

White Blindspot

The Original Essays on Combating White Supremacy and White-Skin Privilege

Editor's Note: This document, published by SDS's Radical Education Project, is in two parts. The first is a letter to Progressive Labor Party, by Noel Ignatin, with a letter of support and commentary by Ted Allen. The second is Ted Allen's essay, 'Can White Radicals Be Radicalized?' Both had a powerful impact in SDS in relation to the outbreak of serious differences on the African-America and Vietnamese liberation struggle's between PL's 'Worker-Student Alliance' faction and the rest of SDS. Later, the key concepts continued to spread, and are still being discussed today. After SDS, Ted Allen joined with RYM2 people in New York City to form the Harper's Ferry Organization, while Noel Ignatin helped found a similar group in Chicago, the Sojourner Truth Organization.

Letter to Progressive Labor

By Noel Ignatin

*"It is only the Blindspot in the eyes of America,
and its historians, that can overlook and misread
so clean and encouraging a chapter of human struggle
and human uplift."*

—W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*,
an essay toward a history of the part which black folk
played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy
in America, 1860-1880. (p. 577)

*"The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the
emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of
workers who are yellow, brown and black."*

—Ibid., p. 16

In response to your request for comments from readers, I am writing this letter raising what I consider to be the fundamental error in your strategic outlook for the revolutionary struggle of the American working class.

In my opinion, this error consists of your failure to grasp and incorporate in your program the idea contained in the following statement by Marx:

“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. (Capital, Vol. I, Chapter 10, Section 7)”

While you pay a great deal of attention to the Negro liberation movement, and correctly recognize it as a part of the global struggles for national liberation, you fail to discover the specific role it plays in the proletarian revolution in the United States. Thus, in your strategy for the proletarian revolution, you place the Negro question outside of the class struggle.

In my opinion you do this in spite of the fact that you cite Mao’s correct words that, “In the final analysis, a national struggle is a question of class struggle.” In this letter, I shall attempt to demonstrate the truth of my criticism and, in the process, suggest what I consider to be the correct strategy for the American working class.

The Greatest Barrier to Class Consciousness

The greatest ideological barrier to the achievement of proletarian class consciousness, solidarity and political action is now, and has been historically, white chauvinism. White chauvinism is the ideological bulwark of the practice of white supremacy, the general oppression of blacks by whites.

The U.S. ruling class has made a deal with the misleaders of American labor, and through them with the masses of white workers. The terms of the deal, worked out over the three hundred year history of the development of capitalism in our country, are these: you white workers help us conquer the world and enslave the non-white majority of the earth’s labor-

ing force, and we will repay you with a monopoly of the skilled jobs, we will cushion you against the most severe shocks of the economic cycle, provide you with health and education facilities superior to those of the non-white population, grant you the freedom to spend your money and leisure time as you wish without social restrictions, enable you on occasion to promote one of your number out of the ranks of the laboring class, and in general confer on you the material and spiritual privileges befitting your white skin.

Of course there are dislocations in this set-up. Contradictions between antagonistic forces cannot be resolved except by revolution. The masses of white workers produce vast quantities of value, and there is consequently an unceasing struggle over how this value shall be divided –within the pre-imposed limits ‘ of the deal.

The Original ‘Sweetheart Agreement’!

But in spite of this unceasing and often fierce struggle, what exists is an opportunistic “contract” between the exploiters and a part of the exploited, at the expense of the rest of the exploited—in fact, the original “sweetheart agreement.”

Does this mean that the white workers have no revolutionary potential, that they should be written out of the ranks of the revolutionary forces? Does it mean that, as far as the white workers are concerned, communists must sit passively and wait until the ruling class, of its own necessity (e.g. loss of colonial holdings) moves to cut its losses at the expense of some of the white workers’ racial privileges and attempts to reduce them to or near the level of black, brown and yellow workers?

It does not mean either of these things. In spite of their privileges, the white workers (except for the aristocracy of labor) are exploited proletarians, victims of “the stupid system of violence and robbery which we call Law and Industry”. (G.B. Shaw) In the struggle for socialism, as well as the struggle for immediate reforms, without which the working class will never achieve socialist consciousness, the white workers, like their black, brown and yellow brothers, have a “world to win”. But they have more to lose than their chains; they have also to “lose” their white-skin privileges, the perquisites that separate them from the rest of the working class, that act as the material base for the split in the ranks of labor.

PL deals with the struggle for the unity of the working class in the following, manner, from your convention documents:

“The unity of black and white workers can be forged only in the course of winning the white workers to struggle against the common class enemy for their own class demands, and by combating racism and by supporting the cause of Black Liberation.”

And in another passage, this time from the editorial on Watts in the October 1965 issue of *PL*, we read the following:

“White workers today are generally better off than the black people, who are engaged in a militant struggle for more jobs, housing and full political rights. But even today, where white workers are fighting for the same demands, they are also ruthlessly wiped out, like the unemployed coal miners of Hazard, Kentucky or the 80,000 laid off white railroad workers, victims of the Johnson-bosses-union gang-up or the teamsters shot at in a recent Tennessee strike.

“They, too, meet up with violent repression at the hands of the ruling class.

“As more and more white workers lose their jobs due to automation and the inability of the capitalist war economy to grow along with the population, they too will have to fight for their economic and political demands, or go under.

“The Johnson administration has only one answer for workers who struggle for a better life -armed terror and suppression. Just as it commits genocide in Vietnam and the Congo, the government does not hesitate to use its army against the black people at home. Similarly, the same thing is in store for white workers who fight back as soon as they feel the squeeze.

“By rejecting the racist slanders of the press and the hysteria whipped up by the politicians who serve the bosses, by supporting the black people in their liberation struggle, white workers are protecting themselves and preparing their own defense for the attacks Johnson will unleash against them when he and his bosses cannot meet their demands.”

The ‘Parallel Struggles’ Fallacy

Both of these passages are representative of the general line of PL; both avoid the central question of the struggle against white supremacy. Both explicit and implicit in the passages cited is the concept that white workers have “their own class demands” which are separate from the demands of Negro liberation (which you summarize as “more jobs, housing and full political rights”), and that in the parallel struggles of two groups of workers for two sets of demands lies the path to the unity of black and white workers.

This is wrong on two counts: in the first place, it is not correct to reduce the demands of the Negro liberation movement to “more jobs, housing and full political rights”. These are the demands of all workers. (Nor is it enough to toss in the demand for self-determination, as you do elsewhere, as a slogan for the Negro nation: the writings of Lenin on the national-colonial question make it abundantly clear that self-determination of an oppressed nation is a slogan directed toward the working class of the oppressor nation.) The fundamental demand of Negro liberation is and has been for one hundred years the ending of white supremacy, the granting to the Negro people of every bourgeois right held by every other sector of the American people, excepting the other oppressed national minorities.

In the second place, the ending of white supremacy is not solely a demand of the Negro people, separate from the class demands of the entire working class. It cannot be left to the Negro people to fight it alone, while the white workers “sympathize with their fight,” “support it,” “reject racist slanders” etc. but actually fight for their “own” demands.

The ideology of white chauvinism is bourgeois poison aimed primarily at the white workers, utilized as a weapon by the ruling class to subjugate black and white workers. It has its material base in the practice of white supremacy, which is a crime not merely against non-whites but against the

entire proletariat. Therefore, its elimination certainly qualifies as one of the class demands of the entire working class. In fact, considering the role that this vile practice has historically played in holding back the struggle of the American working class, the fight against white supremacy becomes the central immediate task of the entire working class.

