

## **Black Workers: Key Revolutionary Force**

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Imperialism has one primary need—to amass maximum profits. Therefore, the oppression of Black workers at home and the domination of oppressed peoples in Asia, Africa and Latin America is not merely an aberration of deranged imperialists, but the necessary operation of imperialism.

Racism is the political expression of imperialism; it organizes and justifies such brutal exploitation at home and abroad that the exploitation of Black workers is the most profitable domestic business of U.S. imperialism.

Wage differentials between Black and white workers each year amount to \$22 billion. In addition, billions more are saved by denying Black Americans the vital social services necessary for survival; this is the enormity of Black oppression.

Imperialism as a system must perpetuate racism in order to thrive; it must continue to reap the super-profits derived from the “racial inferiority” thesis it has drummed home into both Black and white workers.

Consequently, the ability of the working class to reject racism is crucial to its ability to end class oppression. U.S. imperialism cannot exist without the brutal super-exploitation of Black people and, therefore, will never grant equality to Black workers.

The fact of this \$22 billion of super-profits raked in by the bosses in this country permeates every aspect of life. It leads us to the conclusion that unless an all-out fight is made against the racism that permits this robbery—a battle waged by revolutionaries in the first place and by the working class in general—then (1) the workers will be unable to make any basic advances in their class interests and establish a Left-Center coalition to lead their fight against the bosses; (2) the danger of fascism will increase; (3) the hacks who serve the ruling class at the head of the trade union movement will continue to ride roughshod over the interests of the rank and file; and (4) no Marxist-Leninist revolutionary party will succeed in the United States.

The basic industries on which the U.S. ruling class depends for its very existence are increasingly using Black workers as a source of labor power. In the auto industry, which affects one out of every seven jobs in this country, there is a growing Black minority. No longer limited to 10 or 20 per cent of the work force, it now makes up 35 to 50 per cent, and in many plants Black workers are in a majority. In the steel mills the Black work force has reached about 35 per cent of the total. In the next 8 to 10 years the present 500,000-man work force in basic steel is expected to dwindle to 200,000 if the \$2 billion annual capital investment plans of steel bosses produce their planned results. Since the preponderance of Black workers are among the unskilled—those most likely to be affected by such plans—a fierce struggle involving tens of thousands of Black workers is looming.

The transportation industries are gaining increasing numbers of Black workers, since this is another area that hires many unskilled workers. In many metropolitan mass transit systems, Black workers form a majority. This is also true in other “vital city services” such as sanitation where Black workers compose from 30 to 70 per cent of the work force.

Thus, though Black workers compose only 10-15 per cent of the population, their presence—and militancy—in such vital areas of the economy as basic industry, the key unionized sectors, and key industries in big cities, gives them a far greater importance than their numbers suggest; in fact, a decisive importance.

Consider New York City, for instance: Black and Latin workers make up 25 per cent of the population but are a majority, or near it, in mass transit, sanitation, garment, post office, welfare department, and are sizable minorities in teamsters, railroad, long-shore, distribution and city government. Though New York’s white workers form majorities in some of these industries, most of them are in the skilled crafts and in the white-collar sales areas. Black workers, therefore, being either a majority or sizable militant minority, can bring the city’s politicians and their bosses to their knees.

The above example can be repeated in other large cities where Black workers make up an even larger percentage of the population—up to 40 and even 50 per cent in places like Chicago, New Orleans, Newark, and Detroit.

Since capitalism as a system creates racism, there is more to the problem than just the effects within the working class at the

point of production. The ruling-class-created ghetto so permeates every area of life that white workers—and the middle class—can no longer escape its growing effects. During the New York school shutdown, a racist fight affected every neighborhood in the city as Black parents demanded better education for their children.

But the effects of the ghetto spread far beyond education: super profits to banks grow from mortgages on ghetto housing; rebellions begin to shape the uses of the army and national guard as well as local police forces; the flight of whites to surrounding areas makes Black people a greater force within the cities and creates sharper contradictions about “who pays” for the running of the city, since the remaining Black workers are the lowest paid; the hopelessness of ghetto life leads Black youth to enlist in the armed forces or await the draft, making for a less stable military to depend on in foreign imperialist wars and in domestic rebellions. The increasing revolts among Black servicemen in Vietnam and here at home attest to this instability. The special oppression also leads to a greater resistance to being drafted by many Black youth. Both types of opposition to the military creates a greater need for the ruling class to figure out ways to put more pressure on white youth to “serve their time,” resulting in all kinds of new gimmicks to maintain a standing army. Again the special oppression of Black people sharpens the contradictions for the whole population.

