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NEW TRENDS AND NEW MOODS IN THE NEGRO STRUGGLE

By George Breitman

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Much has happened in the Negro struggle since our party convention in 1957 adopted the resolution, "The Class-Struggle Road to Negro Equality." We must become better acquainted with the new trends and moods and find ways to link ourselves with the most progressive forces. The following contribution to the party discussion is an expansion of remarks made at the 1961 convention panel on Negro work, together with some suggestions and conclusions. I realize that it is incomplete and maybe one-sided on some points, but I have kept it as short as I can in order to submit it without delay; I am sure that other participants in the discussion will correct one-sidedness and errors.

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The tempo of the Negro struggle continues to run ahead of that of the labor movement. While a few cracks and openings have appeared here and there in the unions, the Negro struggle as a whole has been marked by continuous and dramatic forward movement, expansion and progress. This is easily demonstrated by merely listing the main events of the last 18 months:

- * February, 1960 -- start of the Southern sitins.
- * May, 1960 -- formation of the Negro American Labor Council.
- * September, 1960 -- demonstrations of sympathy with the Cuban revolution in Harlem.
- * February, 1961 -- the demonstration at the UN against the murder of Lumumba which called national attention to the existence of several new organizations.
- * May, 1961 -- the Freedom Rides.
- * May-July, 1961 -- significant signs of self-defense activity in various parts of the country.
- * 1960-1961 -- continued growth of the Black Muslims.
- * 1960-1961 -- emergence of a new radical tendency symbolized by Robert F. Williams and independent young Negro intellectuals.

An examination of these rapidly unfolding developments shows that a contest for leadership has begun among four tendencies in the Negro movement -- the "gradualist," reformist tendency represented by the NAACP leaders; a "non-violent," passive resistance tendency represented by Rev. Martin Luther King and CORE; a nationalist tendency, whose chief spokesmen are the Black Muslims, led by Elijah Muhammad; and a militant or radical tendency, represented by numerous new groups that have not consolidated into a single nationwide organization.

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It is a little hard to realize that the sitins began so recently because they have spread so far and so fast. Adopting flexible forms and striking at the most vulnerable positions of the racist enemy, from the lunch counter to the bus station, they have scored a number of limited successes and have shown to all that it is possible now to make gains through direct action even in the South.

It would be a serious mistake to minimize the significance of the sitin movement on the ground that it does not -- yet -- grapple with the central question of political power. Its real significance is that it marks the entry on the scene of a new force in the Negro movement, in the South and in national politics -- students, college and high school.

This new force was not set into action by the old leadership or the older generation -- on the contrary, it mobilized itself and its appearance is in effect a repudiation of the inadequate and timid policies of the "moderate" leadership (NAACP, etc.).

Rebellious youth are often an advance signal of a broader mass radicalization. These students are a reservoir for a completely new leadership in the South; and meanwhile they strengthen the hand of the militants among the older generation.

Another positive aspect of the sitins is that they have demolished the theory that the South was destined to lag behind the rest of the country in the fight for equality. Migration from the South continues, so that now only about 52% of the Negro population lives in the South (compared with 60% in 1950, 71% in 1930 and 81% in 1910). Nevertheless, industrialization, urbanization, the colonial revolutions and the international class struggle are now clearly having their effect on race relations in the South too. The Southern Negro has made a giant leap forward and now occupies the center of the stage, temporarily attracting more attention than his tactically better situated Northern brother. This not only confirms an important part of the theory of the permanent revolution but also, for the first time in this century, makes the Negro movement a truly nation-wide one, extending into even South Carolina and Mississippi.

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The analysis made of the NAACP leadership in our 1957 resolution does not require any serious revision at this time. It is necessary only to note that its near-monopoly of leadership in the Negro community has ended. That position is now partly-challenged, partly-shared by the passive resistance movement. Rev. King has acquired great influence and the Congress of Racial Equality has grown considerably.

The King-CORE tendency suffers from many of the same basic weaknesses and inadequacies as the NAACP leaders. But it also differs from them. James Baldwin has noted that most Negro leaders were "in the extraordinary position of saying to white men, Hurry, while saying to black men, Wait." That describes the NAACP leaders very well. They tell the Negro masses: "Wait -- until we take another case to court. Meanwhile, confine yourselves to supporting our legal cases." But King and CORE don't tell the masses to wait -- they tell them to act outside of the courts too. It is this positive attitude toward action which explains the growth of their influence, espe-

cially among youth, who are fed up with waiting and yearn for action to change their lot.