The incorrect formulations and evasions which abound in the two passages have cited from PL documents are not mere slips of the pen. For nowhere in your literature do we find a single appeal to the white workers to fight against white supremacy in the only way possible, by repudiating their white-skin privileges and joining in a struggle with the rest of the working class for the demands of the entire class.

Programmatic Error: A Hypothetical Case

Your wrong theoretical approach to this question expresses itself in a wrong program. Thus, in an article by Antaeus in *PL* of Oct.-Nov. 1966, it is stated:

“It now remains for a revitalized labor movement, led by the rank-and-file, to fulfill one of its greatest inheritances from its glorious past: to fight the ‘national interest’ squeeze of the Johnsons and the Kennedys, and their corporate masters; to raise the deteriorating standards of the working class, to curb unemployment, especially among black, Puerto Rican and Mexican workers, to fight all this by launching a nation-wide; struggle for shorter hours at 40 hours pay.”

My, my. It seems that the shorter work week has more uses than aspirin. Now, it is probably true that the winning of the shorter work week would provide more jobs for the Negro, Puerto Rican and Mexican workers.

One can easily compute the mathematics of it: in a factory presently operating with 6 toolmakers, 60 machine operators, 60 assemblers, 6 packers and 3 sweepers, each working 40 hours a week, if the work week were shortened to 30 hours the following changes, more or less, could be expected: in place of the present 6 toolmakers (all white), 8 would be required to produce the same quantity of value in 30 hours that is produced in

40. However, since there is a shortage of toolmakers, they would continue on 40 hours, drawing overtime pay. In place of the 60 machine operators (all white), 80 would be required; the additional 20 would be drawn from those assemblers with the greatest seniority (all white). We now have 40 assemblers left, but need 80; their ranks would be filled by advertising in the "help-wanted, women" section, or from the ranks of the unemployed white men. For the increase of two packers required, the plant would hire one white and one Negro. And finally, to provide the additional sweeper (couldn't we do without him since we're now on 30 hours?), a Negro would be hired, in accordance with the traditional personnel policy.

Thus, we would have a net gain of two jobs for Negroes. Perhaps exaggerated, but not much. Of course, those who put forward the demand for the shorter work week as a partial solution to the problem of Negro oppression argue that Negroes would benefit from it to a greater extent proportionately, than their numbers in the population, since they make up a disproportionate share of the unemployed. That is possibly so. One can concede the possibility (although not the certainty) that out of the 62 or 63 new workers needed in my example, maybe four, instead of two, would be recruited from the ranks of the Negro unemployed; perhaps even the lily-whiteness of the ranks of the assemblers might be tinted a little.

'Fair Employment Through Full Employment':

A White Supremacist Slogan

But would this disturb the institution of white supremacy? I am not here opposing the "30 for 40" slogan. But raising it the way you do, to "curb unemployment, especially among black, Puerto Rican and Mexican workers", is merely an echo of the "Fair employment through full employment" argument of Secretary of Labor Wirtz and other spokesmen of the "liberal" wing of the ruling class. Even at its best (which will never be) "fair employment through full employment" is just another way of excusing the practice of leaving the Negroes as the last hired. Under such a slogan we may be assured that the last unemployed man or woman hired-the one that makes it "full"-will also be the one that makes it "fair". In other words, "fair employment through full employment" is another way of saying that job discrimination against Negroes will be maintained as long as it is possible to do so.

The point is: raising the demand for a larger slice of the pie for the working class does not in itself alter the apportionment of the slice within the working class. In fact, the ruling class has always utilized every concession won from it to increase the gap between white and black, thus turning even a victory of the working class into a cause of greater division. The shorter work week, with the promise of more jobs for those last hired, does not challenge the pattern of who shall be last hired, and therefore does not alter the inequality of white and black workers.

Is it not a fact that there have been times when the average real income of the Negro worker has increased, while at the same time the gap between the Negro and white worker has also increased? Thus, while the living conditions of the Negro people may have improved for a time absolutely, relative to those of the white population they deteriorated. To accept the premise that the way to improve conditions for the Negro workers is by increasing the proportion of the value created that goes to all workers is equivalent to institutionalizing the split in the working class, and accepting the inferior status of the Negro and other colored workers.

‘If You Want Shorter Hours, Let Me Tell You What To Do...’

I would go further—the working class will not be able to win the shorter work week, will not even be able to resist the growing offensive of the ruling class, unless it first comes to grips with white supremacy as the chief cause of the division within its ranks.

There is no easy way around this problem. The struggle against white supremacy cannot be replaced by the struggle for a larger portion of the pie to be parceled out unequally among the workers. The only way to overcome the division in the working class is by overcoming it.

Elsewhere in your literature you raise the demand that 8000 of the jobs in the big industrial plants in the Watts ghetto should go to the Negro residents of Watts, since they make up 80% of tile area’s population. In my opinion, this demand contains some merit, as well as some faults. But taking it for its merit, that it raises the need for a more equal distribution of the existing jobs instead of banking on the same unequal distribution of new jobs, let me place the question: for whom is this demand raised? For the Negro workers and unemployed alone? In that case it is a divisive slogan, and should be dropped. For the entire working class? In that case

it is, at least partially, a unifying slogan, and should be supported. But then it is necessary to explain to the white workers, and especially those white workers at the big plants in Watts, why they should support such, a demand, even though it apparently threatens some of them with the loss of their jobs.

It is the same with the slogan which I understand was raised in the election campaign of Wendy Nakashima (PLP candidate for state legislature in 1966 elections -ed.) in New York City last year. I am told that her demand for preferential hiring for Negroes and Puerto Ricans received quite a bit of support in the mainly Negro and Puerto Rican district in which she campaigned. It is easy to see why. But if that is a good demand – and I am convinced that it is – then it must be good also for the white workers, and they must be explained the reasons why so that they may become active partisans of it.

For, make no mistake about it, with the U.S. imperialist economy stagnating or even contracting, the ending of white supremacy, the ending of the privileged position of white workers means fewer jobs for white workers, fewer skilled jobs, poorer housing, etc. – if it goes no further than that. For it is obvious that if the rate of unemployment among Negroes is lowered from around 25% where it now stands to about 8% (which is “normal” in this period of imperialist decline for workers not suffering from national oppression or “favored” by white supremacy) then the rate of unemployment among white workers must be increased from the 5% where it now stands (by virtue of their white-skin privileges) to the 8% which is “normal”. And likewise with the proportion of skilled and unskilled jobs held by Negro and white workers, and so forth.

If It Goes No Further Than That...

But please note the phrase in my last paragraph: “if it goes no further than that”. For the consequences of the ending of white supremacy, which can only be ended by mobilizing and raising the consciousness of the entire working class, would extend far beyond the point of spreading out the misery more equitably. The result of such a struggle would be a working class that was class conscious, highly organized, experienced and militant – in short, united and ready to confront the ruling class as a solid block.

The ending of white supremacy does not pose the slightest peril to the

real interests of the white workers; it definitely poses a peril to their fancied interests, their counterfeit interests, their white-skin privileges.

