard Nixon visited Venezuela in 1958 his limousine was stoned by an angry crowd who chanted, "Little Rock! Little Rock!"

Dignitaries from Third World countries wooed by Washington were themselves often denied the use of public facilities and subjected to the same racist humiliation as American blacks were on a daily

<p><b>Marxist Bulletin 5</b> REVISED</p> <p><b>WHAT STRATEGY FOR BLACK LIBERATION? Trotskyism VS. Black Nationalism</b></p> <p>Key documents and articles 1955-1978</p> <p><small>Spartacist Publishing Co. Box 1377 GPO, New York, NY 10116</small></p>	<p><b>PROMETHEUS RESEARCH SERIES 3</b></p> <p><b>In Memoriam Richard S. Fraser</b></p> <p>An Appreciation and Selection of His Work</p> <p><small>PROMETHEUS RESEARCH LIBRARY August 1990</small></p>
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basis. John Kennedy's secretary of state, Dean Rusk, described one such incident:

"Early in the Kennedy years a black delegate to the United Nations landed in Miami on his way to New York. When the passengers disembarked for lunch, the white passengers were taken to the airport restaurant; the black delegate received a folding canvas stool in a corner of the hangar and a sandwich wrapped with wax paper. He then flew on to New York, where our delegation asked for his vote on human rights issues."

—quoted in Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*

Having been elected in 1960 with no particular political commitment to civil rights legislation, the administrations of Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson ushered in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This won John Kennedy and his younger brother,



Paul Schutzer

**Vice President Richard Nixon's car attacked by angry protesters in Venezuela, May 1958.**

Robert, reputations as champions of black rights. In fact, Kennedy's primary concerns were prosecuting the Cold War against the USSR and keeping the Democratic Party coalition of Northern liberals and Southern Dixiecrats together. Just a few years after Robert Kennedy signed wiretap orders on King's phone, Johnson's attorney general Ramsey Clark would escalate the war against the Black Panthers and other "black extremists." In 1992, Clark went on to found the International Action Center, among whose leading spokesmen are members of the Workers World Party (WWP).

In Birmingham in 1963, the world watched police official Bull Connor and his stormtroopers: police dogs were set loose upon black protesters, while firehoses set at pressures sufficient to strip off tree bark hurled children up against walls. In response, the black masses fought back with sticks, rocks, knives and bottles against the racists in the

streets. It was at that moment—and not before—that Kennedy sent troops to bases outside the city and announced he had taken steps to federalize the Alabama National Guard.

In the wake of black self-defense efforts against Klan and cop terror in Birmingham, Kennedy made vague suggestions of civil rights legislation. The 1963 March on Washington was an attempt to channel the mass struggle for black rights into pressure politics for the passing of such a civil rights bill and to cement ties with the Democratic Party. But when Kennedy called the civil rights movements' "representative leaders" into the Oval Office, they quickly changed their minds about seeking to pressure Kennedy, who they saw was dragging his

feet. The destination of the march was changed from the White House to the Lincoln Memorial. The march leaders deleted a "statement to the president" and a call to confront Congress from the march handbook. Participation was denied to "subversive" groups and speeches were censored.

Malcolm X rightly condemned the march as a "farce." Overseas it generated substantial goodwill for the administration. But this didn't last very long. The following month the Klan bombed the 6th Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing four young black girls. When an embassy official invited a Cameroon government representative to a screening of a film on the March on Washington, he was asked, "Don't you have a film of the church dynamiting, too?"

The following year, in 1964, months after Kennedy's assassination, his successor Lyndon Johnson pushed through the Civil Rights Act, formally eliminating

segregation in schools and public accommodations. In early 1965, Johnson ordered the first bombing attacks on Vietnam, sparking the initial antiwar protests and again revealing the brutal face of U.S. imperialism around the world. Days after enactment of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Watts erupted after the arrest of a black motorist, as did ghettos across the country over the next three years, an expression of the frustrated expectations generated by civil rights agitation. These upheavals marked the beginning of the end of the civil rights period.

## The End of the Civil Rights Era

After the ghetto upheavals in Harlem and Watts, when it was clear the explosions were part of a pattern and not isolated events, it also became clear that King's "turn the other cheek" ethos had no relevance to the embittered urban black masses. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael, newly elected as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), raised the demand for "Black Power." This call electrified young radicals from the Jim Crow South to the ghettos of the North. We noted at the time that the Black Power slogan "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" ("Black Power—Class Power," reprinted in *Marxist Bulletin* No. 5 [Revised], "What Strategy for Black Liberation? Trotskyism vs. Black Nationalism" [September 1978]). We also warned that "'Black Power' must be clearly defined in *class*, not racial terms, for otherwise the 'black power' movement may become the black wing of the Democratic Party in the South" ("Black and Red—Class Struggle Road to Negro Freedom," *Spartacist* supplement, May-June 1967).

Unfortunately, this prognosis was proven to be the case. And not simply in the South. Beginning with Carl Stokes in Cleveland in 1967, black mayors came to be installed in Northern cities to contain the seething discontent of the ghetto masses. Over the years, a layer of black elected officials rose to prominence by cynically selling themselves as agents of "change" from within the system. In Chicago, Harold Washington, elected in 1983 as the city's first black mayor, slashed jobs and services and oversaw Chicago's murderous police department. In 1985, Philadelphia mayor Wilson Goode oversaw the FBI/cop bombing of the MOVE commune, killing eleven peo-



New America

**Social-democratic advisers to Martin Luther King. Bayard Rustin (far left) seen here with Max Shachtman. Right: Michael Harrington.**



Workers Vanguard

ple, five of them children. In 1989, David Dinkins, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America led by Michael Harrington, became the first black mayor of New York City. He promised to tame the largely black city workers unions with his pledge to Wall Street: "They'll take it from me."

In the 1960s and '70s, while co-opting a layer of civil rights activists, the capitalist rulers also waged a war of police terror against black radicals, particularly targeting the Black Panther Party. The Panthers originated at just about the same time the SNCC militants were embracing Black Power. In Oakland, California, a group of young black militants led by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale appeared on the scene, dressed in black leather jackets and berets and lawfully carrying rifles. Within the space of one short year, the Panthers would win the allegiance of thousands.

The Panthers represented the best of a generation of young militants who sought a revolutionary solution to the oppression of black people. Despite their militancy and personal courage, the Panthers' program was one of black nationalism—disdainful of the only force for revolutionary change, the multiracial working class. Their isolation left them especially prey for the brutal COINTELPRO vendetta. Within a few short years, the Panthers of Newton and Seale would run for office for the petty-bourgeois Peace and Freedom Party and then the Democratic Party.

### The Myth of MLK's Radicalism

This brings me back to why understanding historical context is so important. The unique circumstances—both domestically and internationally—that set the stage for the civil rights move-

ment's struggle for legal equality have long been removed. The desperate conditions of black people today, in the context of the deteriorating conditions of the entire working class, underline that any serious fight for black rights must take as its starting point the need to uproot the capitalist order. Today, black workers remain a strategic part of the working class.

For a number of years, we have seen groups raising the call for a "new civil rights movement." One that immediately comes to mind is the By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) group initiated by the fake-Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers League in California in 1995. On the one hand, the call is just plain stupid—you cannot suck a movement out of your thumb. Politically, it is an appeal to revive the same type of liberal pressure politics that cut off the revolutionary potential of militant black activists in the 1960s in service of the Democratic Party. But in this, BAMN is not alone.

The same political perspective is seen in the reformist left's adulation of King. About a year ago, while poring through some left-liberal and self-proclaimed socialist papers and Web sites, I was struck (maybe naively) at how often King was cited as the authority for whatever cause the liberals and reformists were promoting. The invocation of King is a naked appeal to the not-so-progressive wing of the bourgeoisie: Dear Congressman, this cause (whatever it is) is so wholesome that even King would support us—you should too.

A United for Peace and Justice "Action Alert" (19 January 2009) on the U.S. Labor Against the War Web site declared: "We honor King's legacy by continuing to work for a new foreign policy which recognizes that there are no military solutions in Gaza or Iraq and

Afghanistan." *Socialist Action* declared, "Dr. King...spoke on behalf of all the exploited and oppressed.... Dr. King's fight is still before us, as is his inspiration" (January 2004).

Nobody has pushed this more tirelessly than the WWP and the ISO. King's picture is plastered all over the WWP Web site and posters for their "Bail Out the People" campaign. *Workers World* cites the "transformative" last year of King's life, during which it claims he "had come around to the understanding that merely altering the appearance of the capitalist system would in a short time amount to little more than a cruel betrayal of the fierce urgency to change the system." They add: "This contradiction pushed King toward...an anti-capitalist struggle" (*Workers World* online, 3 September 2008).

The ISO's Brian Jones chimes in that "in that last year of his life," King "campaigns for radical, social-democratic reforms that are *still* far beyond what the Democratic Party is prepared to accept" (*Socialist Worker* online, 19 January 2009). Normally a little slicker, the centrist Internationalist Group (IG) got on the bandwagon in their *Internationalist* (May 2008) report on the 1 May 2008 ILWU longshore workers' port shutdown against the occupation of Iraq. The IG wrote without any comment, "The crowd was most animated when actor Danny Glover read from Martin Luther King's speech against the Vietnam War calling for a 'radical revolution in values' and restructuring of the U.S. economy."

The May Day action, a powerful demonstration of the kind of working-class action that is needed against the imperialist occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, was politically undermined by the ILWU bureaucracy. The bureaucrats disappeared

the occupation of Afghanistan, widely supported by the Democrats, and channeled the anger of the ranks against the Iraq war and their desire to defend their union into "national unity" patriotism and support for Obama. (See "ILWU Shuts West Coast Ports on May Day," *WV* No. 914, 9 May 2008.) The acclaim given King by Glover and the ILWU tops exemplified the politics of the event.