The trouble is the kind of action they advocate, or rather their insistence that only one kind of action is permissible -- their version of "non-violent" resistance. Militant Negroes and revolutionary socialists must oppose their efforts to confine and restrict the struggle to one form of action. But if we don't want to become isolated, we must learn how to make a distinction between non-violent tactics in one or another situation where they are appropriate and non-violence as a rigid principle or philosophy to be employed in all situations. A good opportunity to make this distinction and expose the inconsistencies and flaws in the passive resistance policy was provided by the Freedom Rides. There King and CORE warned the riders not to defend themselves against violence and urged the Negro community not to defend the riders when they were assaulted -- at the same time that they were appealing to the government to stop and prevent the attacks (that is, use violence or the threat of violence).

We support and engage in all struggles against the Jim Crow system, including those led by the passive resisters. Simultaneously we criticize their leaders for restricting the struggle and subordinating it to a narrow middle-class dogma; for obstructing the defense of Negroes violently attacked by white supremacists; and for failing to connect immediate battles with the broader struggle to take power away from the ruling class that is responsible for the perpetuation of Jim Crow.

Only through such a combined approach will we be able to make and deepen contact with the heroic young militants now following King and CORE, and be in a position to influence them in a revolutionary direction when the time comes, as Julian Mayfield put it, that "the students will abandon the technique of passive resistance as it proves ineffectual in seriously disturbing the power structure of Southern society."

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The King-CORE dogma on non-violence is not shared by large sections of the Negro community. Repeatedly during the past few years, in both the South and North, large numbers of Negroes have clashed with cops and racists in the streets. In almost all cases these battles have been defensive, but there was nothing passive about them. The usual pattern has been for cops to begin to arrest a Negro, using or threatening to use violence, then for crowds of Negroes to gather around, prevent the arrest, disarm the cops and, if reinforcements arrive for the cops, to fight them militantly, overturn their cars, pelt them with stones and garbage, etc. Another variant, when racist hoodlums are in action, has been for Negroes to take over their own neighborhoods temporarily and to keep out or drive out all white passersby. This happened, for example, in some parts of Montgomery at the very same time that the Freedom Riders were being assaulted at the bus station and a big meeting chaired by King was besieged by white supremacist hoodlums. In most of these cases the Negroes were not armed. But Monroe, N.C., is not the only place in the South where Negroes have armed themselves in self-defense.

The press attributes most of these battles to the Black Muslims, which adds to their prestige. Actually they are usually not organized in advance by anybody, but occur spontaneously, in response to police or racist provo-

cations or attacks. Because Robert F. Williams' views on self-defense express the feelings of many Negroes, there is a good deal of latent sympathy for him wherever his activities and views have become known in the Negro community.

Two years ago, in mid-1959, Williams was scarcely known outside of North Carolina and those northern cities he had toured in connection with the "kissing case." But starting with the NAACP national office attack on him and the resulting debate over "meeting violence with violence," and his identification with the achievements of the Cuban revolution, he has become a national figure, with sympathizers in many big cities. The circulation of his paper, *The Crusader*, has increased. Some of his supporters and admirers have begun to form organizations, uniting the most militant elements locally. In addition, Williams has become a symbol for a number of the younger Negro intellectuals in New York and elsewhere who see the need for more militant tactics and strategy than are provided by the NAACP and the passive resistance movement. Despite their relative inexperience, these forces have the potential to create a new, radical nation-wide movement in the period ahead.

The colonial revolutions in Africa and the socialist revolution in Cuba have both given powerful thrusts to the development of a new Negro movement in the U.S. Successes in Africa have inspired American Negroes with the conviction that victories against white supremacy are possible, and with the feeling that if they don't get going soon here they may be the last ones in the world to win their freedom. The Cuban events have had similar radicalizing effects; it is probably safe to say that at the time of the invasion in April, 1961, the only major group in the U.S. where majority sentiment was pro-Cuban was the Negro community.

Recently formed organizations include the Liberation Committee for Africa and the On Guard Committee for Freedom. Although they began with the African events as their main interest, they soon became concerned not only with Cuba, but with the struggle in the U.S. itself. In general, they take strong, militant and non-pacifist positions. There is little that separates them from the Williams tendency or from each other. A new movement would certainly seek to unite these forces that stand for essentially the same things.

These groups and others like them are often called "nationalist"; wrongly, I believe, and as I shall try to show. But first it is necessary to say some things about the authentic nationalists.

* * *

The dominant organization in this field today is the Nation of Islam, popularly called the Black Muslims, whose leader is Elijah Muhammad. Although 30 years old, it has become a mass organization only in the last two or three; estimates of its membership vary considerably, but it is probably in the 100,000 range, not counting many sympathizers.

The Black Muslims are, among other things, a religious sect. Though not recognized by the orthodox Moslem groups in this country, they generally follow the doctrines of Islam, except on one question -- race. Where orthodox Moslems are tolerant on this point, the Black Muslims are anti-white; belligerently so. They teach that the black race (in which they include all non-whites) is the superior race; that whites always have been and always will be enemies of blacks; that sitins, demonstrations, legal tests and political

action aimed at the achievement of integration are useless or harmful. Their program has four main points: unite the black race, achieve absolute racial separation, build a separate black economy, and create a separate black nation. (Not in Africa, as Marcus Garvey proposed; but here, through the separation of several states and the grant of a large sum of money as compensation for the centuries of unpaid and underpaid labor extorted from black people.)