Of course, the ruling class has many “answers” for these problems: “community control”; breaking up present slums with middle-class housing and relocating Black people in new slums; making welfare clients into case-aides and eliminating caseworkers, who cost more money; hiring more Black cops and national guardsmen, as well as turning militant Black youths in the ghetto into local police forces over Black workers (“community control of the police”).

Though it's been said that fascism will come to the U.S. in the guise of democracy, it is more important to say that racism will be the main tool the ruling class uses to turn white workers and the white middle class to fascism. The bosses will try to present the Black workers as the main enemy in every one of the situations already cited, thereby preventing the specially oppressed Black workers from leading the whole working class in revolution against the bosses.

### **Recent Experiences in Labor Movement**

The central importance of the fight against racism—and the potential for working-class victory if the fight is successful—is reflected in the fact that it is fast becoming the burning question in just about every major trade union and community struggle now taking place.

In the New York City school shut-down, the Shanker leadership of the United Federation of Teachers has done the bidding of the bosses by calling a racist walkout directed essentially against the Black and Latin working-class parents of the city. The split between white and Black workers in New York has not only hurt any common class struggle against these bosses, but has set rank-and-file white teachers fighting ghetto parents, and generally taken the heat off the main enemy—the ruling class' Board of Education.

In a recent major rank-and-file led strike in New York's largest industry, garment (see *PL*, October, 1968), racism was the tactic the bosses tried to use to split the Black and Latin workers. This was a particularly important gambit for the garment bosses because these workers were setting an outstanding example to the 250,000 workers in the garment center and could become of decisive importance in breaking the boss-banker-ILGWU-Mafia-police hold on those workers. Nor did the ruling class lose sight of the fact that half of these quarter-million workers live in the ghetto and could bring it special organized leadership because of the experience gained in their struggles against the bosses at the point of production.

In recent auto wildcats, the issue of racism assumed an increasing importance. First there were the King assassination walkouts, led by Black workers, which shut down the plants; in some cases the companies tried to forestall the movement by voluntarily closing down “in memoriam” before the Black workers walked. Then there were disorganized attempts by white workers to walk after Kennedy was killed, but these were racist reactions. (If “they” could shut it down for one of “their own” why can't we do the same for one of “ours.”) For the most part these failed to shut the plants.

In two wildcat strikes in Chicago—Railway Express and bus drivers—again it was Black workers in the lead, with the bus

strike contributing to the disruption at the Democratic Convention.

And there have also been welfare client demonstrations. Since these were generally led by government anti-poverty forces, the caseworkers were on the spot. They had to find a course of action that would neither be directed against the clients nor seek out the cops as allies but would, at the same time, help build the union against the city, not against the clients, and also defeat the racism existing among both white and Black caseworkers.

These struggles—involving either the leadership of Black workers, the fight against racism by Black and white workers or the use of racism by the ruling class to divide and weaken the working class—follow many battles of a similar nature in the past year: a wildcat at Ford's Mahwah (N.J.) assembly plant when Black workers walked out with the support of white workers after a white foreman called one Black worker a "Black bastard" (see *Challenge*, May, 1968); the historic Memphis sanitationmen's strike, which fought the whole ruling-class structure of that deep Southern city for union recognition and decent pay and conditions, setting a fighting example for unorganized workers all over the South (see *PL*, June, 1968); the wildcat strike and two-day rebellion of 15,000 Black and white workers at Newport News (Va.) Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., initiated by 200 Black workers over oppressive working conditions and discrimination, and joined by the rest of the workers, a majority of whom are white (see *PL*, Oct.-Nov., 1967). No doubt still more examples both inside and outside the trade union movement could be cited to prove the point that racism and the fight against it, especially when led by Black workers over class issues, has become the all-pervading issue in the country.

### Ruling Class Reactions

That the ruling class recognizes the importance of maintaining racism is evident from its latest actions. A two-pronged drive has unfolded, raising racism among white workers to new heights and also pushing anti-working-class Black nationalism to an unprecedented degree.

The ruling class made "law and order" (meaning shoot Black people) the main issue in the recent elections; it gave Wallace tremendous publicity to bring out the worst racism among white

workers; under the guise of "community control" it provoked a school shut-down in New York City designed to weaken and destroy the teachers' union as well as whip up racism among white people; it is attempting to use professional workers such as teachers and welfare workers—people with middle-class backgrounds, aspirations and ideology—as a base from which to launch strong attacks on Black and Latin workers and the class consciousness of workers generally; and it is using every anti-working-class Black nationalist it can create or buy as a target for white people to vent their racism on.

