



A RESOLUTION SUBMITTED TO SDS NATIONAL CONVENTION

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The debate on racism which is occurring in SDS is central to the direction of the movement. Because we are American revolutionaries and because of the history of racism in America, the dynamic relationship between class and race must be understood if we are to know what our relationship to the labor movement and the black movement must be. To those who see the black question only as one of black people as super-exploited members of the working class, we say you are ignoring the very real history of the black man as a national or colonial question in this country. To those who see the black question only as a nationalist question, divorced from class, from its relation to white labor, we say you are ignoring the great historic periods of black nationalism -- when it was conscious of its class character.

Let us state at the beginning how we view the relationship of race and class: the black people are the touchstone of American history. At each stage in history, they anticipate the next stage of development of labor in its relationship with capital; they anticipate the next surge forward of humanity's development. Because of their dual oppression -- as race and as class -- and because of their self-activity, creativity, it could not be otherwise.

The black population is the vanguard in the movement to transform the reality of our class divided, racist society. They are vanguard because they have, throughout history, been masses in motion. This vanguard role stands out at all crucial points, whether that be the movement for the abolition of slavery leading to the Civil War or Populism; the fight against the very first sign of imperialism (when the U.S. betrayed the Cuban fight for freedom from Spain by itself turning conqueror in 1895) or the building of the industrial unions in the 1930's; the sense of internationalism, or the present attempts to re-construct society on totally new, truly human foundations.

To see how the race question has continually pushed the class basis of America to the foreground, and how class has always been the cutting edge of revolutionary black nationalism, we must begin with the past -- the black past and the Marxist past.

First, the black past has always been international. Neither the African nor the American black revolts were one-way streets. The two-way road to revolution was in fact triangular, from Africa, through the West Indies, to the United States, and the other way around. In a word, the color question was, at one and the same time, a national question and an international one.

In Africa the black man was in the majority; in the U.S. the Afro-American is in the minority. The strategy of black revolt here, thus, was and is much more complex --and also more challenging, for the revolt is occurring in the bastion of world capitalism. Here the relationship between white labor, black revolt, white radical youth is crucial to the dialectics of liberation. It has been so throughout our history and is so today. The red coloration of revolutionary Marxism has been an integral part of this dialectic. It has worked to bring about the coalescence of white and black revolutionary forces.

THE CIVIL WAR

Unfortunately much of the native Marxist movement has, from the beginning, misunderstood the relationship between class and race. At the time of the Civil War there were self-styled American Marxists who evaded the whole issue of the War by saying that they were opposed to "all slavery, wage and chattel." Compare them to Marx who wrote in 1860:

"In my opinion, the biggest things that have been happening in the world today are, on the one hand, the movement of the slaves in America, started by the death of John Brown,

and, on the other, the movement of the serfs in Russia... I have just seen in the Tribune that there has been a fresh rising of slaves in Missouri, naturally suppressed. But the signal has now been given."

What is important here is that Marx, unlike other radicals of his day, never separated his philosophy of freedom from the concrete struggles of human beings for freedom. He was constantly looking for what he called "new passions" and new forces which would bring down the old and construct the new. The industrial proletariat was central, but he saw that a peoples' struggle for self-determination could be a spark to ignite that proletariat. And it proved to be so on the question of white labor's fight for an 8 hour day. Here is how Marx expressed it in Capital:

"In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the agitation for the eight-hour day that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California."

There were whites in the United States, the Abolitionists, who did align themselves with the black slaves' fight and with freed black abolitionists. Together they fought for three decades to bring about the irrepressible conflict and transformed it from a war of mere supremacy of Northern industry over Southern cotton culture to one of emancipation of slaves.

The point is not history for history's sake, but that there is much in this that applies to us today. We too have self-styled Marxists who state an obvious truth, that "the material basis of racism is capitalism's driving need to maximize profits," (Ann Arbor NC resolution on Racism), but from there proceed to disregard the black question as a question. Instead it is dismissed as just an appendage to the class question. Everything is treated mechanically and as a result the ideas coming forth from the black revolt itself are ignored and one's own ideas are neatly put on top no matter what form the struggle. That is exactly what is happening with the black nationalist movement today, with one group in SDS dismissing nationalism as reactionary and another group in SDS proclaiming it knows what is the correct "vanguard" in the black nationalist movement.

GARVEYISM

Black nationalism is not new on the American scene. One mass organizational form was the United Negro Improvement Association organized by Marcus Garvey in 1918.

The period, 1916-1921, saw a massive emigration of black people from the South to the Northern industrial cities. They were confronted by ghetto degradation, lack of jobs, and the anti-black Jim Crow exclusionist policy of the existing craft unions of the period. Competing for even the lowest jobs with whites, they were frequently used as strike-breakers against the craft-only unions. Such monumental oppression created the consciousness of group identity, of group oppression -- as black people.