King was explicitly clear that in the era of Black Power with angry black youths and workers groping for a revolutionary solution to their oppression, he had been compelled to oppose the Vietnam War because of growing criticism of his hypocritical appeals for "non-violence." In response to the fake socialists who concoct an "anti-imperialist" King, I'll let King speak for himself: "I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government." In a speech at Riverside Church, King chastised Johnson for suppressing Vietnam's "only non-communist revolutionary political force, the unified Buddhist Church" ("Beyond Vietnam," 4 April 1967). He issued the timeworn appeal for "reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war," this being "our greatest defense against Communism" (Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* [1967]).

The ISO's Jones lavishes praise on King's 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here?* In that book the "anti-capitalist" King urged America's rulers to "seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity and injustice which are the fertile soil in which the seed of Communism grows and develops." King bemoaned the "sad fact" that "comfort" and "complacency" have "driven many to feel that only Marxism has the revolutionary spirit."

That the ISO & Co. seek to boost King's credentials by portraying him as a "democratic socialist"—which he wasn't—certainly tells a lot about *them*. The whole purpose of social democracy is to tie the working class to its "own" rulers, to inculcate among the workers the inviolability of the capitalist state, to contain radicalization and prevent revolutionary upsurge in times of social crisis. Social democracy is a key prop of capitalist rule—a lesson paid for in the blood of workers and imperialism's colonial slaves around the world.

Today, the Soviet Union no longer exists, and its destruction has been accompanied by a retrogression in consciousness, albeit unevenly, to the point where politically advanced workers no longer identify their struggles with the goals of socialism. King got his wish.

But things change. The American bourgeoisie's class war on the working masses has been so one-sided for years that young militants today tend to see only the painful and pathetic reality of the racist

ideology that pervades all sectors of society in "normal" times. But when powerful social struggles erupt, these attitudes are rapidly swept aside by the developing consciousness of shared class interest. This has been borne out time and time again in U.S. history. Socialist revolution is the only means for delivering the exploited and oppressed from the capitalist bondage that took the place of the chains of slavery. And in that struggle, black workers will play a vanguard role as the section of the proletariat with the least to lose and the most to gain from a fundamental reshaping of the existing social order.

Our study of the civil rights period is critical to exposing those who have stood and continue to stand as props to the capitalist system, obstacles to the development of revolutionary consciousness. So, I will conclude by again citing the programmatic statement of the Spartacist League/U.S.:

"The proletariat is the only revolutionary class in modern society. Only the revolutionary conquest of power by the multiracial working class, emancipating the proletariat from the system of wage slavery, can end imperialist barbarity and achieve the long-betrayed promise of black freedom. We seek to build the Leninist vanguard party which is the necessary instrument for infusing the working class with this understanding, transforming it from a class *in itself*—simply defined by its relationship to the means of production—to a class *for itself*, fully conscious of its historic task to seize state power and reorganize society." ■

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# Mumia Is an Innocent Man! Free Him Now!

For nearly three decades, Mumia Abu-Jamal has been imprisoned on death row. An innocent man, Mumia is a former Black Panther Party spokesman and supporter of the Philadelphia MOVE organization. He was framed up and convicted on charges of killing Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner in December 1981. His conviction was based on lying testimony extorted by the cops, without a shred of physical evidence. His death sentence was secured on the basis of his political convictions and powerful indictments of racist America as a Panther. Since then, court after court has refused to even consider the mountains of evidence proving Mumia's innocence, including the confession of Arnold Beverly that he, not Mumia, shot Faulkner.

On April 6 the U.S. Supreme Court summarily turned down Mumia's petition to overturn the frame-up conviction. *Ominously, it has not ruled on the Philadelphia district attorney's appeal to reinstate the death sentence*, which was overturned by U.S. District Court Judge William Yohn in 2001. Should the Supreme Court rule in favor of the D.A.'s appeal, it would place Mumia a big step closer to the death chamber.

The relentless campaign by the cops, courts, prosecutors and judges to put Mumia to death or entomb him for life epitomizes the apparatus of state repression deployed by the rulers of this country against any perceived opponents. It throws a spotlight on the barbaric, racist death penalty, a form of institutionalized state terror directly descended in the U.S. from black chattel slavery. It goes to the core of the racist subjugation of black people in this country, which is fundamental to the maintenance of American capitalism. It underlines that the fight for Mumia's freedom must be based on a class-struggle opposition to the racist U.S. capitalist system.

It is this understanding that has infused the work of the Partisan Defense Committee—a legal and social class-struggle defense organization whose views are in accordance with the Marxist principles of the Spartacist League—since it took up Mumia's case over 20 years ago. While

## Reformists Crawl to Obama and His Top Cop



Korotzer/Next Left Notes

Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition at NAACP convention in New York City, 2009.

fighting to assist Mumia in pursuing every legal avenue, we had no illusions that this outspoken fighter for the oppressed could or would get any "justice" from the courts or any other agency of the capitalist state. Our fight has been to mobilize the multiracial working class in the U.S. and working people internationally. The proletariat is the one force in this society that has the social power to effectively challenge the capitalist rulers.

Our fight to free Mumia and abolish the racist death penalty is rooted in the revolutionary perspective of winning the working class to the understanding that the bourgeois state is not some "neutral" agency that serves society as a whole but rather exists to defend the class rule and profits of the capitalist class against those they exploit and oppress. To put a final halt to the grisly workings of capitalism's machinery of death—be they guardians of death row or the cops who operate as "judge, jury and executioner" in gunning down minority youth on the streets—requires sweeping away this entire sys-

tem, which is based on exploitation and oppression, through socialist revolution.

In contrast, the reformist left's defense of Mumia is, in the words of Bolshevik revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky, defined by the "framework of bourgeois society and an adaptation to its legality—i.e., the actual training of the masses to become imbued with the inviolability of the bourgeois state" (*Lessons of October*, 1924). For years the reformists have subordinated the fight for Mumia's freedom to peddling the most treacherous illusions in the capitalist courts with their calls for a "new," "fair" trial. Now, with the judicial appeals in which they put their faith all but exhausted, they shamelessly go on bended knee to the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. imperialism Barack Obama and his top cop, Attorney General Eric Holder.

### Reformists Beg Capitalist State for "Justice"

A petition to Holder by the International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia

Abu-Jamal (ICFFMAJ), the International Action Center, initiated by the Workers World Party (WWP), and the Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition (NYC) appeals:

"Inasmuch as there is no other court to which Abu-Jamal can appeal for justice, I turn to you for remedy....

"I call on you and the Justice Department to immediately commence a civil rights investigation to examine the many examples of egregious and racist prosecutorial and judicial misconduct dating back to the original trial in 1982 and continuing through to the current inaction [!] of the U.S. Supreme Court....

"I am aware of the many differences that exist between the case of former Senator Ted Stevens and Mumia Abu-Jamal. Still, I note with great interest the actions you have taken with regard to Senator Stevens' conviction to assure that he not be denied his constitutional rights."

The petition further notes, with grotesque understatement of the obvious, that Mumia, unlike Stevens, is not "a U.S. senator of great wealth and power." No kidding. Does anyone really think that the Justice Department hasn't spotted the difference between a white Senator facing bribery charges and a black radical facing the death penalty on frame-up charges of killing a cop?

This became an all-out lobbying effort at the centennial convention of the NAACP in New York in July, where Obama and Holder were keynote speakers. Standing outside the convention, the Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition (NYC) raised a banner pleading: "Obama & Holder/We Need You Now!/Free Mumia."

Who are they appealing to? Obama is the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. imperialism—the most bloody and rapacious imperialist power on the face of the planet—and the overseer of the slaughter of countless peoples in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. His attorney general is the warden-in-chief of the prison dungeons holding political prisoners such as Mumia and over two million people, disproportionately blacks and Latinos. It would be hard to find a more savage indictment of the reformists' fundamental belief in the "democracy" of capitalist class rule.

The appeal for Obama to "free Mumia" is all the more grotesque considering that he *supports* the death penalty. His credentials in this regard have been promoted by Philadelphia's right-wing radio broadcaster Michael Smerconish. The co-author of the book, *Murdered by Mumia*, which rehashes the lies concocted by the Philly cops and D.A.'s office to falsely convict Mumia, Smerconish sees Obama as an ally in his relentless campaign to put Mumia to death. In a 20 August *Philadelphia Daily News* op-ed article, Smerconish wrote:

"I was also thrilled to have the chance to question him on a subject in which I've

invested almost 20 years of time and energy—Mumia Abu Jamal.

"Had he taken a position on the case, and if not, did he intend to do so? 'I haven't, only because the details of this event I've never studied. I'm vaguely familiar with the fact that there's been a controversy around it. So let me just lay out a very clear principle: In my mind, if somebody killed a police officer, they deserve the death penalty or life in prison,' he told me.

"Amen to that."

Reporting on the lobbying effort at the NAACP convention, an article in the *Amsterdam News* (16-22 July), explained "hope is based on the premise that having a Black attorney general, a Black president...will give Abu-Jamal's plight stronger consideration." The self-proclaimed "communists" of WWP took a second to no one in championing Obama's election as "a triumph for the Black masses and all the oppressed" (*Workers World*, 20 November 2008).

In fact, after eight years of the widely despised Bush regime, Obama's election has provided a much-needed facelift for U.S. imperialism to more effectively lord it over the world's working and oppressed masses. In the U.S., the inauguration of America's first black president is a powerful propaganda weapon for the U.S. rulers. The message to black people and the oppressed is to shut up and eat it because the election of a black man as president proves the "American dream" works! This was exactly Obama's message in his speech to the NAACP convention. "No excuses. No excuses," he intoned, channeling Booker T. Washington, who over a century ago preached accommodation to the racist status quo by telling the impoverished black masses to pull themselves up by their bootstraps (if they owned any).

