

Looking At the Impact and Character of the African American People's Struggle

**Civil Rights and the US Revolution
By Brian Becker**



People's Organization for Progress celebrates MLK Jr.'s birthday

**Civil Rights and the Black liberation movement
By Saladin Muhammad**

Black Workers League Pamphlet

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The Republicans and Democrats, twin parties of the ruling class, will seek a way out in a new imperialist war. The multi-national working class, despite the present lack of revolutionary consciousness, will be compelled to struggle.

Civil Rights and the Black liberation movement

By Saladin Muhammad

"Civil rights and the U.S. revolution," by Brian Becker (*Socialism and Liberation*, January 2005) is an important assessment of the democratic political impact of the African American liberation struggle of the 1950s on a major component of US imperialism—the system of Southern segregation—US apartheid. The characterization of the civil rights phase of the struggle as a "political revolution" helps to point out the importance of recognizing and supporting the African American peoples struggle as a national liberation struggle and major component of the process of revolutionary transformation of U.S. society that create conditions for socialist revolution in the US, throughout North America and internationally.

What this analysis does not point out is that the political revolution and the "restructuring of the political superstructure of the United States," was not really completed as a strategic stage until the development of the Black Power movement, which objectively advanced the demand and movement for African American self determination—even if only in the limited form of zones of mass Black power within existing capitalist relations.

It's also important to remember the international context that the civil rights movement was developing and transforming in. In 1955, the same year of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Bandung Conference was held to promote and build solidarity with the anti colonial struggles. This context of national liberation struggles influenced the politics and character of the African American organizations that developed during the 1960s.

The 1960s formation of state-wide Black political parties in Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina and other parts of the U.S. South, both to fight for representation in the national Democratic Party and to vie for political power against the white capitalist power structure in those states and local governments, the development of a cooperative movement among Black farmers, the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Union and its strike against the remaining section of the planter class, the strikes of the Memphis sanitation workers, Charleston hospital workers, the organization of Black militias in Monroe, NC, Deacons for Defense in Louisiana, United League in Mississippi, SNCC Freedom Schools, Freedom Singers, the Poor People's March and the opposition the Vietnam War and the expansion throughout the US to the urban areas with 1960's rebellions, Black Arts Movement, National Black Power Conferences, the DRUM movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and wildcat strikes, the Black Workers Congress, Revolutionary Action Movement, African People's Party, Republic of New Africa extending into the 1970s with the formations of the Congress of African People, Gary National Black Assembly and African Liberation Support Committee—all of represented an unbroken chain of national liberation struggle and movement formation. They were composed of different political tendencies, class forces and organizations in motion, all contending for leadership.

National Oppression and Black Worker Consciousness

The social consciousness of the African American masses in the US South in particular, and African Americans throughout the US in general has been a national and class consciousness shaped by a history of struggles against national oppression and super exploitation which expressed itself as a special form of working class exploitation different from that faced by white workers.

The push for multi racial working class labor unity was led by Black workers during the Reconstruction Period following the Civil War and continuing up into the 1930s. However, the national unions refused to include Black workers in their ranks. The Colored National Labor Union and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters are examples of trade unions formed by Black workers outside of the mainstream unions.

"Prior to the formation of the CIO, the national AFL steadfastly opposed any special effort to organize Black workers, repeatedly rejecting pleas by Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters president A. Philip Randolph for a campaign organizing African Americans insisting that the "autonomy" of AFL member unions made action against segregation and racial exclusion

in the federation impossible. The AFL claimed that its policies merely reflected the racist sentiments of white workers in its ranks, and yet white workers in the CIO unions often had the same racist attitudes.”¹

At the point of inclusion of Black workers into the national unions, they were organized into “Jim Crow” locals with different bargaining rights and power than the locals of white workers.

These experiences and struggles by Black workers developed a form of working class consciousness that was largely expressed through their African American national consciousness and independent worker organizations. When white workers fail to push the unions to take up issues of Black workers on the job as a part of its program and mandate, Black workers saw their labor issues as part of their national oppression.

Like the Colored National Labor Union and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Black workers have had to form organizations like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Black Workers For Justice and Black caucuses to try and push the trade unions and working class forward in taking up the struggle against racism and national oppression.

Black workers need self organization inside and outside of trade unions to push forward the trade union and broader working class struggles in society and to help shape an anti racist working class consciousness among white workers in the course of those struggles.

The triple oppression of working class African American women magnifies the system of national oppression and white skin privilege and places the demand and struggle against women’s oppression in the vanguard of the struggle for African American self determination and socialism.