And that is the other side of the ideological coin: the capturing of the Black movement by anti-working-class nationalism, using the very increase in Black consciousness itself as a weapon against both Black and white workers. The ruling class is afraid of the class leadership Black workers in Black caucuses can give to white workers, setting them in motion against their sellout leaders. Thus, the big pitch for "Black capitalism" (a major plank of Nixon's campaign), or "sitting down with the Black Panthers," or "making contact" to keep things cool—meaning buying off any Black militants, an approach increasingly used by mayors such as Aliota of San Francisco and Lindsay and his "urban task force" in New York, and "community control"; in other words, anything to prevent Black workers from developing a revolutionary, Marxist-Leninist outlook.

The ruling class "lieutenants" in the labor movement are busy, too. It is no accident that Reuther is forming a second labor federation at this time. In addition to the unions considering joining (UAW, teamsters, chemical workers, rubber workers—all with large numbers of Black workers), it will probably include unions such as District 65, the drug and hospital workers' Local 1199 and the UFT in New York, as well as many ex-left-led unions that are having plenty of trouble keeping their increasing Black memberships in line. Reuther, himself, sees the handwriting on the wall in the UAW, with Black workers increasing in membership and in leadership of rank-and-file actions.

Therefore, what better way to create the illusion of action than to set up a safety valve for more militant workers to "fight the Meany old guard," which, of course, includes the "fight for civil rights." As things stand now, the Alliance for Labor Action may have four million members. It will be looking for—and feeding—Black nationalists and sellouts to join the payroll and become the

leaders of the militant Black workers. In other words, the main feature of this new federation will be to contain the rising rank-and-file militancy in the labor movement, of which the Black workers form a crucial part. The organizers are even "sponsoring" (unofficially, of course) Black caucuses in their own unions (Reuther in the UAW, Shanker in the UFT) to steer the workers down the wrong road.

### **Fighting Racism: Principled Struggle**

In PLP's Black Liberation Program we stressed the necessity of organizing Black workers in the shops and at the "point of production." Here, we have emphasized the role of Black workers in certain key industries and the all-pervading influence of racism and the fight against it in every important people's struggle now occurring. From this it must be concluded that unless an all-out fight is made against racism within the working class (which, of course, includes our own members), a Marxist-Leninist party cannot grow or succeed in the United States. Furthermore, the ability to defeat a ruling-class move to fascism will be seriously weakened. We will not even be able to construct a Left within the trade union movement, let alone a real Left-Center coalition.

It is not only crass racism to conceive of building this Left and this coalition without major emphasis on the role of Black workers in leadership of it—it is also impossible. In the past, many of us have coupled the correct idea of the Black Liberation Movement being the "vanguard of the revolutionary process" in the U.S. with the false notion that this meant the Black people as a whole were in advance of the white workers, especially in basic industries. And, further, that while the Black people could not wait for the white workers, at some time the white workers would catch up and assume their rightful place (being the majority, after all) in the leadership of the working-class movement. It is time to bury this theory, for it is now clear that the trade union movement—and any budding Left-Center coalition within it—will be smashed unless it decisively includes Black workers in its leadership as well as, of course, in its rank and file. Therefore, the Black workers (not the "all-class" Black population) are an essential part of the revolutionary potential of the U.S. working class and in a quality and quantity far exceeding their percentage in the population. Without the Black workers, no rank-and-file

movement of workers in any key area of the trade union movement can succeed for long, if at all.

The fight against racism is inseparable from the fight for rank-and-file-led unions and from working-class solidarity. We can thus define the New York school shutdown as a racist action, not a strike in the class interests of workers. And we can oppose "solidarity" in the abstract by asking "solidarity with whom and for what?" In New York it was solidarity with the teachers' bosses, the administrators and principals, to say nothing of the cops necessary to "protect" teachers' "job security" in the schools. That's about the last place to look for job protection—to the police whose job it is to break the class actions of workers.

Contradictions such as these are going to increase. We must prepare to analyze every action led predominantly by white workers from a class viewpoint that considers racism an anti-working-class factor. We must carefully determine if the action is building solidarity against the ruling class or "solidarity" for racism.

From all this we must conclude that the question of fighting racism is a principled question, a question of strategy, not tactics. Building a base for revolutionary ideology and for a Marxist-Leninist party, rather than a base "for the union" or a personal base for ourselves, can only succeed if the fight against racism is made a central task of the Marxist-Leninist party.

This problem is most clearly revealed among teachers in New York because the class struggle is a lot hotter, at the moment, on the school issue than it is in many other trade union situations. But when the battle heats up in other industries and areas of working-class struggle, we will be faced with the same ruling-class drive to raise racism to a fever pitch. We could then easily give in to it (since to fight it "isolates me") the way some teachers did.