The appearance of Marcus Garvey, a West Indian printer, gave voice to this consciousness. In his paper, Negro World, begun in 1918, Garvey addressed "Fellowmen of the Negro race" -- throughout the world: "Black men, you were once great; you shall be great again... If the world fails to give you consideration because you are Negroes, four hundred millions of you shall through organization, shake the pillars of the universe and bring down creation, even as Samson brought down the temple upon his head and upon the heads of the Philistines." (Quoted in Black Moses, by Edmund David Cronon.)

It was not so much Garvey's ideas for repatriation to Africa that won a mass following among some six million, mostly proletarian, blacks and gained the Negro World a circulation of 200,000 in 1921, but rather that he had tapped the magnificent force of black consciousness among the masses of black people both in America and throughout the world.

Garvey stressed the African cultural heritage which had for so long been ignored. Today there are some in SDS who dismiss culture as reactionary. Instead we must look both at cultural nationalism's positive features and at its limitations. Let us take the slogan "Black Is Beautiful." The positive feature of this new culture is that it upsets what America has been living by since its inception -- the dominant prejudices which demand that white is right and black is wrong -- by counter-posing to this the reality in such slogans as Black Is Beautiful."

The limitation of culture is that such positive features are but beginnings. If pure culture replaces freedom as a goal then in place of revolt will appear arrogance. Culture cannot be a substitute for revolution, but a first step towards revolution. That it can be transformed into its opposite is seen in certain groups where "cultural nationalism" becomes appended to the system as "black capitalism."

The point for us in SDS is to see that there is a movement, a dialectic to thought, from consciousness through culture to philosophy of revolution. It is tied to the movement of history from slavery through serfdom to free wage labor. It is tied to the dialectic of the class struggle in general, and under capitalism in particular as it develops through specific stages from competition through monopoly to state. At each stage it calls forth new forms of revolt and new aspects of the philosophy of revolution. The new forms of black revolt and thought are part of this dialectic.

If Garveyism has much to say about black nationalism, it also exposed the failure of the American left to deal with the race question. The stage was set in 1903 by Eugene V. Debs, a founder of the Socialist Party in declaring "Properly speaking, there is no Negro question outside of the labor question." Despite the fact that Debs was a great native socialist, whose work in the labor movement is unrivaled to our day, he misunderstood the black question. While it is not an excuse, he did make that statement back in 1903. But what can we say of Progressive Labor, who cannot shine Debs' shoes. After the experience of the Garvey movement, the black workers in the CIO, the whole Civil Rights movement of the 1960's, now, in 1969, PL still denies there is a black question. It is truly ludicrous.

Many of the radicals during the Garvey period as well as some black intellectuals of that day (DuBois' 'talented tenth') refused to listen to the voices of the black masses being elicited by the Garvey movement. Garvey sensed more affinity with Lenin's International than with the black 'talented tenth' of the U.S. Lenin felt it necessary to hit back at those radicals who did not see the national question. He censured for "national egoism" those who failed to recognize the National Question as it applied both to easily recognized nations like the Irish, or minorities like the ghetto Jew in Poland or the Negro in the United States.

It was to this point that Claude McKay, the great black poet, spoke, when he addressed the 4th Congress of the Communist International in 1922:

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"Much has since been written on the sameness of the Negro and American culture in order to prove that the Negroes are not a nation. But what these writers have failed to show is: why, then, does there nevertheless exist a Negro problem? The sameness of the Negro and American culture does not explain this. And this is the nub of the matter."

Carveyism is not just in the past. In its demonstration that not a few intellectuals or small parties, but black masses in motion are the vanguard, it says much for today's struggle. In its look at African cultural heritage, it shows how culture can play a role in a freedom movement. Its demonstration of the isolation between would-be leaders and masses is still true today.

THE CIO AND WORLD WAR II

Two movements--the black movement, the labor movement--have run parallel in our history. The parallelism is the characteristic feature of American class struggle. Only when these two great movements coalesce do we reach decisive turning points in United States development. The formation of the CIO was such a turning point.

In its time, the birth of the CIO changed the industrial face of the nation, changed black-white relations among the working class and showed the class aspect of black nationalism. In the process of fighting for industrial unionism, white labor began to drop some of its racism. On a national scale, white and black united to gain recognition. There are stories from plant upon plant of white and black unity.

At the Hudson plant in Detroit, the entire plant walked out on protest against the unjust treatment of black women workers. During the Little Steel strike of 1937, blacks fought alongside whites on the picket lines. At Republic Steel one of the ten strikers who was shot and killed by the guns of the cops was a black worker.

"The Republic Steel strike demonstrated that in a time of crisis white workers would not only struggle side by side with Negroes, but would also follow them as leaders and honor them as martyrs....The strike had shown that some Negroes, acting on the basis of their class alignments, would subordinate racial loyalty even to the point of criticizing and fighting Negro strikebreakers." (Quoted in Daniel Guerin's Negroes on the March.)