White Skin Privilege and White Worker Consciousness

When dealing with the social and political consciousness of white workers, the weakness in US working class unity and the “lag” in the general US working class consciousness, it is important to acknowledge the impact of white skin privilege. The social class consciousness of white workers is not determined by wage levels and conditions of poverty alone.

“White skin privilege is part of the social reality (social being) of all whites in varying degrees and becomes the way in which [many] white workers see the world. This problem has confounded class based political organizing in the United States for more than two centuries. In fact, it is scarcely an exaggeration to conclude that white laborers in the United States are the least Marxian-acting working class in the world...While false consciousness is certainly a problem the more critical problem is that the white working class comes to think of itself and its interests as white. In effect, white privilege and self-interest do not develop along separate tracks; rather white privilege helps construct individual whites’ notion of self-interest across classes.”²

These ideas have not only been promoted by the US white capitalist class; it has also been promoted by the trade unions, especially the bureaucracies, both in their racial make up, main bargaining demands, by white union members, especially the skilled trades and by working class social organizations around issues of schools, housing and access to public services.

W.E.B Du Bois points out that “white workers are compensated in part by a ‘public and psychological wage’ that amounts to a tangible benefit acquired at the expense of people of color. They are given public deference because they are white; they are treated more leniently by the police because they are white; they are welcomed in any community where they can afford to buy a house because they are white; their children are more likely to be welcomed in the best schools because they are white; they can shop in any store without being treated as suspect because they are white. [White skin privilege has been] used to make up for alienating and exploitative [capitalist] class relationships...White skin privilege undermines not only working class unity, but [also] the very vision of many white workers”³ about democracy.

The most exploited sections of the US white working class, whose anti racist political class consciousness depends mainly on the programs and activities of an anti racist revolutionary left, is not being developed partly because the main forces on the white left refuse to support the right of African American self determination starting with the right to form independent forms of Black working class organization and Black worker led initiatives to build multi national working class unity like the Million Worker March mobilization.

Many Black revolutionaries are marginalized within predominantly white revolutionary organizations, in terms of leading major mass initiatives and internal organizational work, especially controlling finances and propaganda. The close scrutiny placed on many Black comrades working within the African American liberation movement about the absence of a major role for white comrades, makes it difficult to carry out a plan of concentration within the oppressed nationality national movement, including recruiting from those movements.

This is why a political and ideological struggle to win US white workers to socialism must include support for the African American national liberation struggle and demand for self determination. This must include an organizational division of labor

¹ Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers, pg 83, by Michael K. Honey—University of Illinois Press

² Ibid

³ The Constraint of Race: Legacies of White Skin Privilege in America, by Linda Faye Williams

and leadership of particular initiatives among oppressed nationalities on the part multi national worker and revolutionary organizations, especially those that are majority white. This is a complex issue, not to be taken lightly or dealt with in an opportunist manner. It is also not a call for revolutionaries and worker organizations to organize exclusively around race, gender or nationality. There must be forms that fight for and help to forge the unity of the multi national working class. Unity and independence of the national movements should not be seen as a contradiction in fighting for socialism. In fact, national liberation movements should be encouraged to see themselves as being engaged in a national liberation revolution, thereby defining their revolutionary objectives beyond the political demand for self determination which will also be necessary as part of the process of building socialism, either independently or as part of a multi national socialist state or federal.

"All nations will arrive at socialism - this is inevitable, but all will do so in not exactly the same way. Each will contribute something of its own to some form of democracy, to some variety of the dictatorship of the proletariat, to the varying rate of socialist transformation in the different aspects of social life."⁴

National Liberation Struggles within the U.S.

Globalization is imperialism—the highest stage of capitalism. The Imperialist restructuring has brought about the international integration of global markets for goods, services, and finance capital. The US is using its so-called war on terrorism to forcibly establish an imperialist military global infrastructure that expands and protects the global interest and domination of the US ruling class and its increasing concentration of global capital. This is not only intensifying national oppression and national divisions throughout the world, but also within the US.

It threatens not only the national sovereignty of countries through trade “agreements” and regional institutions to govern these markets, and the activities of multilateral institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. It also attacks the political, economic and social institutions and districts inside of the US imperialist nation state – eroding the ability of historically defined groups of people to access resources for community and social development or to exercise political power and contribute to shaping public policy.