As long as white supremacy is permitted to divide the working class, so long will the struggle of the working class remain on two separate planes, one concerned with their “own” class demands and the other, on a more elementary plane (but with a much higher degree of class consciousness) fighting first for the ordinary bourgeois rights which were won long ago for the rest of the workers. As soon as white supremacy is eliminated as a force within the working class, the decks will be cleared for action by the entire class against its enemy.

And what would be the outcome of such a struggle? Well, consider: if it were not for the ideology of white chauvinism, the American workers would by now have a labor party, which would represent a step forward in the class struggle. If it were not for the ideology of white chauvinism, the South would be organized, with all that that implies. If it were not for the ideology of white chauvinism the American workers could see clearly the racist, imperialist, anti-working class character of the US aggression in Vietnam, and oppose it from the only possible proletarian standpoint—opposition to US imperialism.

Communists (individually this is the task primarily of white communists, although collectively it is the responsibility of the whole party) must go to the white workers and say frankly: you must renounce the privileges you now hold, must join the Negro, Puerto Rican and other colored workers in fighting white supremacy, must make this the first, immediate and most urgent task of the entire working class, in exchange for which you, together with the rest of the workers will receive all the benefits which are sure to come from one working class (of several colors) fighting together.

This does not mean that the process will develop in clear stages, i.e., first the ending of white supremacy, then a massive struggle for reforms, then revolution. It is probable that Negro liberation will not take place without the conquest of power by the working class in our country as a whole. What it means is that, in the course of mobilizing the entire working class to fight white supremacy some victories will be won and, most important of all, the ideology of white chauvinism will be widely exposed as the weapon of the oppressor, thus preparing the working class for the assumption of power. In this way the Russian workers, led by the Bolshe-

viks, made the liberation of their “own” colonies an integral part of their own class demands (now let us use your phrase without quotation marks) and thus were prepared to carry out their revolution.

‘The Real Secret’ – An Instructive Parallel

When we consult the writings of the founders of scientific socialism, we find a wealth of material on this question. In a *Resolution on Relations Between the Irish and the English Working Classes*, written by Marx in 1869 for the International Workingmen’s Association, we read the following:

“On the other hand, the English bourgeoisie has not only exploited Irish poverty in order to worsen the condition of the working class in England, by the forced transplantation of poor Irish peasants, but it has moreover divided the proletariat into hostile camps. The revolutionary fire of the Celtic workers does not harmonize with the restrained force but slowness of the Anglo-Saxons. In all the big industrial centers of England a deep antagonism exists between the English and Irish workers.

“The average English worker hates the Irish as a competitor who lowers his wages and level of living. He feels national and religious antagonism towards him. He appears to him in much the same light as the black slaves appeared to the poor whites in the Southern States of North America. This antagonism between the proletarians of England is artificially cultivated and maintained by the bourgeoisie. It knows that in this antagonism lies the real secret of maintaining its power.”

And in the same year, on Nov. 29, in a letter to Kugelmann, Marx wrote:

“I have become more and more convinced—and the only question is to bring this conviction home to the English working class—that it can never do anything decisive here in England until it separates its policy with regard to Ireland in the most definite

way from the policy of the ruling classes, until it not only makes common cause with the Irish, but actually takes the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801 and replacing it by a free federal relationship. And, indeed, this must be done, not as a matter of sympathy with Ireland, but as a demand made in the interests of the English proletariat. If not, the English people will remain tied to the leading-strings of the ruling classes, because it must join with them in a common front against Ireland. Every one of its movements in England itself is crippled by the disunion with the Irish, who form a very important section of the working class in England.”

Please note the last phrase in the above citation. Now, if Marx could correctly observe that the Irish workers formed a “very important section of the working class in England” in 1869, what are we to say of the position of the Negro workers in the American working class in 1967?

Black Workers Are Proletarians –Not ‘Allies’ of the Proletariat

This brings me to another error you make. For it follows logically from your first error of placing the national question outside of the bounds of the class struggle that you also isolate the Negro workers from the working class as a whole. In actuality, you relegate the Negro workers to a kind of limbo, peripheral to the main body of the working class, “allies” of the working class—anything but the integral part of it that they are.

The proof of this assertion lies in your underestimation of the importance of the Negro liberation struggle for the future of the American working class. Yes, I say underestimation, for that is in fact what you are guilty of in practice. I will give you some examples.

You correctly pose as one of the tasks before the working class that of building a third party, a labor party. But just such a party is being born under your very eyes, and you are blinded to it by your chauvinist (might as well speak plainly) lack of appreciation of the significance of the Negro liberation movement, such as the Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, Alabama, and the Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi, as well as other stirrings in the same direction throughout the country. Of course these movements differ in their degrees of clarity and maturity, but is there

any doubt that they represent motion toward a breakaway from the two-party strangle-hold? Suppose the Negro people succeed in launching such a party, will it not contain within it the essentials of a labor party program, in spite of its label as a Negro party? Will it not then be a prime task for those armed with Marxist-Leninist theory to take the program of such a party to the white workers and rally their support for it, whatever its name? And even if this party makes its appearance under less than ideal circumstances, for example under the auspices of a demagogue and opportunist like Adam Clayton Powell, as long as it is a real living party and not still born like the Freedom Now Party of 1963, the same thing will hold true—for let us not forget that the CIO was born in 1935 by one labor faker, John L. Lewis, punching another, William Hutcheson, in the jaw!

If we are dialecticians, we base ourselves on what is new, and look under the appearance of things to discover their essence. And one of the essential features of American history, which must be understood by everyone who hopes to apply Marxist-Leninist theory to the specific conditions of our country, is that traditionally the Negro people, for very real reasons, have carried forward the demands of the entire working class, cloaked in the garb of Negro rights!

This is true even now of the Black Power slogan, whose significance is not limited to the Negro people. As a white worker, I declare that I would a thousand times sooner live under the Black Power of Stokely Carmichael than under the “white” imperialist power of Lyndon Baines Johnson!

The Only Choice

And this is the choice which today, on one level or another, confronts every white worker. It can be seen most clearly in Sunflower County, Mississippi, where the only alternative to Black Power, for both black and white poor, is Eastland power. But the developing reality of the class struggle will soon bring forward in dramatic contrast everywhere the truth that there are only two paths open to the white workers: with the boss, or with the Negro workers; abandonment of all claim to share in the shaping of our destiny, or repudiation of the white-skin privileges, for which we, in our very infancy, pawned our revolutionary souls.

Another example is the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. In your trade union program, you praise it as a necessary response to the Jim Crow

practices of the labor brass. Fine! But you treat it as a stop-gap measure until such time as the racist unions change their policy. Why not instead recognize it as the kernel of a potential workers' controlled labor movement for all workers? You yourselves state that the union officials are now in the process of converting the unions into a fascist labor front. Instead of casting around for a way out of this by looking for some possible new alignments among the faction-ridden labor brass, why not recognize the importance of what is really new? In Mississippi we see the amazing (for the US) phenomenon of workers organizing their own union to fight the bosses. Are you going to let the fact that these workers are black blind you to the fact that they are, first of all workers, and leave you standing on the sidelines with your mouths full of patronizing words of admiration, unable to see that these black workers are today the foremost representatives, not merely of the Negro liberation movement, but of the American working class?