The reformists and liberals were successful in getting the NAACP to pass a resolution calling on Holder to investigate Mumia's case. It would be more than welcome if the NAACP put its considerable resources in a genuine fight to free Mumia. But this is not the political purpose of the WWP et al.'s petition for a civil rights investigation, which disappears the fact that Mumia is innocent and pushes illusions in the "fairness" of the American "justice" system. This was captured by NAACP chairman Julian Bond in an interview with Amy Goodman that aired on July 20. Bond argued that Mumia has "had trouble" bringing "doubts" about his case "before a tribunal that can say, you know, these things are true or they're not true. And we think he needs that chance. We think he needs that chance before the state of Pennsylvania decides to snuff his life out." I.e., notwith-

standing the NAACP's opposition to the death penalty, the key thing is to let Mumia have another day in court before the rulers "snuff his life out."

## Mumia's Cause and the Fight for Black Freedom

Black oppression is structurally embedded in American capitalism and will not be overcome short of socialist revolution. In our struggle to free Mumia and abolish the racist death penalty, we seek to win the working class to the understanding that the fight for black freedom is central to the fight for the liberation of all of labor and the oppressed from a system based on exploitation and rooted in the segregation of the black masses at the bottom of society.

The fight to mobilize the social power of the working class in struggle for Mumia's freedom faces many obstacles. Integrated unions representing millions of workers have gone on record in support of Mumia. But these millions have not been mobilized *in action* to combat this racist frame-up. The responsibility for that lies with the pro-capitalist trade-union misleaders, who overwhelmingly refuse to call their members into action to defend their economic interests, much less in defense of a black political prisoner. The bureaucracy's class-collaborationist policies, which have tied the working class to its capitalist class enemy, have dissipated the fighting strength of the unions. The pathetic reformist and liberal petitioners of Obama and Holder similarly do their best in reinforcing belief in the inherent benevolence of the capitalist state.

For the Spartacist League and the Partisan Defense Committee, the fight for Mumia's freedom is part of the struggle to do away with a social and economic system based on exploitation, increasingly hideous oppression and state terror. The power to do that lies in the hands of the multiracial working class, with its numbers, organization, discipline and, most importantly, its capacity to bring the wheels of the capitalist profit system to a grinding halt. Mobilizing that power is a question of building a revolutionary workers party, acting as the tribune of the people that can bring to the working class the consciousness of its historic interests to be the instrumentality to shatter the power of the racist capitalist rulers and their state.

The stakes are high and the situation is grim, but any real fight for Mumia's freedom must be based on a class-struggle opposition to the capitalist rulers, who have entombed this innocent black man in prison for more than half his life. ■

reprinted from *Workers Vanguard* No. 958, 7 May 2010

# Full Citizenship Rights for All Immigrants!



## Down With Arizona's Racist Pass Law!

To be brown-skinned in the state of Arizona is to be a suspected criminal under the provisions of the recently enacted "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhood Act." This apartheid-style, anti-immigrant pass law mandates the cops to stop and question anyone they think might be an "illegal" immigrant. Those who fail to immediately produce documentation proving their "right" to be in the United States could be arrested and thrown behind bars. This is the codification in law of the racist



Top: Immigration cops unshackle rounded-up immigrants and expel them across Mexican border, El Paso, Texas, 2009. Above: 25 April 2010 protest in Phoenix against Arizona's racist pass law.

roundups of Latinos that have been carried out for years by notorious Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, whose prisoners are shackled in chain gangs and housed in tent cities in the blazing heat of the desert.

Outrage against the Arizona law brought out tens of thousands in protest in cities across the country on May 1. But as was the case with the massive immigrant rights demonstrations on May Day 2006, the protest leaders are channeling this outrage into the political shell game that is a cen-

tral pillar of capitalist rule in America—the idea that the Democratic Party is the "friend" of immigrants, labor and black people. The 2006 rallying cry of "Today we march, tomorrow we vote" paid off handsomely for the Democrats, who captured the overwhelming majority of the Latino vote in the last presidential elections. This year, chants of "Sí, se puede! Yes, we can!", the election slogan of today's Commander-in-Chief of U.S. imperialism, Barack Obama, were the

chorus orchestrated by the Latino organizations, Democratic Party politicians and trade-union bureaucrats who headed the protests.

In a televised message to hundreds of thousands at a March 21 immigrant rights rally in Washington, D.C., Obama promised to "build a future worthy of our history as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws." The ability to use such honey-coated words to mask a system which is based on the exploitation of the working class and rooted in vicious racial oppression is

precisely what has made the Democratic Party the often-preferred party of the American bourgeoisie in times of war and economic crisis.

Behind the words stands the iron fist of capitalist state repression. This was seen in Arizona only a week before the passage of the new law, in anti-immigrant raids carried out by Obama's Department of Homeland Security (now headed by former Arizona governor Janet Napolitano). With helicopters buzzing overhead,

## Break with the Democrats— For a Revolutionary Workers Party!

up to 800 agents from the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) and other police agencies, some in black hoods, launched a military-style attack on shuttle van businesses that transport immigrant workers in Phoenix, Tucson, Rio Rico and Nogales. Heralded as the biggest smuggling bust in the I.C.E.'s history, these raids provide a chilling snapshot of the Democrats' program for "immigration reform."

As described in a *Washington Post* (1 May) article: "The Democrats' legislative 'framework' includes a slew of new immigration enforcement measures aimed at U.S. borders and workplaces. It would further expand the 20,000-member Border Patrol; triple fines against U.S. employers who hire illegal immigrants; and, most controversially, require all American workers—citizens and noncitizens alike—to get new Social Security cards linked to their fingerprints to ease checks of their work eligibility." Obama promised to "open a pathway to citizenship" for the more than eleven million undocumented immigrants in this country. What this means is seen in the current Democratic proposal that these desperately impoverished workers turn themselves in as "lawbreakers," pay heavy fines and back taxes, pass background checks and be proficient in English. Even then they would be granted only a provisional status for eight years.

This has not shaken the reformists' illusions in Obama as "change" they can "believe in." As usual, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) takes second place to no one on this score. A 30 April article in its press, *Socialist Worker*, opines: "A conversation about really progressive immigration reform needs to start by strategizing about how to stop the Arizona scare, and how to force Obama, who repeatedly has recognized that the system is broken, to stop deportations"! This, they argue, "can buy time for the movement to push for legislation...that puts the interests of the entire working class, immigrant and native-born alike, up front."

The hard truth is that the capitalist system is based on the brutal exploitation of all labor, with the ruling class inflaming racial and ethnic hostilities to keep the working class divided and thus ensure a greater extraction of profit. Just as immigrant workers are brought in during economic boom times to provide a pool of low-wage labor, the current rise in anti-immigrant attacks worldwide is exacerbated by the global economic crisis and its attendant soaring unemployment. As we wrote in the International Communist League's "Declaration of Principles and Some Elements of Program" (*Spartacist* [English-

language edition] No. 54, Spring 1998):

"Modern capitalism, i.e., imperialism, reaching into all areas of the planet, in the course of the class struggle and as economic need demands, brings into the proletariat at its bottom new sources of cheaper labor, principally immigrants from poorer and less-developed regions of the world—workers with few rights who are deemed more disposable in times of economic contraction. Thus capitalism in ongoing fashion creates different strata among the workers, while simultaneously amalgamating the workers of many different lands. Everywhere, the capitalists, abetted by aristocracy-of-labor opportunists, try to poison class consciousness and solidarity among the workers by fomenting religious, national and ethnic divisions. The struggle for the unity and integrity of the working class against chauvinism and racism is thus a vital task for the proletarian vanguard."

We do not seek to tinker with the capitalist system by advising the bourgeoisie to take up an alternative immigration policy. We call for *full citizenship rights for all immigrants* as part of our struggle to advance the class consciousness and solidarity of the multiracial working class, preparing it for the necessary revolutionary battle to end capitalist class rule. A real fight for immigrant rights in this country will only begin when the workers—white, black, Latino and others—struggle based on their common interests as a class. This means opposition to all the political parties and state agencies of the capitalist class. Unlocking the social power of the multiracial working class will take a political fight against the current pro-capitalist misleaders of labor who have shackled the working class to their exploiters, particularly through support for the Democratic Party.

### Labor Lieutenants of the Capitalist Class

Many of the 1.8 million members of the Service Employees International Union

(SEIU) are immigrants, and many of these have waged militant struggles to organize unions. But their interests are betrayed by the union leaders. A statement on Arizona's anti-immigrant law by Eliseo Medina, executive vice president of the SEIU, declared:

"This radical anti-immigration law should be a wake-up call to Congress and the White House. Immigration is a national problem that needs a national solution.... We need immigration policies that will eliminate the underground economy by getting undocumented immigrants into the system, paying fines, back taxes, learning English and getting on local, state and federal tax rolls. We need reform that will truly end illegal immigration and hold bad-actor employers responsible for depressing wages and violating the right to a safe worksite for all workers."

Likewise, AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka's statement in opposition to the Arizona law demanded that "our focus should instead be on a comprehensive solution to the broken immigration system."

Last year, the SEIU's "Change to Win" union federation and the AFL-CIO issued a joint statement for "comprehensive immigration reform." Embracing the government's campaign against undocumented workers, these labor traitors seek only to tinker with its methods of repression. To regulate immigration, their "unified framework" called for "an independent commission to assess and manage future flows" of immigrant workers, leaving open the possibility of their own participation on such a commission as the labor police for the capitalist state. It also demanded more "rational operational control of the border" and a "secure and effective worker authorization mechanism."