This is a major reason on the attack on Black voting rights—not justice the right to vote at the polls, but the restructuring of political boundaries that give African Americans a political majority or a large minority base to elect officials and to take control of other institutions and their governing boards. Majority African American political entities could constitute bases for launching trade union campaigns, establishing and repealing laws and forging alliances to defend and advance democracy and social change.

The social revolution that the comrade Becker speaks of—to move the African American liberation struggle and other movements forward in realizing the hopes and dreams of a better society made possible by the resources, development and wealth of U.S. imperialist society—is an uneven revolutionary process. It often requires various sectors to take the lead and become catalysts for other sectors to come forward in challenging imperialism.

“The socialist revolution is not one single act, not one single battle on a single front; but a whole epoch of intensified class conflicts, a long series of battles on all fronts, i.e., battles around all the problems of economics and politics, which can culminate only in the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. It would be a fundamental mistake to suppose that the struggle for democracy can divert the proletariat from the socialist revolution, or obscure, or overshadow it, etc. On the contrary, just as socialism cannot be victorious unless it introduces complete democracy, so the proletariat will be unable to prepare for victory over the bourgeoisie unless it wages a many-sided, consistent and revolutionary struggle for democracy.”⁵

During the McCarthy period in the late 1940s and 1950s, all tendencies of the U.S. left were being persecuted, jailed and murdered. Taft Hartley and anti-labor “Right to Work” were implemented to weaken and prevent the organization of trade unions, especially in the US South. This placed the left and social movements identified with the left on the defensive. It was the Montgomery Bus Boycott part of the struggle for African American democracy and self determination in the U.S. South that created the conditions for the left to regroup and reemerge from its defensive and political crisis.

A communist party (according to Lenin)—an essential factor in providing working class leadership for socialist revolution, forms around a minority of the working class—it’s most militant and advanced fighters, rooted in the sector most prone to challenge capital. Within the U.S., the Black working class (95 percent of Black people) has been the main social base of the most exploited and oppressed sectors of the U.S. working class. It suffers class, national and patriarchal oppression: exploited and oppressed as part of the U.S. working class and also as an oppressed nation/nationality. It has been the most prone to challenge U.S. imperialism. However, the larger US working class and many of the left have failed to rally around Black working class leadership because of racism and national and social chauvinism.

⁴ Lenin, A Caricature of Marxism & Imperialist Economism Aug.-Oct. 1916

⁵ Ibid

There is a tendency among many socialists not to refer to the African American peoples struggles as struggle against racism and not as a national liberation struggle when they talk about how the African American political revolution advances toward a socialist revolution. No, self determination is not a revolutionary end in itself. It should be seen as part of the process of oppressed nations in fighting for power to enforce democracy, altering the national and international balance of power to contribute to the defeat of imperialism and arriving at socialism.

“The socialist revolution may break out not only in consequence of a great strike, a street demonstration, a hunger riot, a mutiny in the forces, or a colonial rebellion, but also in consequence of any political crisis..... or in connection with a referendum on the secession of an oppressed nation.”⁶

Working class unity means fighting white supremacy and national oppression

On the question of working class unity; what about the most oppressed strata making the call for unity and building class unity and around a program that addresses race, national, class and gender demands? Should decisions around program be based on the need to win a majority of white workers or on a critical minority that struggles within the white majority and against national oppression?

These are questions that face today’s labor movement, anti-war movement, the “labor party” as well as socialist organizations and revolutionaries throughout U.S. history. “White workers,” the argument goes, “are not ready to support demands of the Palestinians, are not ready to oppose police brutality, not ready to support a Black presidential candidate, etc.”

A policy of national self determination is the only policy capable of uniting the US multi-national working class and at the same time recognizing the organized independence and initiative of the African American workers and other oppressed nationalities to lead their national liberation struggles. This will ensure the greatest strength for the workers movement, and also foster the greatest solidarity of the workers movement with those of the nationally oppressed.

This means that workers of differing nationalities uniting in organizations such as trade unions, tenants, students, women’s, community and mass and revolutionary parties “must pay attention to the language, culture and other needs of the oppressed nationalities, including forming internal caucuses and should support the right of self-determination.

All revolutionaries should view the reemergence of the African American liberation movement, especially with Black worker leadership, as critical for advancing the anti-imperialist movement and social revolution in the U.S. The convergence of Black worker and trade unionist leadership and their call for a unified multi-national independent workers movement should be viewed as one of the most important aspects of the Million Worker March and a significant development toward radicalizing the US workers movement and rebuilding the African American liberation movement.