Indeed, under present conditions, with the Negro liberation struggle moving into high gear while the rest of the workers remain backward and relatively quiescent, to speak of the white workers "supporting" the Negro liberation movement is something of impertinence. The Negro liberation movement is today doing more for socialism and the class demands of the proletariat than any "working class" movement outside of it, and represents the firm and reliable support for any progressive struggles which may develop among white workers. More, it represents a solid base from which to develop such struggles. But in order to draw upon the strength of the Negro people's movement, the white workers must, first of all, break the links which tie them to the bosses (to the "leading-strings of the ruling classes," as Marx wrote Kugelman) by repudiating the white supremacist contract.

The Subjective Factor Was Ignored...

If this is not done we will see repetition of what has transpired more than once in our history: The crisis arrives, conditions worsen, the working people are radicalized—and then—defeat, because the subjective factor was ignored and the white-skin privilege and its vile ideology were not specifically, directly, consistently and courageously denounced and renounced in words and in deeds.

Up to now in my critical remarks I have dealt only with the white chauvinism in your erroneous theoretical line. But you also exhibit its inevitable concomitant: serious deviations in the direction of bourgeois nationalism. Since I regard the battle against bourgeois nationalism as primarily the responsibility of those Negroes imbued with Marxist-Leninist theory, I will limit myself to pointing out one example from your literature. In the November-December 1966 issue of SPARK, your West Coast paper, you report the speech of John Harris, whom you identify as a PLP organizer, before a mass rally in Watts: "Harris talked about the war in Vietnam and said that Black men should not fight against their Vietnamese brothers, 'who look more like them than the white man who sent them there.'"

Such a statement does not require much comment. If made by a black nationalist, it would be a positive statement and could be supported, but when made by a responsible leader of an organization which claims to be guided by the science of Marxism-Leninism, and then reprinted in an official publication of that organization, it becomes nothing more than shallow opportunism.

The vanguard of the working class is the home of the internationalist workers; while bourgeois nationalism, outside the party, may on occasion play a positive role, within the party it has no more place than the white chauvinism which engenders it.

I would like to conclude this letter by referring to the words of old John Brown. For many years it has been the fashion in American left-wing circles to pay homage to old Osawatomie, while ignoring the lessons he taught us. Usually this is done by dismissing his use of armed struggle under the pretext that it was "appropriate for another era." But there was more to Brown than his determination and heroism; he was a serious and careful student of American social reality. In his last letter to his family, Brown wrote to his children to "abhor, with undying hatred also, that sum of all villainies —slavery."

The 'peculiar institution'

John Brown clearly understood that all the social evils of our country were summed up in the "peculiar institution" of African slavery, without whose abolition progress in any field would be impossible.

So it was to old John Brown, and so it is to us, his children. For, all the

evils of US imperialist rule in its dying days—the barbarous wars of extermination launched against colonial and semi-colonial peoples, the murder by starvation, the mass insecurity, the fascist clamp being tightened on the American people, the trampling on culture and the contempt for the decent aspirations of humanity—all these are concentrated and summed up in the infernal theory and practice of white supremacy.

Therefore, the attack on white supremacy is the first order of business for all progressive forces in our country, and the key to strategy for Marxist-Leninists.

Noel Ignatin—March, 1967

A Letter Of Support

By Ted Allen

Dear Noel,

A few comments on your draft letter to PL:

Esther [Kusic] and I have, until now, been alone in this view and approach to strategy (at least as far as we know). First of all, nobody else has even posed the problem of strategy; they are “all dressed up and no place to go.” We were, therefore, simply exhilarated by your letter; it is a sheer delight, a bulls-eye scored against a well chosen target. It will be most interesting to see what PL will do with it. Let them ignore it at their peril—murder will out!

Some people with whom we have discussed this idea – the attack against white supremacy as the key to strategy in the struggle for socialism in the United States – have grasped the significance of it almost out of sheer class instinct, even without accepting the basic theory from which it is derived and is a part. Such encouraging reaction has been more frequent among Negroes than among whites, but not exclusively among Negroes.

Others, more frequently whites than Negroes, have simply missed the essential point because they are afflicted with what DuBois calls the “Blindspot in the eyes of America.” (*Black Reconstruction*, p 577) They have come to accept the oppression of the Negro as a fourth dimension of our world, and, so, our point of departure has been too subtle for their

notice. Most of them have, therefore, seemed to confuse our attitude with the general abhorrence of white supremacy (an abhorrence to which all respectable people pretend as a matter of course). Then they say, in effect, “So—what else is new?” and proceed to argue along the lines indicated below. In each case, I set forth the lines of our rebuttals to their arguments.

Argument No.1:

...That we exaggerate the importance of the Negro question.

You see, they are “old hands”, “experts” (usually white) on the “Negro question.” All the while their white blind spot prevents them from seeing that what we are talking about is NOT the Negro question, NOT, for instance, the history of the Negro and his struggle for equal rights, etc. —but (as some Negro publicists have previously put it) the “white question,” the white question of questions—the centrality of the problem of white supremacy and the white-skin privilege which have historically frustrated the struggle for democracy, progress and socialism in the US.

Argument No.2:

...That while the fight against white supremacy is certainly important, and even one of the most important tasks, it cannot be regarded as THE key; there are others, equally important, such as the struggle against the Viet Nam war and imperialist war in general, or solidarity with the nationally oppressed peoples of the world struggling against the yoke of imperialism.

It seems to me that a moment of calm reflection should suffice to bring one to the realization that the greatest political, social and ideological bulwark of the imperialist war makers and colonial oppressors is precisely white supremacy in America. Even more than “anti-Communism. For, after all, there are now the “accommodation” Communists and the “bad” Communists. It has got so you can’t get a rise out of people anymore with “Iron Curtain” and “We’ll bury you.” But the peril from those dark-skinned ones, from Lumumba to Mao, that is something that every white-blooded American is expected to grasp instinctively. Seriously, what is the great glaring lack of the peace movement in the United States? It is the poor grasp on the part of the whites in it of the connection between the war question and the struggle against white supremacy, their failure to see

the war in Viet Nam as a white supremacist war and to boldly challenge it on these grounds. (Of course, there are exceptions to this among the peace fighters.) Or, again, what is the greatest strength of solidarity of Americans with the oppressed peoples of the world? It is the sentiment of the Negro people. And what is the greatest weakness of that solidarity? It is the habit of white supremacist thinking conditioned by three-and-a-half centuries of oppression of the Negro and extermination of the Indian in America. Again, the fight against white supremacy and the white-skin privileges is the key.

Argument No. 3:

... That the struggle against white supremacy and the corrupting effects of the white-skin privileges cannot be the key for the simple reason that it is not possible to “sell” the idea to the white workers, who have those privileges and who are saturated with the white supremacist ideology of the bourgeoisie. Some argue further that it is not really in the white workers’ interests.