Such behavior stemmed from the confused idea that the struggle was for solidarity in a trade union class struggle, rather than a racist action; therefore, any opposition might lead to isolation from one's fellow teachers. Yet, in nearly every instance where the class analysis of the action as racist was put forward, some teachers—and parents—were won over to that understanding, and won over on a higher level than ever before. This is building a base for a Marxist-Leninist party, for a revolutionary ideology. To "defend the union" under any and all circumstances, without examining the class content of that defense, is economism, not Marxism; and in

this case was also racism. Such a defense will have the opposite result: It will destroy the union as a viable weapon of class struggle for rank-and-file teachers. In such a situation Black and white workers (in this case, Black parents and white teachers) who see "going into school or staying out" as a purely tactical question are thinking of racism itself as a tactical question. Here we see, in sharp relief, the inseparability of class-conscious trade unionism and the fight against racism, since in not fighting racism in a principled way the union, as an organization that is supposed to fight in the class interests of its members, is being destroyed.

We cannot adopt an approach that says: "Racism is a tough question; it splits workers if you fight on it too soon. Therefore, fight on other not-so-tough economic questions first." With racism staring us in the face now in just about every situation we encounter, the "too soon" approach will tend to make the fight against racism a tactical question. This would be a disaster for a Marxist-Leninist party. We must make the fight against racism a cardinal principle. Of course, this doesn't mean that the first time one meets a particular racist white worker he should be fed the entire Marxist-Leninist analysis in one swallow. But it does mean that the plan of how to—and the necessity to—fight racism every step of the way is laid in concrete discussions in our PLP clubs, in caucuses, and in all organs of people's struggle.

For our part, in PLP, we must re-emphasize the struggle to win over the white workers, away from racism and to a class line. Not to do this would be to fall into the trap of: "All white workers are racist; therefore develop relations with only Black workers." It is possible to make progress among most white workers, as we have found from our own experience. Even more important, we must develop the kind of mutual trust and confidence among workers that goes into their understanding of us as communists. Such a relationship will go a long way to helping us get listened to and break down racism among white workers. The main concentration for white communists is still among white workers.

### **Black Communists Reflect Anti-Racism**

A real measure of whether we're fighting racism among the masses is whether we're recruiting Black workers to a Marxist-Leninist party, which in turn is a reflection of how well we're fighting racism among white workers. No Black worker can be

expected to join such a party unless it is actively fighting racism among white workers who are racist. Thus, recruiting Black workers becomes a key question and forces white communists to measure up to what they're doing among white workers as well. For instance, are white workers being recruited to a line that doesn't include fighting racism as a principled question?

There are, of course, many special aspects to the fight against racism. For example: People who come from middle class or student backgrounds acquire a special brand of racism over and above the brand developed among white workers, a certain class snobbishness that is directed against all workers but that becomes a racist attitude when it involves Black workers.

Another problem concerns teachers. Teachers have a particular problem in fighting racism because they are involved not only with their fellow workers but also with the children and parents in the large cities where a high proportion of the population is Black or Latin. Though an auto or garment worker may not like his work, this doesn't necessarily reflect itself in racism towards his fellow workers. But if a teacher doesn't like children, he will inevitably adopt racist attitudes toward the ghetto children similar to the racism of his fellow teachers. Teachers deal mostly with the children of the working class and in a high percentage of cases with the children of the specially oppressed Black and Latin workers. Under these circumstances, to dislike children will inevitably result in anti-working-class and racist attitudes. If the cornerstone of any strong teachers' union is an alliance with parents, and if these parents are part of specially oppressed groups—victims of racism—certainly a dislike of children that becomes racism will defeat the aim of any teacher attempting to fight in the class interests of his fellow teachers or of the working class as a whole.

Racism is the main tool the ruling class has to divide the working class. In every instance where its use has been successful, all workers have been set back, no matter how much a privileged group of white workers think they've gained, because the united struggle of workers as a class has been weakened. And in all the instances cited in this article, where racism has been forced to take a back seat, the class interests of all workers—Black and white—moved forward.

To root this cancer out of our Party and the working class is a first order of business. We must make a qualitatively renewed

effort to study the questions of racism and nationalism as they reveal themselves in our everyday relations with white and Black workers. We must oppose racism whenever and wherever it bursts forth, in the smallest incident as well as the biggest strike or working-class struggle.

The fight against racism is a life and death matter in the United States. To succeed means to bring the militant and revolutionary leadership of the specially oppressed Black workers to the working class as a whole in the total fight against the same exploiter—the bosses who own and run this country. It means to build a base for socialism within the trade union movement, and a Left-Center coalition that will toss out the present sellout misleadership and work in the class interests of the rank and file. And it means that a truly revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party will be built in the U.S., one that will not in any way accommodate itself to the ideology of the class enemy.

Therefore, for the working class to emancipate itself and all oppressed people, for it to eventually seize state power as a class, with a Marxist-Leninist party in its vanguard, the racism that splits the working class must be buried.