The Marxist movement in that period was both good and bad. In contrast to many black intellectuals who separated themselves from the new element in the black movement--black workers on the move--the American Communist Party both in and outside the factory was with the black population in many battles. But with World War II and the German invasion of Russia, the American Communist Party, following Stalin's line, abandoned the black movement altogether. Before the invasion, A. Philip Randolph's March-on-Washington Movement (an all-black mass organization which planned to mobilize 100,000 to march on the nation's capital to demand an end to job discrimination.) was too moderate for the Communists. After Hitler's invasion, the Movement was "too belligerent." Everything was subordinate to the crusade against Hitlerism. The struggle for black emancipation had to be laid over to a better day. Here are two quotes for the period: "Four hundred years of Negro slavery are nothing beside Nazi persecution of Jewish peoples, people of the occupied countries." (James W. Ford, a black leader of the Communist Party, Feb., 1942) "Hitler is the main enemy" "The foes of Negro rights in this country should be considered as secondary." (Eugene Gordon of the Daily Worker March, 1942)

The NAACP was criticized by the Communists as being "too militant." During the 1943 race outbursts in Harlem, the Stalinists sided with the city and state authorities against the black masses. It is this "heritage" that many young PL people should know before telling SDS the correct line on the black question. Many of their own leaders

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were around in the CP in those days.

It is easy to contrast the reaction of Bill Epton of PL upon the death of Martin Luther King Jr.--"we do not mourn the death of King, he was merely an obstacle in our way"--with that of the black workers in factories all across the country who wildcatted and stopped production over the assassination of Dr. King. This was not "bourgeois consciousness"; it was that black workers damn well know that the assassination of King was an attack on all black people. But unfortunately this failure to listen to what the black masses are saying is not limited to those like PL who will condemn all who do not follow their party line.

It is also true of the resolution passed at the Austin National Council Meeting on the Black Panther Party. In this resolution SDS proceeds to identify "the vanguard force" of the Black Liberation Movement as the Black Panther Party, which has "an essentially correct program for the black community." Is this not merely the other side of the coin of what PL does? Who gave SDS the right to decide for black people who the vanguard force is, what the correct program for black liberation is, not to mention the correct military strategy and the right to determine what is revolutionary nationalism?

What about the black worker and his caucuses in the union that fight both management and the labor bureaucracy? Aren't they part of the "vanguard" or is only "a party", not self-activity of masses in groups like these to be considered "vanguard?"

Today, the revolutionary aspirations of black people are creating many new forms, many different types of organizations--Black Panthers, black caucuses in the shops, welfare rights movement, black GIs, black students on campus, the revolt in the cities. All show that it is the self-activity of the masses, the mass movement from below, that is the real vanguard.

With the Ann Arbor and Austin resolutions on racism, aren't we just falling into the same old way of "fitting" the color question into a preconceived model for revolution? Isn't it time we broke with mere sloganizing and began seriously working out a philosophy for human freedom for our day as Marx did for his epoch and Lenin did for his? If so then we must begin by moving away from the old radicals toward the new elements struggling for freedom. We must begin by listening to the forces for revolution. We must see these forces not just as muscles to be used, but minds which have the thoughts and creativity to build something new.

We live in a white racist society. But there must of necessity be a relationship of white and black to once and for all rid ourselves of this monster. In the 1960's there was a relationship between the black population, especially black youth in the Civil Rights movement and white youth. Today a new relationship is needed. One involving race, class and the unifying cement of revolutionary Marxism. But we cannot aid in bringing about this relationship if either we do not recognize the uniqueness of the black struggle in America which we have tried to point out in this paper, or if we try and dictate to the black men and women who shall be their leaders and what shall be their program. The black masses have been creating their own movement for freedom. They have rejected black leaders who sought to speak for the masses without listening to the masses; they will certainly do the same to whites.

Revolutionary Marxism, Marxist Humanism, begins precisely with this listening to the new revolutionary elements now emerging in this country and the world over. This is how Marx created a philosophy of freedom for his day. This is the task for our day if we are to get a coalescence of forces. It is for this reason that we do not here

offer programatic suggestions. We have to know where and how to look for answers before we can hope to find them. The Ann Arbor and Austin resolutions on racism show a breakdown in the method whereby concrete answers for today can be found. We feel that SDS must begin by listening to the new voices of revolt and getting its own theory together. If we begin working out the theoretic preparation for revolution, the programs will fall into place. Activity in no case waits on "programs."

If we are serious about the necessity of white labor, revolutionary youth and the black liberation struggle coming together as a revolutionary movement, and are determined to elicit the ideas of people fighting for freedom, then we will be on the road to a real transformation of society.

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