Since this is the whole nub of the task before us, volumes of articles will eventually have to be written on it. Therefore, I’ll not attempt to cover the ground of reply in a half-paragraph. But, first of all, those “vanguard” elements who worry about the difficulty of “selling” the rank-and-file on the idea of repudiation of the white-skin privileges should begin their charity at home: they should first “search their hearts” and ask if they, themselves, are sold on the idea of repudiating the white-skin privileges, and if they maintain a 24-hour-a-day vigilance in that effort. But in more objective terms, those who make this argument have openly or tacitly “given up on” the US workers (the white section at least) as a potentially revolutionary factor. They keep looking for some *deus ex machina* to deliver the American workers from what they regard as a historically “hopeless” position. I venture to state categorically on the basis of reading and participating and observing history that socialism cannot be built successfully in any country where the workers oppose it—and workers who want to preserve their white-skin privileges do not want socialism. So, again, in America, the fight against white supremacy and the white-skin privilege is the key. Let us note in passing the implicit contradiction in their saying that the fight against white supremacy is “one of the most important”

things, and, at the same time saying that the white workers cannot be won to it—and note what is implied by it, the abandonment of one or both, and indeed, of both.)

Argument No. 4:

...That we—the advocates of the position set forth in your letter to PL—are merely whites reacting subjectively out of feelings of guilt for our complicity in the white supremacist scheme of life in the US. (As if the “feelings” could somehow over-match the actual guilt!).

To any extent that there may be such subjectivism as they warn us against in our argument, the cure lies in accepting old John Brown’s injunction to his children (you cite the same letter): “Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them.” As you put it in your letter: “There are only two paths open to the white workers: with the boss, or with the Negro workers; abandonment of all claim to share in the shaping of our destiny, or repudiation of the white-skin privileges for which we, in our very infancy, pawned our revolutionary soul.” It is precisely the subjective factor, the fatal flaw of the labor and democratic movement in the United States, the influence of the bourgeois racist doctrine of white supremacy, upon which we must concentrate our attention, That this should have its concomitants in the subjective feelings of individuals is only normal, and one may say, necessary. John Brown was “subjective” about the abominable system of chattel slavery. (Remember also Marx’s “subjectivism” in his bitter comment to Engels: “The bourgeoisie will remember my carbuncles!” If anyone doubts the revolutionary relevancy of such “guilt feelings,” he need only begin to “act them out” and the bourgeoisie will let him know it through a thousand agencies!

If that which to us is the big thing is still too subtle for some very good people to see at first, perhaps will, take some comfort from the following recollections: In a letter, to Engels (24 August 1867) Marx, speaking of the just-published first volume of *Capital*, said: “The best thing in my book—and on this depends all understanding of the facts is the two-fold character of labor according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value, which is brought out at once in the first chapter.” Yet that “best thing” was a distinction which had escaped the best of the classical political economists, Petty, Smith and Ricardo, because of the bourgeois

blindness which prevented them from seeing capital as a historical—rather than a natural—category. Perhaps, too, we can take some comfort in this situation from recalling that Lenin insisted on making the whole distinction between a true revolutionary and “any ordinary bourgeois or petit bourgeois” in the movement turn upon the acceptance of the subtle Marxist idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Again, congratulations on the excellent job you done in your letter to PL.

Ted Allen—1967

Can White Workers Radicals Be Radicalized?

By Ted Allen

Brooklyn, NY 1967

For more than seventy years, general historians and labor and socialist specialists have sought to explain the “traditional” generally low level of class consciousness of the United States working class, as compared with that of the workers of many other industrial countries. Scholars, such as Frederick Engels, F.A. Sorge, Frederick Jackson Turner (with his three generations of “safety-valvers and anti-safety-valvers”), Richard T. Ely, Morris Hillquit, John R. Commons and associates, Selig Perlman, with his Theory of the Labor Movement, Mary Beard, and William Z. Foster, with his analyses of “American exceptionalism”, have produced a classical consensus on the subject.

They ascribe this phenomenon to what they regard as some six actual and peculiar objective factors of United States development: 1) The existence of the right to vote and other democratic liberties from the very founding of the state; 2) The heterogeneity of composition of the United States working class, a conglomeration of many tongues and kindreds; 3) The “safety valve” for social discontent provided by the availability of homesteading opportunities in the West; 4) The “social mobility” factor, the relative ease with which poor persons could rise on the economic ladder to become not only property owners, but entrepreneurs; 5) The relative shortage of labor, resulting in a higher level of wages, as compared

with that of other countries; 6) The institutionalization of “pure and simple trade unionism”, in the form of a dominant labor aristocracy using its organizational authority to prevent the development of independent political action by labor.

For many reasons this rationale has lost much of its force. For one thing, analysis completely refutes, or at least casts great doubt upon, many of the basic assumptions involved.

For instance, the free-land safety-valve theory has been thoroughly discredited. Heterogeneity may well be considered to have brought essentially and incidentally, more strength than weakness to the United States labor and radical movement, while the implied benefits of homogeneity are hard to substantiate. The rise of mass, “non- aristocratic”, industrial unions has not broken the basic pattern of opposition to a workers n party, on the part of the leaders. The “language problem” in labor agitating and organizing never really posed any insurmountable obstacle and, in any case, has long since ceased to be a major problem.

Elsewhere I shall undertake a thorough analysis of each of the points of that consensus and a general refutation of the thesis as a whole, and I shall argue for an alternative thesis. That argument will be based on two basic and irrefutable themes: First, whatever the state of c lass consciousness may have been most of the time, there have been occasional periods of widespread and violent eruption of radical thought and action on the part of the workers and poor farmers, white and black, directed against mill-owners, landlords, bankers, loan companies, usurious merchants, mining companies, railroad “kings”. There was black labor’s valiant Reconstruction struggle against the resubjugation by the” New South”, and the grand effort of the Exodus of 1879. The “year of violence”, 1877, when a ten-cent cut in the daily wage set off fiery revolts at every major terminal point across the country. From bloody Haymarket to the Pullman strike of ‘94. were nine years during which the U.S. army was called upon no less than 328 times to suppress labor’s struggles. There were the Populists of the same period when black and white poor fanners joined hands for an instant in the South as cotton went down to a nickel a pound, and when on Mary Lease’s advice Middle Western farmers decided to “raise less corn and more hell!” And in the 1930’s, the bursting grapes of wrath revived the old militant traditions, finally established industrial unionism, and black and

white auto workers added something new, the sit-down strike.

In such times as those, any proposal to discuss the “relative backwardness of the United States workers and poor farmers” would have had a ring of unreality. If, in such crises, the cause of labor was consistently defeated by force and co-optation; if no permanent advance of class consciousness in the form of a third, anti-capitalist, party was achieved; and, if subsequently, the scholastic harpies were emboldened to reappear questioning the fighting mettle of the black and white working people of this country—then there must have been reasons more relevant than “free land” that you couldn’t get; “free votes” that you couldn’t cast, or couldn’t get counted; or “high wages” for jobs you couldn’t find or, if found, you couldn’t live on; or “big deals” that never panned out; or... the rest of the standard rationale.

Second: Each of the “facts of life” as set down in the classical consensus must be decisively altered when examined in the light of the centrality of the question of white supremacy and of the white-skin privileges of the white workers, in particular. “Free land”, “constitutional liberties”, “immigration”, “high wages,” “social mobility”, ‘aristocracy of labor” – all, white-skin privileges. Whatever their effect upon the thinking of white workers may be said to be, the same cannot be claimed in the case of the Negro—“the excluded class.”

All this leaves us with two questions:

Why is it that the, at time, militant and radical anti-capitalist movement of industrial and agrarian toilers merely flared and then died without either changing power relationships or establishing an independent mass party of its own?

Why did no independent anti-capitalist Negro liberation party come into being?