Since coming to power, bankrolled by millions in contributions from the labor tops, the Obama administration has expanded such "worker authorization mechanisms" as the E-Verify program,



Workers Vanguard  
Spartacist banner at Los Angeles demonstration for immigrant rights, March 2006.

which is aimed at confirming the legal status of workers through checking their Social Security numbers against government databases. At one workplace after another, mass firings of immigrant workers have followed such audits. Last year, 254 workers, mostly women, at the food processing plant Overhill Farms and another 1,500 at clothing maker American Apparel, both in the Los Angeles area, were driven out of their jobs after these so-called “desktop raids.” The Obama administration boasts that in its first year it deported a record number of “illegals.”

Such raids are an open invitation to get rid of union activists and other “troublemakers.” In 2006, the bosses at Smithfield’s pork processing plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina, tried to stop a fight for union recognition by firing 75 “no match” workers. A two-day walkout that included black and white workers as well as Latinos forced the company to rehire everyone. The workers won their union in late 2008, but by that time I.C.E. workplace raids had driven out a significant number of the immigrant workers.

The battle at Smithfield underlines the need for a mass, militant union organizing drive throughout the country and particularly in the open shop South. Only 6.5 percent of workers in Arizona, a notorious “right-to-work” state, are organized. Now, in response to the new anti-immigrant law, an article in the *Phoenix Business Journal* (30 April) reports that SEIU union representatives “say they are seeing a surge in inquiries from Hispanic workers in Arizona worried about the new law and the potential for more police raids and inquiries into their workplaces.” Enlisting immigrant workers—many of whom have a history of militant struggle in their own countries—in the front ranks of the labor movement is an urgent task both to fight the exploitation of the most vulnerable layers of the population and to bust the government’s anti-union laws. This in turn could reverse the decades-long decline of the trade unions in this country. Rather than defending the working class as a whole or even members of their own unions, the union bureaucracy embraces the “national” interests of the U.S. capitalist rulers as its own.

The Democrats’ “immigration reform” plans include the institution of a national biometric identity card for everyone in the United States. This will increase the police-state powers and repressive apparatus of the capitalist state, which have already been vastly augmented under the so-called “war on terror.” Under the Transportation Workers Identity Creden-



Lenny Ignelzi

**Obama’s Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano at Southern California’s Otay Mesa port of entry, April 2009.**

tial (TWIC) program, such biometric ID cards have already been mandated for hundreds of thousands of workers at the ports. To qualify for a TWIC card, all port workers had to submit to extensive criminal background and immigration checks. For black and Latino port workers, who have been particularly targeted under the racist “war on drugs,” even applying for the card meant running the risk of possible deportation or being pursued as some kind of “fugitive from justice.” The applications of tens of thousands of port workers were rejected, although some eventually won their cases on appeal. An unknown number of longshore and other port workers are permanently gone, branded as a threat to “national security” for trivial offenses like drug possession with “intent” to distribute, or just being an “illegal” immigrant.

Rather than fighting this “anti-terror” law, the response of the leaders of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union—which is still widely seen as a bastion of labor power and militancy—was to call for a more expedient and “fair” implementation of the TWIC program! As we wrote in “War on Terror’ Crackdown on the Docks” (WV No. 936, 8 May 2009):

“For the ILWU and other longshore unions to wage a real fight against TWIC and the racist, union-busting ‘war on terror’ laws, the obvious starting point must be *opposition* to the very state that is enforcing these laws. It means championing full citizenship rights for all immigrants and fighting to organize foreign-born workers.... In a country built on the subjugation of black people, where racist reaction has long served to ratchet up the exploitation of the working class as a whole, the fight for black freedom is directly linked to the fight to break the chains of capitalist wage slavery and the state forces and laws that maintain it. But to wage that kind of struggle, the unions

must be led by a different kind of leadership, one rooted in a program of class struggle, as opposed to the present misleaders whose policies of class collaboration increasingly subordinate the unions to the capitalist state.”

When the ILWU embraces TWIC, making itself an auxiliary to the racist crackdown on the port truckers; when the auto unions lobby for the bosses’ bailout schemes, pledging to lower the cost of union labor to rival the depressed wages and rotten conditions in non-union plants; when the powerful Teamsters union pleads that “unsafe” Mexican truckers should be barred from America’s highways: the conservative bureaucrats are lining up against the basic class interests of the international proletariat. Their highest loyalty is to capitalist profitability on behalf of their own racist ruling class, whose benefits are supposed to “trickle down.” This means pitting workers against one another in competition for crumbs and increasing poverty and unemployment, especially for the most vulnerable social layers.

## **Black Rights and Immigrant Rights**

Calls for an economic boycott of Arizona have come from a variety of Democratic Party politicians, ranging from the San Francisco city government to New York’s Al Sharpton, with the reformist left, such as Workers World Party, bringing up the rear with the demand that capitalist investors and businesses “divest from the apartheid-like police state!” The last time there were appeals for such a boycott was in response to the refusal of the Arizona state administration to recognize Martin Luther King’s birthday as an official holiday. That refusal, together with the state’s apartheid-style, anti-immigration law, captures something of

the history of Arizona. This history is in turn emblematic of the racial oppression of blacks and anti-immigrant reaction that are central to the maintenance of American capitalism.

Until the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, Arizona like most of the Southwest was part of Mexico. It was in large measure the Southern slavocracy's drive to extend slavery that motivated the invasion of Mexico, which resulted in the U.S. stealing half of Mexico's territory. Today, Latinos—largely Mexicans and Mexican Americans—make up more than 30 percent of the state's population. Although black people are a mere 4.2 percent of Arizona's population, the state has long been a bastion of anti-black racism. Barry Goldwater, five-term Arizona Senator and Republican candidate for president in 1964, voted against the 1964 Civil Rights Act. For decades Goldwater was an icon of a right-wing backlash against black rights, unions and any and all social welfare programs. In the past decade, Arizona has been on the cutting edge of anti-immigrant reaction, spawning vigilante

Minuteman militias to patrol the borders against "illegals."

Now, Sharpton—a political hustler who mobilized against Korean-owned grocery stores in Brooklyn before he became a more "respectable" Democratic Party politician—bombastically declares "we will bring Freedom Walkers to Arizona just like Freedom Riders went to the deep south 50 years ago" (*New York Daily News*, 26 April). The courageous civil rights struggles of the 1960s led to the elimination of formal Jim Crow segregation in the South. But the promise of black freedom was betrayed by the leaders of the civil rights movement, who tied their fortunes to the Democratic Party and were bought off for token concessions and a few "black faces in high places." Today, Sharpton's invocation of these heroic freedom riders is aimed at enforcing the rule of racist American capitalism in its Democratic Party face.

A keynote speaker at the 50,000-strong immigrant rights protest in Los Angeles on May Day was the city's Latino Democratic Party mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

A sign read "We Latinos Are the Jews of the 21st Century." Only two weeks earlier, a gang of Hitler-loving Nazis staged an anti-immigrant, race-hate rally in Los Angeles to "Reclaim the Southwest." They were protected by hundreds of L.A. cops, mobilized by the mayor's office, against a protest by about a thousand anti-fascists. The trade-union misleaders, in a city where immigrant workers have been in the forefront of union organizing over the past two decades, turned a blind eye to this deadly fascist provocation. The fascists should have been stopped by a militant mass mobilization of working people and oppressed led by the labor movement. Labor's inaction spelled an unqualified defeat for the working class, the bitter fruit of the labor bureaucracy's allegiance to the Democratic Party.

The working class needs its own party, a multiracial revolutionary workers party. It is the purpose of the Spartacist League/U.S. to forge such a party, which, through education and in the course of sharp class struggle, can make the working class conscious not only of its social power but also of its historic interest as the gravedigger of the vicious and depraved rule of capitalist imperialism. Crucial to building such a party in the U.S. is the understanding of the inextricable link between the fight for labor's emancipation, the defense of immigrant rights and the cause of black freedom. When the wealth of this country is in the hands of the working class that produced it, we will begin the construction of a socialist planned economy which will provide the material basis for the eradication of black oppression. Grounded in a program of revolutionary internationalism, a workers government will begin to right the historical crimes of U.S. imperialism, for example by returning to Mexico the predominantly Spanish-speaking areas along the border. Such a gesture would be the sharpest possible repudiation of the social-patriotic politics of the present American labor movement and a concrete demonstration of the internationalist program to smash the imperialist world order.