Yes, the African American liberation movement is fragmented, weak and trying to regroup through organizations like the Black Radical Congress, the Reparations movement, the Black workers Unity movement, along with environmental justice groups, struggles against police brutality, Black farmers and other Black political struggles and organizations. What has been missing is a strong national Black workers movement and fight backs to help anchor a process and provide leadership in building a Black united front to facilitate the regroupment of the African American liberation movement.

Altering the balance of power

Capitalism is undergoing a major structural crisis. Economically, it has very little room to maneuver. There exist chronic unemployment, massive homelessness, million’s without health insurance, huge military budgets, increased repression and major damage to the environment. The way out of this structural crisis for the working class and oppressed nationalities—in a way that helps the movements to build power for the ongoing revolutionary struggle to overthrow US imperialism is to turn defensive struggles into offensive struggles for strategic zones of power—bases of dual or contending power within the framework of the struggle against US and global capitalism.

The ongoing struggle and demand for African American self-determination must seek structural reforms that increase the power and democracy of the African American masses in our relationship to all of the institutions impacting our lives and to the U.S. government and ruling class at all levels—up to and including political secession—as part of the process of altering the balance of power in favor of advancing the social revolution.

The demand for African American proportional representation and regional autonomy becomes a strategic demand for self determination in fighting for control of political, economic and social institutions and territories

To address the unevenness of the revolutionary process between workers of the US oppressed and oppressor nations in bringing about a social revolution, requires a recognition that the US anti-imperialist movements must support demands amounting to a partial redistribution of the wealth and political power.

The demand for reparations must be viewed as a demand for a partial redistribution of the accumulated US imperialist wealth to the African American oppressed nation and nationality, whose labor, culture, institutions, land and lives have been super

⁶ The Socialist Revolution and The Right of Nations to Self-determination, *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 22, p. 143-56

exploited, stolen, sold, murdered and politically subjugated as a central part of developing the US imperialist economic and political system, and racist social character. And yes, we must be mindful of cooptation by imperialism.

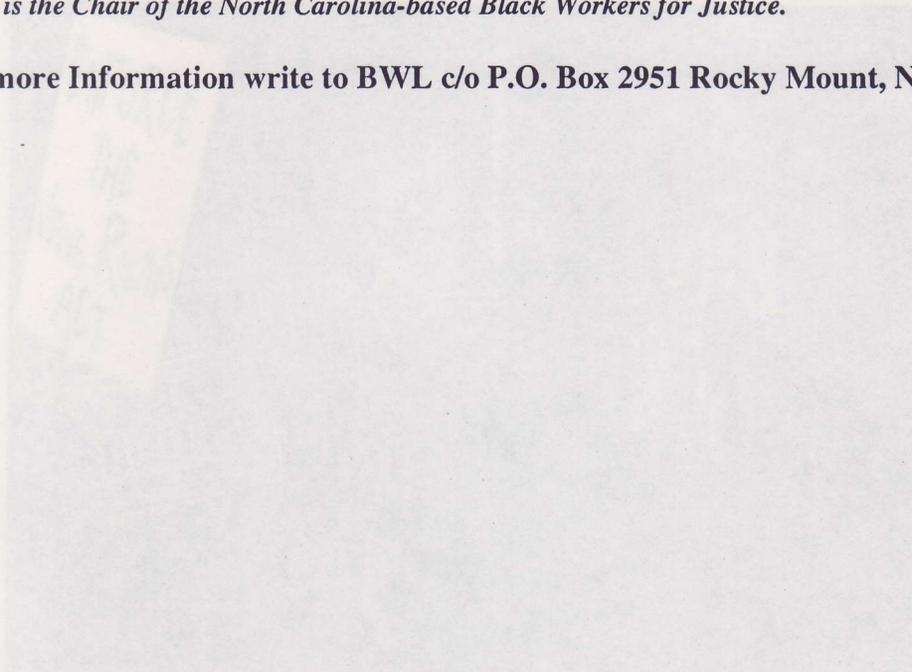
Thus, the question of Black working class consciousness needs to be cultivated with a socialist orientation rooted in an analysis of Black and working class history in the manner captured by Dubois and others, as well as from experiences of the international working class including in the former colonial countries.

This will enable Black worker leadership to better articulate a program and demands for African American self-determination, while recognizing the limitations in fully resolving the problems of national oppression without a social revolution and ongoing struggle in building a global communist society.

Struggling against US imperialism within its national borders requires a revolutionary understanding of internationalism and solidarity. This must reflect a willingness to struggle against white chauvinism, accept political leadership from Black and oppressed nationality and women workers and a concrete for support of self determination of oppressed nations and nationalities.

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