The discussion of this latter question lies outside the scope of this article, except to the extent that white supremacist ideology and practices among white workers and radicals may have functioned to inhibit the development of a black radical party.

As with streams and their sources, it is axiomatic that the political level of a movement cannot rise above that of its leadership, in this case, the radical vanguard. It devolves upon them to educate and organize, to instill class consciousness in the others and to bring them to life, so to speak, in

the political-historical sense, as a self-conscious part of the class struggle. Therefore, to learn why the past upsurges of radicalism affected so little of a lasting nature “for the good of the order”; we must give first attention not to the workers in general, nor even just to the white workers, but to the radical movement. For, as it was said, “Ye are the salt of the earth, but if the salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted?”

And, indeed, wherewith, but from a black prophet-without-honor who was always seated “below the salt” at white America’s table—from Dr. W. E. B. DuBois?

Almost sixty years ago, DuBois warned American radicals: “The Negro Problem is the great test of the American Socialist.” A fighter by nature, he left the Socialist Party, saying “Can the objects of Socialism be achieved as long as the Negro is neglected? Can any great human problem wait? If Socialism is going to settle the American problem of race prejudice without direct attack along these lines by Socialists, why is it necessary to fight along other lines?” (*New Review*, Feb. I, 1913)

In his chief historical work, DuBois found that Black Reconstruction was “a normal working class movement, successful to an unusual degree, despite all disappointments and failures.” Its final defeat was due to “the race philosophy” of white supremacy, operating “to make labor unity or labor class-consciousness impossible.” (*Black Reconstruction*, pp. 383 and 680). He wrote that as the Great Depression withered the land and he saw the fatal race differential still unchallenged in the ranks of the jobless, penniless and starving white masses. By the light of the times in the mirror of the past he descried something of the future:

“The South, after the Civil war, presented the greatest opportunity for a real national labor movement which the nation ever saw or is likely to see for many decades. Yet the labor movement, with but few exceptions, never realized the situation. It never had the intelligence or knowledge, as a whole, to see in black slavery and reconstruction, the kernel and the meaning of the labor movement in the United States.” (ibid., 353)

Let no one lay the flattering unction to his whited soul that there is more Negro than historian in this work of DuBois. Being black helped him to see; but what he saw, was there.

Georgia Populist leader Tom Watson in 1892, boggled at the gaping pit waiting for him and his cause: “... the argument against the independent

movement in the South may be boiled down into one word—nigger.” Like farmers, like workers: “...if a body of (white) workmen generate sufficient temerity to ask for less hours or an advance in wages,” wrote Georgia American Federation of Labor Leaders Will Winn in 1898, “the Goliath in command has only to utter the magic word ‘Negroes’ to drive them back into the ruts in fear and trembling.”

In the thirties the bright brave crusade of American labor ground to a halt on the Southern approaches. “Both the AFL and the CIO encountered special difficulties in this effort,” explains one sympathetic white author. Instead of being glad that the Negro workers “were more easily organized than whites,” the “organizers” backed away, since “to organize the Negro workers first, was to risk alienating the whites.” (Ray Marshall, *The Negro and Organized Labor*, p. 44) Add one more epitaph on the tomb of labor’s buried dreams: “Don’t alienate the whites!”

Like dormant spores, the “kernel and meaning” of the working class movement in this country began to produce mass understanding only when they were watered and warmed in the ambience of the surging national liberation struggles of the peoples of the colonial world, and of the Negro people of the United States, in particular. Viewed thus in its historical context, it is a matter of profound significance that throughout the Left, not only the blacks, but white radicals are raising the old question about “the backwardness of the United States working class”, in this new and more meaningful form: “Can the white workers be radicalized?”

The very asking of this question by white radicals reflects a historic advance of understanding in that quarter. It fixed upon the white supremacist attitudes within the United States working class, as the No. 1 barrier to the development of a class conscious movement, and places this question as the central problem for the radical movement of today and tomorrow. In passing, let us acknowledge our debt to the black liberation struggle for this advance in our understanding; it is a debt which can be repaid in only one way.

To ask this new-formed question, “Can the white workers be radicalized?”, really is to ask, “Is it in the interest of the white workers, as workers, to become radical?” For, if we are to disregard the guiding principle of class interest, we may as well start with “revolutionary” preachments to the power-elite, themselves. At the same time, since everything contains

its own immanent opposite, this form of the question, though it marks an advance of understanding, bears the potential negation of the whole concept of proletarian radicalism as the motive and mode of social progress.

Indeed, many have opted for the negative, influencing yet others to be troubled with doubt. The negaters argue as follows:

“To become radicalized means above all, to believe that ‘An injury to one is an injury to all.’ But the injury dealt out to the black worker has its counterpart in the privilege of the white worker. To expect the white worker to help wipe out the injury to the Negro is to ask him to oppose his own interests. This would violate the condition of ‘class interest’ which you, yourself, have set. Therefore, the answer to the question, ‘Can the white workers be radicalized?’, is simply, ‘No.’ But do not be discouraged; do not forget, you said everything contains its own immanent opposite: Hegel in fair weather, Hegel in foul! Have we not vowed to follow the truth wherever it leads? If the truth leads us away from the working class, count yourself blessed since it also leads you out of the century-long shadow of ‘proletarian’ dogmatism!”

Whether they are right or wrong, I believe that this states their case fairly. Furthermore, it is a fair challenge and it is as futile as it is dishonest to dodge the issue. Yet that is precisely what some “working-class-oriented” radicals (blacks as well as whites), along with liberals tend to do. They want to be somewhere on the “yes” side of the question of the white-skin privilege. That is why the first question is not “Can the white workers be radicalized?” but “Can the white radicals be radicalized?” The first step toward a positive answer is to cut the ground out from under all the artful-dodging, as I shall try to do with some typical rationales:

Artful-Dodge No. 1:

“Level up; don’t level down! The way to handle the problem of the white-skin privilege is not to take anything away from the whites, but to give something to the blacks. “

If there is one sure way of perpetuating the white-skin privileges, this is it. This thesis is typified by the “Fair employment-through-full-employment” approach. Since nothing is to be “taken away” from the white worker, including his privilege of being first hired and last fired, this policy simply means the preservation of the Negroes’ status of last-hired and

first-fired, as long as there is any hiring or firing to be done, and there are any white workers left to be hired or any black workers left to be fired. The same may be said, *mutatus mutandis*, of this approach to anti-Negro discrimination in housing and education.

Artful-Dodge No 2:

“The new working class—the technical specialists and educators—will be able to deal with this problem of the white-skin privilege because of the unique powers deriving from their strategic place in the economy, and because they are almost completely insulated from the effects of Negro competition, they are not affected by the white supremacy that the lower orders of white have taken on in the hurly-burly.”

It is not the competition that white workers have with Negro workers that explains their infection with the poisonous ideology of white supremacy. After all, all workers compete with all other workers under this system. The reason for the white supremacist infection is the white-skin privilege which the power structure confers on the white workers.

The competition is an economic law; the racist form of it is a social and political contrivance. When white educators of the New York City schools invoked “due process” from Black Reconstruction’s Fourteenth Amendment to defend white job privileges, they merely showed what a college education can do to put irony at the service of white supremacy. When a section of “new working class” gets involved in the hurly-burly of the competitive struggle the next time, it is to be hoped that they, unlike the UFT, will make more common cause with the Negro than with their brother aristocrats of labor. But if they are not ready to face the hurly-burly of job competition with blacks, they are not ready to advise the “traditional working class”.