As we wrote in a 2006 joint declaration of the SL/U.S. and our comrades of the Grupo Espartaquista de México (GEM), written to intervene into the mass immigrant rights demonstrations held that year: "The multiracial U.S. working class is potentially the most powerful ally of Mexican workers. The SL/U.S. and the GEM are dedicated to forging revolutionary workers parties on both sides of the border as part of the fight to reforge Trotsky's Fourth International, world party of socialist revolution." ■

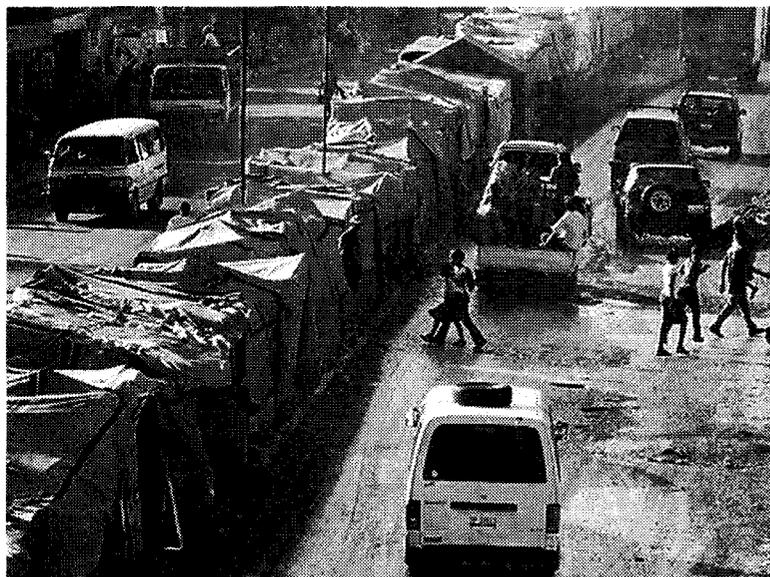
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# Haiti: Mass Misery Under Imperialist Occupation



Fremson/NY Times



AP

**Left: Hundreds of families live in shanties on median strip in Port-au-Prince six months after earthquake. Right: Protesters in front of National Palace demand that UN forces leave and President René Préval resign, 25 May 2010.**

In the six months since the devastating earthquake struck the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, killing some 250,000 people and destroying 100,000 homes, the suffering of the Haitian masses has only deepened. A week after the quake, imperialist occupiers led by the U.S. signaled what they had in store for the Haitian masses when police in a joint UN-Haitian operation fired into crowded prison cells in the southern city of Les Cayes, killing at least 12.

While the last of the 20,000 U.S. troops that were dispatched to Haiti in the guise of a “relief effort” have been withdrawn, 500 American National Guardsmen are stationed there. The country remains under military occupation by the UN force known as MINUSTAH, which has run Haiti since 2004. Headed by the Brazilian military, more than 10,000 UN troops and police are imposing “order” on a starving, homeless population, brutally repressing social protest and rebuilding the machinery of repression on behalf of Haiti’s imperialist masters.

The earthquake’s death toll was itself a product of over a century of imperialist

## All U.S./UN Troops Out!

depredation that left the country totally exposed to the quake’s impact, as shoddily built buildings in the teeming city collapsed. Today, some 1.5 million people are still living in makeshift tents—often no more than four sticks and bedsheets—in camps in and around the capital. With virtually no means of transport, many of these people are hours from the city center. In this utterly impoverished country, where the unemployment rate reached as high as 80 percent before the quake, this means that few have even the hope of being able to find any work.

People who had sought refuge on golf courses, parks or other facilities were forcibly relocated to barren land where there are no basic services like water and sanitation, where the dust and heat are unbearable and where a strong wind could easily destroy their shelters. More than 1,200 families camped in the Sylvio Cator soccer stadium had their tents destroyed without warning by the Haitian

National Police and were moved out at gunpoint. People are in deadly fear of the hurricane season, with

many living precariously on eroded hill-sides that could easily be wiped out by a mudslide. Only a few of the promised hurricane-resistant shelters have been built. Other people have fled to the abject poverty of the countryside.

Some elements associated with the occupation have swooped down like vultures to reap the spoils of “reconstruction.” In the town of Ganthier, 18 miles east of the capital, private developers have laid claim to state land that has been used to grow food for 80 years, driving peasants off with bulldozers. Those who resisted were beaten and arrested, along with the mayor.

The Haitian Parliament has officially ceded power over aid money and reconstruction to the Interim Commission for the Reconstruction of Haiti, headed by Bill Clinton, placing control of what exists of an economy in this shattered country in the hands of the IMF, World Bank and other imperialist agencies. These are the same forces that have repeatedly

imposed drastic austerity measures on the Haitian population while enforcing privatization and other "free trade" policies that have ruined local agriculture and most of what little industrial production had existed. The "development" that Clinton & Co. talk about centers on expanding garment and other sweatshop production. Workers in those shops are paid starvation wages, often less than the official minimum salary of roughly \$3 a day.

Half a year after the quake, only some 2 percent of pledged reconstruction aid has been delivered and less than 5 percent of the rubble has been removed. Aid was never the point of the U.S. intervention into Haiti. The International Executive Committee of the International Communist League issued an April 27 statement repudiating our initial position justifying the U.S. imperialist troop presence as essential to aid, a social-patriotic betrayal of Marxist principle. We wrote: "The U.S. military invasion was designed to provide a 'humanitarian' face-lift to bloody U.S. imperialism and was aimed at securing U.S. military control in Haiti and reasserting American imperialist domination over the Caribbean" (WV No. 958, 7 May).

U.S. military authorities who took command of the Port-au-Prince airport prevented the World Food Program from landing cargos of food, medicine and water for two days, diverting their flights "so that the United States could land troops and equipment, and lift Americans



Reuters

**1 February 2010: U.S. troops push through crowds of desperate people waiting for food coupons in downtown Port-au-Prince.**

and other foreigners to safety" (*New York Times*, 17 January). At the same time, the Obama administration ordered a naval blockade to prevent Haitians from fleeing to the U.S., with Air Force flights broadcasting a Creole-language warning from Haiti's ambassador to the U.S. that American forces would "intercept" anyone fleeing by boat and "send you back home."

We demand an end to the UN occupation of Haiti and call for all imperialist troops and police forces out now! We call for full citizenship rights for all Haitians and other refugees and immigrants who have made it to the U.S. No deportations!

### **Neocolonial Haiti: Subjugation and Devastation**

For 200 years, the Haitian masses have been paying in blood for the revolution carried out under Toussaint L'Ouverture against the French colonial slavocracy. Culminating in the creation of the first independent black state in the modern era, the Haitian Revolution inspired slave revolts across the Americas and met with a frenzy of racist hostility from both France and the then-slaveowning U.S. In return for recognition by France, Haiti was compelled to compensate the former slaveowners in an amount measuring \$20 billion at today's prices. The country remains hideously impoverished to this day.

The occupation this January was the fourth carried out by the U.S. in the past century. U.S. troops occupied Haiti from 1915-1934, drowning an anti-imperialist revolt in blood. The U.S. installed and then propped up a series of brutal, corrupt dictatorships, most infamously that of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier beginning

in 1957. Duvalier organized the Tonton Macoutes paramilitary thugs and oversaw the killing of 50,000 of his opponents. The bloodletting continued under his son "Baby Doc," who went on to face a popular revolt that caused him to flee the country in 1986, when others in his cabal took over.

The massive social discontent eventually led to the election of radical populist priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide, champion of the Lavalas movement, by a two-thirds majority in 1990. Virtually the entire left internationally gave this bourgeois politician political support. In contrast, we warned: "Aristide will either play the role of groveling instrument of the Haitian bourgeoisie and the U.S. imperialist overlords or he will be swept away in a reactionary crackdown aimed at decisively disciplining the pitilessly oppressed population" (WV No. 517, 4 January 1991). In fact, both things happened.

While the Aristide government tried to carry out such reforms as raising the miserable minimum wage, as a bourgeois regime it served the class interests of the ruling elite of sweatshop owners and landowners and their imperialist patrons. Before his election Aristide often denounced U.S. imperialism's role in Haiti. But once in office he welcomed USAID and IMF assistance, boasting that he would "restore the World Bank's confidence in Haiti."

Seven months after taking office, Aristide was overthrown by the man he appointed as military chief, Raoul Cedras, who established a regime of military terror and forced Aristide into exile. Some 2,000 people were killed in the immediate aftermath. Thousands fled to the U.S. in rickety boats only to be imprisoned in

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Guantánamo. In 1994, following a starvation embargo imposed by the U.S. under Clinton, American Marines invaded the country and reinstalled Aristide at bayonet point.

The condition for Aristide's return was that he agree to a drastic austerity program, privatization of state-owned industry, massive layoffs in the public sector and the virtual abolition of import tariffs. All this he did, inducing the collapse of Haiti's economy while setting the police, supplemented by gangs, against strikers and others. Nonetheless, his Washington overlords were not satisfied. After an interim regime under René Préval—the current nominal president—Aristide was re-elected in 2000 only to face a U.S.-led destabilization campaign. To Washington's chagrin, Aristide developed ties with the Cuban deformed workers state, which has provided crucial medical personnel for Haiti, and with Venezuela under bourgeois populist Hugo Chávez. In 2004, "peacekeeping" troops led mainly by the U.S., Canada and France landed in Haiti and Aristide was whisked out on a U.S.-chartered jet to the Central African Republic. (He later moved to South Africa.)

Ever since the 2004 coup, the UN's MINUSTAH troops have backed violent assaults by the Haitian police on poor communities and on demonstrations demanding Aristide's return. UN forces have participated in a number of "anti-gang" raids on Cité Soleil, an Aristide bastion, and other slum neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince. Attacks in December 2004 and December 2006, with hundreds of troops moving into Cité Soleil by land, sea and air, left scores of residents dead. During hunger riots in 2008, UN troops fired on crowds, killing several demonstrators.

The imperialist intervention undertaken by the Obama White House shored up this bloody occupation force while also demonstrating to the world that the U.S. continues to regard the Caribbean basin as an "American lake." Under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the U.S. has expanded its military presence in Colombia, where there are now seven U.S. bases. The government of Costa Rica this month authorized the entry of 46 U.S. warships and 7,000 Marines, while the U.S.-backed government in Honduras opened a new base for American use in April. The U.S. military buildup in the region is a particular threat to the Cuban bureaucratically deformed workers state. We defend Cuba unconditionally against U.S. imperialism while fighting for a proletarian political revolution against the nationalist Stalinist bureaucracy. We demand: All U.S. mili-

tary forces and bases out of the Caribbean! U.S. out of Guantánamo! U.S. imperialists: Hands off the world!

### Anger at Occupation Grows

Thousands of Haitians fed up by foreign occupation and Préval's puppet government have staged protests recently in the face of brutal repression. Demonstrations in May in Port-au-Prince brought out an estimated 30,000 people demanding free elections, a role in reconstruction efforts and the return of Aristide. Demonstrators have also called for ending the ban of his Fanmi Lavalas party, which is barred from running in the national elections scheduled for November. We defend the right of people to vote for whomever they want. We demand the right of Aristide to return to Haiti and oppose the ban on Fanmi Lavalas, despite our political opposition as Marxists to this populist party.

On May 4, after students at the State University Ethnology College in the capital held a series of protests against the occupation, MINUSTAH troops stormed the campus, firing tear gas and rubber bullets and arresting militant student leader Frantz Mathieu Junior. Faced with the growing unrest, the UN is sending 680 additional foreign policemen to augment the MINUSTAH force. The international workers movement must demand: Free all victims of military/police repression!

Unrest has spread to the countryside. On June 4, 10,000 peasants protested against the American agribusiness giant Monsanto, which had donated 475 tons of maize. They fear having to buy new seeds from Monsanto every year at prices they cannot afford. Haitian peasants have bitter memories of previous

instances when the U.S. forced policies down their throats that ruined their livelihoods. After the Clinton White House compelled Haiti to drop tariffs on imports, subsidized U.S. rice flooded the Haitian market, bankrupting many peasants. Earlier, the U.S. had pressured the Haitian government to wipe out the Creole pigs indigenous to the country on the pretext that they might be infected with swine flu. The U.S. substituted its own pigs, which could not survive the Haitian climate.

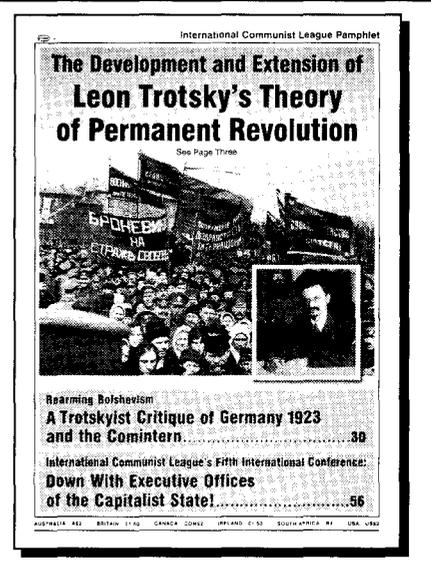
The only way out of the misery imposed on neocolonial Haiti lies through proletarian socialist revolution throughout the Caribbean and, crucially, in the North American imperialist heartland. But the social base for workers revolution is exceedingly narrow in a country as destitute and ground down as Haiti. Struggles by the Haitian masses against imperialist depredation must be linked to class and social struggle in the neighboring Dominican Republic, where Haitians are a sizable component of the proletariat, and elsewhere in the Caribbean. It is especially crucial that workers in the belly of the U.S. imperialist beast—and in Canada as well—wage class struggle against their "own" capitalist rulers.

Our perspective—for a workers and peasants government in Haiti as part of a socialist federation of the Caribbean—is inextricably linked to the fight for the revolutionary overthrow of U.S. imperialism. In diaspora, Haitians, Jamaicans and others can play a crucial role as a bridge to the rest of the American proletariat, particularly to other black workers. The key is to build revolutionary workers parties—sections of a reformed Fourth International—to lead the workers in this struggle. ■

International Communist League pamphlet comprising three articles from ICL press: "The Development and Extension of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution," "A Trotskyist Critique of Germany 1923 and the Comintern" and "Down With Executive Offices of the Capitalist State!" These articles together constitute an introduction to the historically founded principles and program of Trotskyism (i.e., genuine Marxism).

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# Shirley Sherrod Thrown Under the Bus

## Obama: CEO of Racist American Capitalism

Shirley Sherrod's forced resignation from her USDA (Department of Agriculture) post on July 19 was but the latest slap in the face to America's black population by the Obama administration. Sherrod's departure also caused no small amount of distress for Democratic Party liberals, black spokesmen and the reformist left, all of whom had sold the lie that Obama's ascension to office marked a historic turning point in the struggle of the black masses against their oppression. Based on a phony report of

supposedly racist remarks made by Sherrod at an NAACP event in March concerning a 24-year-old incident—a report issued by the notorious con man and Tea Party demagogue Andrew Breitbart—Obama's administration instantly swung into action, browbeating Sherrod by phone, while she was driving her car, into immediately submitting her resignation with her BlackBerry.

The NAACP under its president Ben Jealous promptly endorsed this action. Having been chastised about its complaints of overt Tea Party racism, the NAACP took pains to remove any taint of supposed "reverse racism," intoning: "Racism is about the abuse of power. Sherrod had it in her position at USDA. According to her remarks, she mistreated a white farmer in need of assistance because of his race. We are appalled by her actions, just as we are with abuses of power against farmers of color and female farmers." A couple of days later, when the report was revealed to be a Tea Party fraud and the white farmer spoke out in Sherrod's defense, the administration and the NAACP raced to apologize to the onetime civil rights activist. Sherrod has since accepted their apologies while refusing the administration's



Ryan/NY Times

Evicted tenant with belongings on Milwaukee street last winter.

offer of another government job.

The Tea Party is simply the most recent manifestation of good old American racist, nativist reaction. The Tea Party's roots go back to the racist backlash against the limited gains for blacks and women that resulted from the civil rights movement and other social upheavals of the 1960s. As we wrote in Part One of "Economic Crisis and the Capitalist State" (*WV* No. 961, 2 July):

"That backlash eventually took the form of opposition to 'big government'—identified with court-ordered racial integration in the public schools, giving jobs to blacks and women under affirmative action programs and handing out welfare money to poor black women and their children (a demagogic lie since relatively few government funds went to the poor, black or white). This boiled over into the 'tax revolt' of the late 1970s...which propelled Ronald Reagan into the White House and began the ascendancy of the Republican right in national politics."

For some time it has been the norm in bourgeois politics to portray programs offering even the tiniest amelioration of the black masses' wretched conditions as "reverse discrimination," with the corollary that blacks are painted as "racist" for protesting discrimination and deprivation.

Now, with a black man as president and in the context of the economic woes that are ravaging most Americans (and especially black people), and with no appreciable social struggle to try to offset those woes, racist reactionaries feel less and less constrained to hide behind the fiction of "reverse discrimination."

Shortly before the March 20 Congressional vote on Obama's health care bill, Tea Party protesters yelled the "N" word at civil rights veteran John Lewis and other black Congressmen and spat on

another while confronting openly gay Congressman Barney Frank with homophobic slurs. Laura Schlessinger's recent efforts to capture the Guinness record for use of the "N" word on the radio; South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham's proposal to modify the 14th Amendment, which gave citizenship to black freedmen following the Civil War, so that U.S.-born children of immigrants are excluded from citizenship; the recent Tea Party anti-immigrant mobilization on the Arizona-Mexico border: all are testimony to the exacerbation of open racist/white chauvinism fueled by these types. To take as good coin reports of black "racism" from such sources is not that far from accepting a fascist exposé of bloodless Christian babies found in the basements of synagogues.

It is no less guileless to accept Obama's pretense that he was unaware of the actions taken to dump Sherrod. He has bent over backward to address each and every complaint from these quarters, ditching the Rev. Jeremiah Wright for excoriating American racism at the beginning of his campaign and firing Van Jones, a black administration official who dared to proclaim the innocence of death row politi-

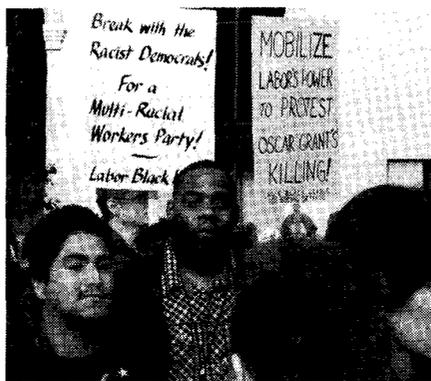
## Tea Party: Spearhead of Racist Reaction

cal prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, last year. Nor should one forget Obama's attempt, over a cold one, to educate Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the cop who rousted him for attempting to enter his own home, in the Miss Manners approach to black-police community relations. That was an attempt to placate the nationwide outrage from law enforcement officials over the president's initial statement that the cop had acted stupidly. At least the relatives of Oscar Grant—a young black worker killed in cold blood by a white transit cop in Oakland in 2009—were spared Obama's revolting pieties.

There were outcries of protest over Sherrod's firing from those who have promoted Obama. Perhaps none of those were more apologetic for Obama's rush to judgment than that of black author and political commentator Earl Ofari Hutchinson. "If Obama talked candidly about race and tried to spark a dialogue on race as some clamor for him to do," Hutchinson wrote in a 22 July Internet posting, "it would turn his administration into a referendum on race. This would turn the GOP and tea party counterinsurgency into a red hot fire. Obama's rush to judgment on Sherrod had nothing to do with fear and only tangentially with a terrible misread of the information about her purported racial statement. It had everything to do with the price of White House governance. The price is a politically constricted, race neutral presidency." Thus black people are told that the price they must pay for Obama's ascendancy to the White House is, simply, to shut up and take it.

Few commentaries were more poignant than that of black *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, who wrote in a 23 July op-ed piece titled "Thrown to the Wolves": "Black people are in a terrible condition right now—economically, socially, educationally and otherwise—and there is no effective champion fighting for their interests. Mr. Jealous and the new edition of the N.A.A.C.P. have shown in this episode that they are not ready for prime time, and President Obama seems reluctant to even utter the word black. Or poor, for that matter." The answer posed by Herbert was considerably less than inspiring: "There is no way we'll overcome those divisions if people who should know better keep bowing before and kowtowing to the toxic agenda of those on the right whose overriding goal is to foment hostility and hate."