Artful-Dodge No. 3:

(More “radical” sounding) “The immediate interests of the white worker are in conflict with those of the Negro, where white-skin privileges are concerned. But their long-range interests in ‘the revolution’ are in common. Therefore, we need a strategy of ‘parallel struggles’ with each group fighting for ‘its own interest’ against the Establishment. Eventually our efforts will join when the long-range tasks are at hand. In the mean-

time, however, racism cannot be the main issue among the white workers; at the same time it must be the main issue among the black workers.”

Obviously, as far as the fatal poison of white-skin privileges is concerned, these dodgers do not have in mind “parallel” struggles, but opposite ones. We shall never get to “the day” except day-by-day, never to the “leaps” except by steps; and we can never come to either by going in opposite directions on the ground that separates us. The day-to-day real interests of the white workers is not the white-skin privileges, but in the development of an ever-expanding union of class conscious workers, white and black. That is the only sure measure of proletarian class interests. That is why racism must be made the central issue day-by-day if the white workers are ever to have anything at all to say about their “long-range” interests.

Artful-Dodge No. 4:

(More “radical” sounding yet) “Eventually, when the depression and/or austerity times roll around, the corporations will move to cut their losses by reducing the privileges that they have extended to the white workers. When that time comes, the white workers will sing “Solidarity, forever!” again and join with the black workers in the struggle against capital.”

If it was “forever”, why does it have to be “again”? Besides, that sort of “automatic” solidarity always seems to have a white top and a black bottom, and that’s how we got to where we are today. After all, the next depression will not be the first one! First, explain what went wrong in 1837, 1873, 1892, and 1929, just to mention the initial years of some famous depressions, none of them distinguished for the elimination of the divisive line of white-skin privilege. Whether that privilege is an extra sack of Red-Cross flour or a swimming pool in the back yard; each does its poisonous work of feeding racism. Reduce the white-skin privilege? Why, the power-elite in this country would, to paraphrase Marx, give up 24 of the 25 Amendments, and the Democratic and Republican Parties, to boot, before they’d voluntarily withdraw one-twenty-fifth of the white workers’ race privilege. It is the keystone and mortar of their over-arching power. It will not “go away”, it will not be taken away; it can only be ended by repudiation by those on whom the rulers confer it.

Artful-dodge No. 5:

(The most “radical” sounding) “Don’t waste time on the United States white workers. For the time being, forget them. The privileges of these workers are paid for by the super-profits wrung out of the super-exploited black, yellow and brown labor of colonial peoples (including the special case of the oppressed Negro in the United States). The victorious national liberation struggles of these peoples will, sooner or later, chop off these sources of white-skin privilege funds. Then, though not before, the white workers will ‘get the message’. Meantime, the role of white radicals is simply to ‘support’ the colonial liberation struggles.”

This is 1) wrong; 2) dishonest; 3) cowardly.

Wrong, because it confuses the white-skin privilege in general, which is the prerogative of every white person living in the United States, with the special form of that privilege, the payment (direct or indirect) to the “aristocracy” of labor above what would be necessary according to the laws of normal competition, and which enables those few workers to escape in all but a formal sense from the proletarian to the petit-bourgeois life.

The white-skin privileges of the masses of the white workers do not permit them nor their children to escape into the ranks of the propertied classes. In the South, where the white-skin privilege has always been most emphasized and formal, the white workers have fared worse than white workers in the rest of the country. The white-skin privilege for the mass is the trustee’s privilege, not release from jail, merely freedom of movement within it and a diet more nearly adequate. It is not that the ordinary white worker gets more than he must have to support himself and his family, but that the black worker gets less than the white worker. The result is that by thus inducing, reinforcing and perpetuating racist attitudes on the part of the white workers, the present-day power-masters get the political support of the rank-and-file of the white workers in critical situations, and without having to share with them their super profits in the slightest measure, as contrasted to the case of the “aristocracy of labor.” The phenomenon of so-called “social overhead” capital expenditure does not alter this situation qualitatively; they do not change the economic status of the rank and file of white workers, and they do conform to and serve the needs of white supremacy.

Dishonest, because it promises to “support” the black struggle, but refuses to give the most meaningful “support” of all, i. e., to challenge the ideology and practice of white supremacy among the white workers.

Cowardly, because it chooses the role of “supply troops” rather than that of “front-line fighters” against the vile racist theory and practice of white supremacy.

In order to face this issue squarely, then, we must understand that the initiator and ultimate guarantor of the white-skin privileges of the white worker is not the white worker, but the white worker’s masters. They have maintained it for nearly four hundred years as an indispensable necessity for their continued rule. Consider a few historical facts.

All authorities agree (McMaster, Commons, Coman, and Schlesinger, for example) that the conditions of the masses of white industrial and agricultural workers, North and South, were abominable in the decades before the Civil War. Still they had their white-skin privileges: The white worker was an actual or potential citizen, with citizen’s rights; the black had no rights. The white, as possessor—if not immediately, then within a definite time—of his own person, had legal freedom of movement; the black did not own himself. The white, if bound by indenture, debtor apprenticeship, or in some other manner, might still succeed in escaping into the free-moving white world much more easily than the black worker. As possessor of himself, the white workers could—even though not always immediately—take a better job, if he could find one; the black had no such chance. The white worker, if opportunity afforded, could learn to read and then study as a means of improving his lot; the black worker was forbidden by law even to learn to read. The white worker could aspire to become a farmer, a merchant or an industrialist; the black had only flight, revolt, revenge to dream of.

At this point, the white skin privilege of the white worker was simply the right to be free; to abolish slavery was to abolish that privilege as a white-skin prerogative. challenge our present-day-nay-sayers to say that the victory of Emancipation in the Civil War was not in the interest of the white workers!

Reconstruction was defeated by armed lynch-terror against the Negro which redefined the white-skin privilege of white labor as the right to vote, to serve on juries, to become landowners in the South or West. It

was sealed with the establishment of the cotton textile mill industry in the South to prevent the poor white from competing and consequently uniting with black labor. (See, Report of the Industrial Commission of the United States, vols. vii and xiv., especially the latter, "Review of the Evidence", p. III, Washington, D.C., 1901; "Broadus Mitchell, Rise of the Cotton Mills in the South", page 137; W. J. Cash, "The Mind of the South," page 1790.) Its accounts thus settled with black labor in the South, the nationally consolidated power of capital confronted the workers of the North and crushed them in a series of sharp, often armed, struggles in the next ten years. Their voting, jury service and homestead rights were of no help to the strikers of 1877, or to the counted-out Greenbackers and Single Taxers, or the Molly Maguires, or the Haymarket defendants in those fierce battles with the Robber Barons.

It was substance and symbol that the very federal troops withdrawn from Reconstruction duty in the South were mobilized against the great railroad strike of that year. In the South, the tragedy of the defeat of Reconstruction had its farcical sequel in the defeat of the white supremacist poor southerner 'readjusters' in Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina and Mississippi at the hands of the Bourbons whom they had helped to power over the broken hopes of the black man.