The liberals who promoted Obama for the presidency wish he would pay them more attention and hang with them, perhaps while shooting some hoops. The fake socialists, who touted him as an agent of positive change, want to force him to do the right thing. The International Social-



Workers Vanguard

### Oakland, 8 July 2010: Protest against verdict in racist cop killing of Oscar Grant.

ist Organization (ISO) and other reformists are publicizing the "One Nation" march on Washington on October 2, a mobilization being heavily built by the pro-capitalist AFL-CIO union bureaucracy. The call for that action pompously proclaims that the march will "charge up an army of tens of thousands of activists who will return to their neighborhoods, churches, schools and, especially, voting booths, with new energy to enact our common agenda. And on the same day, the labor movement will walk door-to-door in targeted states around the country, bringing the same message to union members exactly one month before the fall elections."

The ISO, in an article by Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor in *Socialist Worker* (28 July), intones: "Without a politically independent, activist challenge to the right-wing lies and distortions about racism—and the liberal acquiescence to them—the right will continue to shape and dominate the debates and discussions about racism. And that will make it impossible to have 'civil and human rights in this country.'" These fight-the-right sentiments were expressed in the same fashion by the same liberals and leftist groups two years ago during Obama's campaign. This political stutter is no accident. The bourgeois liberals and their left hangers-on are the apostles of reforming the racist, blood-soaked American imperialist order, and they display the persistence of Pepe Le Pew in their pursuit of this fantasy.

To be sure, there seems to be no compromise or concession this president will not consider. But it is not his lack of spine that renders him bankrupt in dealing with the agonies faced by working and black people. Obama, America's first black president, was elected after decades during which social struggle withered and militant strike activity all but disappeared. According to him, the racial oppression of black people has been all but completely put to rest by the changes con-

ceded to the civil rights movement during the Lyndon Johnson presidency. The only change Obama has offered in U.S. imperialism's wars of conquest has been to select a different one to focus on. Meanwhile those facing the vicissitudes of the grinding depression are offered nothing, while the bankers are assured of salvation.

Obama may compare poorly to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, although in reality the immediate impact of their respective anti-depression measures is comparable. Neither significantly addressed the plight of America's toiling and poor people, although Roosevelt's occasional demagogic critiques of the fat cats gave some solace to capitalism's unfortunate victims. Obama simply is what he is, his skin color notwithstanding: the overseer of the most deadly and exploitative imperialist order on the planet.

Following his election, we wrote in "Obama: CEO of Bankrupt American Capitalism" (*WV* No. 930, 13 February 2009): "The bourgeoisie will hardly spend money on improving the condition of the masses unless it is forced to do so. Especially since the counterrevolution in the former Soviet Union in 1991-92, capitalists internationally have sought to increase their competitiveness against their rivals by taking an ax to whatever gains workers have been able to achieve." Shortly before, Obama had given an interview to the *Washington Post* (16 January 2009), which reported his intention "to rein in health-care costs, stabilize Social Security and prevent the Medicare program from bankrupting the government."

It is Obama's job as chief executive of the U.S. capitalist state to administer the race/caste oppression of black people that is built into this country's economy and is invaluable to the rulers as an obstacle to unified struggle against the predatory capitalist order. That order must be combated by working-class and social struggle. It must be overthrown through proletarian socialist revolution. But it must be remembered that during the massive strikes of the 1930s and the social struggles of the 1950s and '60s, the predecessors of today's liberals and reformists no less than now plied their trade: the binding of the outraged masses to the reform pretenses and candidates of the Democratic Party, then and now the other main party of the bosses' rule.

It requires the forging of an internationalist, revolutionary Trotskyist working-class party to relentlessly expose the treachery of the would-be reformers of capitalist anarchy and to lead the working class and dispossessed to consign imperialism to the graveyard of history. And in this country, the main banner of such a party must be: Finish the Civil War! For black freedom through socialist revolution! ■

# No Deportations! For Full Citizenship Rights!

# France: Down With Racist Anti-Roma Campaign!

Since July, the French government has been carrying out a witchhunt against the *gens du voyage* (literally “traveling people,” the common French name for all Gypsies) and massively deporting Roma. As citizens of the European Union (EU), these Gypsies from Central Europe (coming in particular from Romania and Bulgaria) are supposed to have a legal right to travel and work in any EU country. According to the French minister of the interior, the government has already destroyed 441 Gypsy encampments and expelled at least 1,000 Roma since the end of July. On September 4, at least 100,000 demonstrators rallied throughout France and some other European cities in liberal protests against this racist campaign.

These deportations are an aspect of multi-sided and brutal attacks on the working class and all the oppressed. In the framework of the worldwide economic crisis, capitalist governments throughout Europe are going after the living standards of their own working people in order to improve their competitive position against rival imperialists (see “Economic Crisis and the Capitalist State,” *WV* Nos. 961 and 963, 2 July and 27 August 2010). At the same time, in every country the rulers offer up immigrants and minorities as scapegoats for rising unemployment, playing the old game of “divide and rule.”

On September 7, three million workers all over France participated in a day of strikes and demonstrations called by trade unions against the dismantling of retirement pensions. This massive turnout showed the proletariat’s will to fight to defend its gains. But the workers are saddled with a treacherous reformist leadership that accepts the reactionary notion of a supposed “common interest” that the working class and the bosses have in safeguarding the profits of French capitalism. Such a leadership is incapable of leading a fight to defend the most oppressed sections of the population against the bourgeoisie and its government.



**14 August 2010: Roma in Montreuil, east of Paris, face riot police following expulsion from building.**

On September 14, the French parliament passed a law forbidding women to wear the face-covering Muslim *niqab* or *burqa* in public, and the next day it passed a law canceling subsidies to immigrant families if their children miss school. Earlier this year, a government official, lashing out at North African and African Muslims, even threatened to strip away the citizenship of any person of “foreign origin” accused of polygamy.

The singling out of the Roma as a specific ethnic group has been met with cynical protests by the United Nations and the EU. In August, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urged France to “avoid” collective deportations. Meanwhile, the EU’s justice and citizenship commission called the expulsions a “disgrace” and threatened legal action against the French government. But the current deportations of Roma from France are only the most recent, and visible, manifestations of per-

secution of this minority by capitalist governments throughout Europe.

As recently as April, the German government initiated a plan to deport 10,000 Roma who had been living in the country for the past ten years to Kosovo, where unemployment is currently 45 percent. In July, Denmark summarily expelled a group of persons identified by Copenhagen’s lord mayor as “criminal Roma.” In 2008 in Italy, a wave of roundups and deportations of Roma was launched by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who claimed the country was endangered by “irregular third-country citizens and nomads” (see “Italian Trotskyists Say: Mobilize Labor Power in Defense of Roma, Immigrants!” *WV* No. 922, 10 October 2008).

What triggered the European commission’s expression of wrath was the recent disclosure that, contrary to government assurances that specific ethnic groups had not been targeted in France, a French

Interior Ministry circular had in fact ordered evacuation of camps of Roma "as a priority." This led EU justice commissioner Viviane Reding to liken the focus on Roma communities to ethnic cleansing and to declare that it was "a situation that I had thought that Europe would not have to witness again after the Second World War."

Comparison of President Nicolas Sarkozy's deportations of Roma with deportations of Jews and Gypsies from France during World War II raises a touchy subject for the French bourgeoisie, which actively collaborated with the Nazis in the persecution of Jews and Gypsies. In fact, in the "free zone" of France not occupied by German forces, the quisling regime of Marshal Pétain in Vichy organized deportations to the concentration camps with as much zeal as the Nazis, if not more.

In spite of the outcry and a resolution by the European Parliament demanding that France immediately suspend expulsions of Roma to Romania and Bulgaria, Paris is proceeding undeterred and keeps expelling Roma by the plane-load. Minister of Immigration Eric Besson, formerly of the Socialist Party, insisted that suspending deportations was "out of the question." The government even plans to introduce a new draft law allowing expulsions of people guilty of "aggressive begging."

We print below a slightly adapted translation of an article datelined August 28 that appeared in *Le Bolchévique* No. 193 (September 2010), newspaper of the Ligue Trotskyste de France, section of the International Communist League.

\* \* \*

On July 18 in Saint-Aignan [in the Loire Valley], Gypsies exploded in anger after cops killed Luigi Duquet, a youth from their community. The government seized on the opportunity to literally declare open season on the Roma and unleash a racist campaign of unprecedented violence against the entire Gypsy, Roma and traveling population. Detachments of cops have attacked Roma encampments, violently destroying their meager possessions and deporting them massively to Romania. Every day we read of the government's vaunted successes in "eradicating" more encampments. 9,875 Roma were already deported last year to Romania and Bulgaria (*l'Humanité*, 29 July), accounting for a third of the deportations carried out in France that year. This year, as of August 25, more than 8,000 people have been deported so far (*l'Humanité*, 26 August).

The government went after the Roma

**Gypsies in Montreuil-Bellay internment camp, 1944. Some Gypsies remained interned by French authorities until May 1946, well after end of Nazi occupation of France.**

Sigot/Archives de la Résistance



and all Gypsies because this is the most vulnerable layer of the population, living partly on the margins of urban capitalist society. The workers movement has a direct interest in defending these oppressed people against the government's racist attacks. To accept these attacks against the Roma would directly open up the workers movement to the attempts to divide the working class itself along ethnic, racial or sexual lines, while also reinforcing the arsenal of police measures that target workers. *An injury to one is an injury to all!*

### **French Capitalism, the Reformists and the Gypsy People**

The response by the Socialist Party, Communist Party (PCF), Left Party and New Anti-Capitalist Party to the government's racist campaign was to call (along with the Greens) for a demonstration on September 4. The call for the demonstration in *l'Humanité* (5 August) seized on the oppression of Roma to praise the French Republic, a capitalist-imperialist republic dripping with blood from Africa and the Near East to Indochina and, today, Afghanistan. The reformists want to refurbish France's image after the international outcry provoked by the roundup of Roma. The signatories also wanted to reaffirm their support for the capitalist order in the fight against "crime," implicitly echoing in passing the racist cliché that all Gypsies are thieves.

Lutte Ouvrière (LO) properly refused to sign this appeal, but they are notably close-mouthed about the expulsions carried out by the Communist Party in the towns where LO is part of a municipal majority headed by the PCF. For example, in Bagnolet [outside Paris] in July 2008,

the municipal authorities demanded that Bulgarian Roma families send their children back to Bulgaria as the condition for granting housing to the adults.

The call for the September 4 demonstration declared that French president Sarkozy

"is in no way fighting crime, which is reprehensible on the part of any individual regardless of nationality or origin.... It is no longer a matter of having a legitimate debate in a democracy about how to ensure safety in the Republic. Rather, the point is to stigmatize millions of people as dangerous based on their origins or their social situation.... The boundary being crossed makes us worry about the future for all of us—associations, trade unions and supporters of various political organizations—who share an attachment to the fundamental principles of the secular, democratic and social Republic. We forcefully reaffirm that Article 1 of the Constitution 'ensures the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion' and that all attempts to violate this fundamental rule of democracy undermine civil peace.... And we call for a mass citizens' demonstration on the 140th anniversary of the Republic, Saturday, September 4, at the Place de la République in Paris."

Isn't this the height of cynicism! Under the Third Republic [1870-1940], a law was passed in 1912 instituting "anthropomorphic identity booklets" for itinerants along with a collective registration booklet [enabling the authorities to keep track of their movements]; their vehicles were assigned special license plates to identify them as belonging to itinerants, the equivalent of the yellow star [that the Nazis forced Jews to wear]. (Fairground caravans and vendors' wagons were exempted from this requirement if their operators were of French nationality.) The requirement to have one's identity booklet or vehicle

registration booklet stamped four times a year remains in force for Gypsies today.

The Third Republic continually beefed up its arsenal against Gypsies. In April 1940 (before the German occupation), the government decided to place Gypsies under house arrest, in effect interning all itinerant people in small local concentration camps throughout the war. The repression carried out by the Vichy government against Gypsies (who were for the most part French citizens) was in fact based on laws enacted by the Third Republic, which was also the case for most of the measures taken against them by French police in the [German-controlled] Occupied Zone.

After the end of the German occupation of France, the PCF was in the government with the Socialists from 1944 to 1947. But some of the Gypsies had to



AP

**Rome, 9 September 2010: Man leaves Gypsy camp before demolition by Italian authorities.**

wait until 1946 to be freed, with the last ones leaving the detention camps only in May 1946, a full year after the war in Europe ended.

Not all itinerants in France are Gypsies and not all Gypsies are itinerants. In the past few weeks, there have been demonstrations of communities of Gypsies carrying French flags to stress that they are French citizens and voters, as opposed to the Roma from East Europe and the Balkans who are the main focus of racist hatred and prejudice. But even French Gypsies who are not itinerant continue to be victims of racist discrimination. In Strasbourg, 200 Gypsy families live in the Polygone neighborhood, in a camp that was set up in 1970 and is still in dismal condition today. An elderly woman commented: "Our children go to school like any other children. But when they start looking for a job, and say that they live

on Aeropostale Street, they are systematically rejected." And a Protestant minister added simply: "We are regarded as less than dogs" (*Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, 30 July).

Under the capitalist Third Republic, at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, some Jews also looked down on East European Jews fleeing pogroms—French Jews saw them as a threat to their own assimilation as French citizens. As it turned out, the French state sent thousands of Jews—citizens as well as foreigners—to the Nazi death camps under the Vichy regime. One of the overseers was Maurice Papon, who went on to have a long career in the capitalist state apparatus and who also happened to be the CEO of Sud-Aviation during the general strike of May 1968 [the factory where the strike started]. Workers and the oppressed have a vital interest

in uniting in common struggle. The ruling class is trying to instill in immigrant workers the false consciousness that Roma threaten their own struggle for legal papers; they want French workers to think the Roma are "criminals." Fighting this false consciousness is the task of the revolutionary party.

### **The Roma: A People Without a State**

Today 8 to 12 million Gypsies live in Europe; they are either itinerant or settled. Both Jews and Gypsies have a long, shared history of victimization and oppression. The Belgian Trotskyist Abram

Leon, who died in Auschwitz in 1944, explained in *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation* [published posthumously in 1946] that the Jews were a "people-class." They survived as a distinct entity, not in spite of their centuries-old oppression but because they were initially a *caste* filling a specific and necessary economic role. Under feudalism, as money-lenders and traders, they necessarily lived in urbanized communities. Later, with the rise of industrial capitalism, the Jews' special commercial role came to an end and they assimilated into modern capitalist society. In Europe, the powerful workers movement took up the struggle against anti-Semitism. Many socialists and revolutionaries were of Jewish origin, including Karl Marx.

In the old days, Roma and Gypsies were mainly musicians, horse traders, basket makers or scissors sharpeners. His-

torically, they were an invaluable source of knowledge in the subsistence agriculture economy. However, as a "people-class" of itinerant craftsmen, their role in society remained more marginal than that of the Jews.

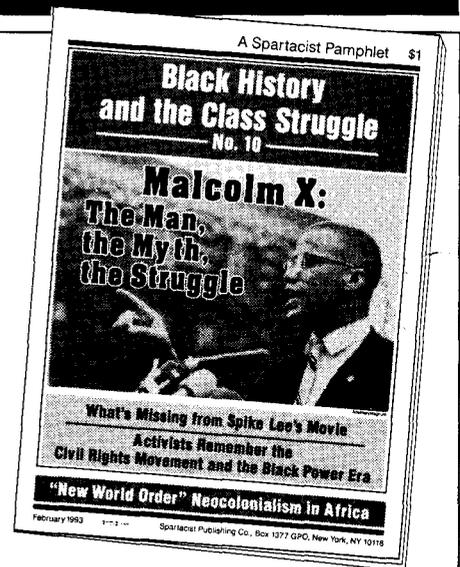
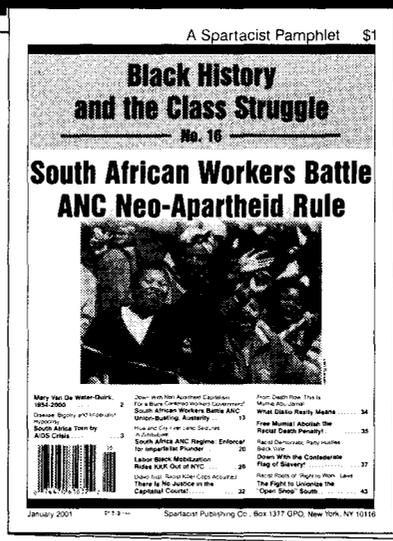
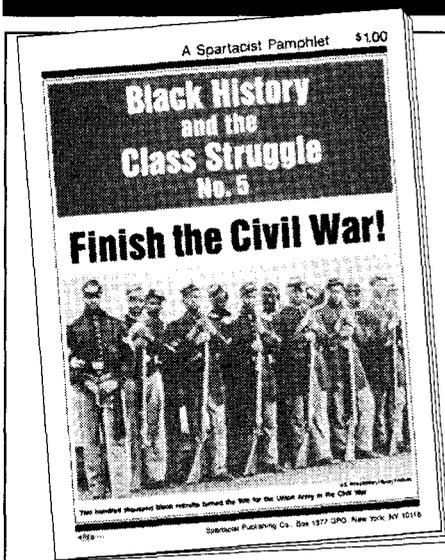
The 1917 Russian Revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky's Bolsheviks, which established the dictatorship of the proletariat for the first time in history, successfully fought chauvinism and anti-Semitic pogroms based on its truly internationalist character. It also opened the way to the emancipation of the Roma, who were recognized as a minority for the first time. The creation of Romani dictionaries and grammars was promoted along with the Roma people's culture.

The year 1924 marked the beginning of a political counterrevolution led by the Stalinists, representing a layer of privileged bureaucrats, that would destroy the revolutionary Bolshevik Party. The poison of chauvinism was revived and nationalist tensions were used to break the workers' internationalist spirit. The Romani language was soon suppressed, followed by Yiddish.

After World War II, the East European Stalinist regimes were able to partly restrain endemic prejudice but were not able to lay the basis for the elimination of chauvinism. In Romania, the particularly brutal Ceaucescu regime forced the Roma to become settled. However, today many Roma miss the Ceaucescu regime because the deformed workers state provided a job and an income for all. *Le Parisien* (23 August) quoted the typical remarks of an elderly Roma: "Before the 1989 revolution, under Ceaucescu, things were difficult but we managed. We had a place to live and a job, even if it did not pay well. And then, everything changed."

Twenty years ago, the International Communist League fought against capitalist counterrevolution in the Soviet Union and East Europe, while LO and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire supported counterrevolutionary forces like Solidarność in Poland. In the struggle against capitalist reunification of Germany in 1989-90, we threw all our resources into fighting for a proletarian political revolution in East Germany to sweep away the Stalinist bureaucracy and establish the rule of workers councils. All the racist prejudices against the Roma resurfaced after the capitalist counterrevolution. There were massive layoffs of Roma, who had to take to the road again to flee poverty and racist terror. Capitalist restoration was so horrible that the Roma came to France in spite of the relentless oppression they face here.





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