The Populist Revolt was dissipated and destroyed by the redefinition, "constitutional and legal", this time, of the white-skin privilege to vote, to free public education, and to segregation of Negroes into the worst conditions in all public accommodations. (William Mabry, *The Negro in North Carolina Politics*, p. 69) Equally important, was the rejection of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise, and the driving of Negroes out of their traditional position in industrial crafts, as the role of the white labor aristocracy was established in the new imperialist scheme of things.

During the next quarter of a century the millions of Negroes who migrated to the North were assimilated into industry on the basis of the white-skin privilege system imposed by the industry-owners and the political and social order prevailing. When, at the end of that time, the Great Depression radicalized the masses of workers, there were sharp and bloody class struggles. Solidarity, forever! Industrial Unionism! Labor Political Action! Black-white unity! Under such slogans the masses of the workers poured into the labor movement. But when the dust had cleared, any threat

to the power of the capitalist class had passed by harmlessly and things were “under control” again.

Sealing the Bargain

While in the South, the open appeal to white racism had stopped the labor movement, in the North, the white-skin privilege was institutionalized in the very form of trade union collective bargaining contracts. Instead of solidarizing with the black worker as the black worker had solidarized with the white worker, the unions gave contractual force to the white-skin privilege pattern which the employers had previously developed. Thus the employers were able to adapt standard trade union demands for seniority, promotion lists, job classification, closed and/or union shop, etc., to their larger purpose, just as the labor reform legislation served to seal a bargain with the white-supremacists in the Democratic Party.

Has this been in the interests of the white workers? The thirty-year boom is drawing to a close, as we can sense by the tightening noose of “austerity.” To see the enervating effect of the complicity of white workers in defending their white-skin privileges under conditions of downward economic indices, look at the soft coal industry.

At one time, the coal miners of this country were called the “backbone of the labor movement”, the great center and backlog of the industrial union upsurge and political action trends of the 1930’s. They had the largest union, and the largest number and proportion of Negro members, in a solidly organized industry. They won the biggest mass wage increases of any union on the basis of equal pay rates for Negroes. They abolished the North-South wage differential in coal, winning an immediate twenty-five percent increase in the basic daily wage in the Southern mines in 1941. In the mining regions they had much authority in the selection of local, state and national officers, elective and appointive, working in political cooperation with the Negro people’s organizations in large measure.

‘Local Customs’ in charge

On the other hand, they made no attack upon the white-skin privileges in the union, nor in the mines, nor in the mining communities. With rare local exceptions, Negroes were excluded from top union positions; housing in mining towns usually did not have running water, but the segregated

status was maintained. White-supremacist “local customs” were ruling doctrine in the Southern mining areas.

And if two-thirds of the miners white and black were handloaders, ninety percent of the Negro miners were in that category, in keeping with the prevailing white-supremacist pattern of excluding Negroes from other categories, especially those involving the operation of machinery or supervisory functions. The absence of seniority rights in the United Mine Workers contracts was, in this particular instance, a special disability for the Negro miners, in contrast to the situation of Negroes in many other industries, because they were by no means “newcomers” to that industry. In 1900, forty percent of the coal miners in the Southern and Border States were Negroes. In 1923, in the nation as a whole, one out of every twelve soft coal miners was a Negro.

The operators struck back at the miners’ union gains by way of the Joy loader and other mechanical loading devices, and in the post-World War years hand-loaded coal became a thing of the past and two out of every three jobs were abolished. But, instead of rallying black-white unity in the face of this murderous economic onslaught of the coal operators, the union united with the coal companies in the name of “competitive efficiency with other fuel and energy sources” and the way was smoothed by throwing the jobs of the Negro miners first before the steam-roller. The lay-off rate of all the Negro miners in the industry as a whole was one-third higher than that of the white miners. In West Virginia, where more than half of all the Negro miners in the country were employed, the lay-off rate was one-and-a-half times that of the white miners. In Alabama, the state with the largest proportion of black miners, the lay-off rate for Negro miners was more than three times that for whites.

And did this treachery serve the interests of the white miners? Go ask it in the “hillbilly” ghettos of Chicago and Detroit. Or in the hopeless hollows from which so many fled. Or in the bereaved and grieving mining towns where scores of the “lucky” ones are each year entombed below or petrify their lungs in black, whites sacrificed now in their turn on the alter of “competitive fuel efficiency.” Go ask it in fields where the contract wage scale has become a mockery, whether in the dog-holes, the truck mines, or in “union operations” where all that is “union” is the dues and the royalties, if that.

Whether or not the miner's general conditions might have been better if all had joined to enforce the seniority rights of the Negroes, for instance, we cannot know. But two things which we do know persuade us that solidarity would have been better, not just for the black miners, but for the whites. First, as Douglass taught us, where there is no struggle there is no progress. And, second, every miner had taken a solemn oath "never to wrong a brother or to see him wronged, if it be in my power to prevent it." By their complicity with the coal operators in robbing the Negro miners of their job rights, the white miners cancelled that sacred pledge—not just to the black man, but to each other—and placed themselves at the mercy of their ancient enemy.

The implications would seem to be unmistakable. Yet there are time-slicers who will argue that the white-skin privileges makes the sufferings of the white worker less and of shorter duration than those of the Negro, and that therefore it serves the former's interest to that degree. But how can they possibly know? Has the other way been tried? Have the white workers ever been asked to cast off the albatross of privilege and to take the side of the Negro workers instead of the white bosses? Can anyone believe that such a course would not be accompanied by a qualitative transformation in the unity and militancy of the working class? Having that, all things shall be added unto labor's cause.

While history has shown that the white-skin privilege does not serve the real interests of the white workers, it also shows that the concomitant racist ideology has blinded them to that fact.

Undeniably, the wrath of the gods will crackle about the heads of the white workers, especially the "early joiners", who reject the racist privileges—Columbia University students fighting the white-privileged gymnasium and urban "removal"; the white Chicago toolmaker denouncing in his shop and union meeting the white privileges of his own craft; the minority of white New York teachers tearing away at the "job security" mask for white privilege; the "keep-on-pushin" types of the Southern Conference Education Fund exposing the poison of the privilege to the eyes of the southern white workers. Jail, harassment, police surveillance, rain down on such as dare to blaspheme against the holy of holies. In this way, quite possibly, the first white-skin privilege to fall will be the low ratio of whites to blacks in the prison population.

The Road to Power

Still, in the storm, some reassurance; it means that a shaft of challenge has struck the premises of power. It signifies that the road to power begins with drawing from these few courageous examples two general rules of attack: First, face the problem of the necessity to repudiate the white-skin privilege. Second, act; repudiate the privilege by violating the white “gentleman’s agreement” as completely as you can at every opportunity. Once radicals adopt such an approach to radicalizing the white masses, the implications for particular areas of activity will not be hard to find. If in doubt at first, just make a list of the privileges and start violating them.

Whether the white workers can today or in the future be radicalized in a historically more important and lasting sense than in past crises of our history, depends mainly upon the function of the white radicals. A radical is one who understands that race privilege masked as “college training” or “seniority rights” or “civil service ratings”, or “apprenticeship training”, will prove no less fatal for the U.S. labor movement than less sophisticated versions of it have been in the past; who understands that “Solidarity forever !” means “ Privileges never! ”; who understands, not only that white supremacy is the Achilles Heel of American Imperialism, but that the white-skin privilege is the Achilles Heel of the American working class.

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