Most of the Black Muslim membership are workers and poor people, and they do their propagandizing among the most exploited and oppressed. Middle-class elements strongly reject them, but among the mass of the Negro people there is a considerable extent of sympathy for the Muslims. Not because they accept their religion, nor because they agree with everything they say; but because they admire the boldness and aggressiveness with which the Muslims "tell off the whites" and they like to hear the truths that the Muslims tell about "token integration: and the Uncle Toms."

Despite our differences with the Muslims, we must bear in mind this mass sentiment of sympathy for them; our criticisms must be sharply distinguished from those who label the Muslims as "mere racists, just as bad as the white supremacists." (This liberal attitude, parroted by the NAACP leaders, equates the chauvinism of oppressed groups, which contains progressive elements, with the chauvinism of oppressing groups, which is completely reactionary.) In addition, we must not forget that the Muslims are under attack by the government, under constant surveillance by the FBI and continuous harassment by local police and authorities. We must be sure at all times to defend their rights to organize and speak freely; above all, we want to reduce any possibility of our criticisms being confused with those that come from the right.

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I think it is correct to call the Black Muslims "nationalist" because they openly and explicitly advocate a separate nation, and that it is wrong to call any group nationalist unless it does advocate a separate nation (even though it may resemble the Muslims in some or many respects). The question is complicated, however, because many groups and many people who do not advocate a separate nation are being called, and are calling themselves, nationalist today.

For example: there is a growing tendency in the Negro community now (it is part of the new mood to be discussed later) for Negroes to organize themselves separately -- that is, in all-Negro organizations. This was one of the features of the March-on-Washington Movement in the World War II period. It was one of the issues hotly debated behind the scenes prior to the formation of the Negro American Labor Council last year.

Liberals and bureaucrats are bitterly opposed to such all-Negro organizations, which they condemn as manifestations of racism, Jim Crow-in-reverse and -- of course -- nationalism. Revolutionary socialists take an entirely different attitude. We see in this tendency a progressive aspect: a seriousness about mobilizing the Negro masses, who have been tricked and betrayed so often by whites and their Uncle Toms that they are justifiably suspicious about organizations that may be controlled indirectly by such whites; and a determination to create an organization that will really express the aspirations of the Negro people. Negroes have every right to band together

and create the kinds of organizations that they feel will be effective instruments of struggle for their interests. And nobody has a legitimate right to criticize them for doing so until the last trace of Jim Crow has been wiped out of our society.

In passing, it is worth noting that the founders of the Negro American Labor Council were inclined to limit its membership to Negroes. But they were under heavy pressure from the Meanys and Reuthers, who were strongly opposed to such a limitation. In the end the NALC succumbed to this pressure, and decided to admit whites. Not many whites have joined, or are influential; but I can't help feeling that the decision made on this point is symbolic and typical of the weaknesses of the NAIC as a whole. It would be a stronger and healthier organization if it had been imbued with more of the spirit that animates some of the other new organizations -- namely, the spirit that the needs of the Negro struggle come ahead of the feelings of so-called white liberal friends.

But this still leaves us with the question: Don't all nationalist groups organize separately, and isn't the tendency to organize separately a sure sign of nationalism? The answer is: This tendency is shared by nationalists, including the Black Muslims, but no, it is not nationalist in and of itself, and it is incorrect to designate an organization as nationalist merely because it is all-Negro (even if its members call themselves nationalists).

Why? Because nationalism is a program, not a form of organization. A group is nationalist when it wants a separate nation. Whether or not it is genuinely nationalist depends not on the way it is organized, but on the objectives it seeks. Thus an organization may decide to limit its membership to Negroes (because it thinks that is the best way to build and strengthen itself) and at the same time decide that its goal is not a separate nation but complete integration into American society. And although its own membership is all-Negro, it may decide to work together very closely and amicably with mixed or all-white organizations also working for integration. To call such an organization nationalist would be altogether misleading.

In fact, the tendency to create just such groups is what I believe is developing now in many parts of the country. Some of the new groups are all-Negro, and some are mixed (like the Liberation Committee for Africa). But whether they are all-Negro or mixed, most of them show a willingness to work together with mixed and predominantly white groups that have similar objectives (for example, with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee). From all indications the present Williams tendency, if it materializes into a nation-wide organization, will have these characteristics: namely, its membership will be all-Negro, but it will fight for integration and it will work together with all other groups that fight for integration, regardless of their racial composition.

I have already mentioned the difficulty of language or nomenclature -- that is, some of these groups, or some members of them, call themselves nationalists. I don't know how to overcome this semantic problem (which often stems from their identification with and support of African nationalism; discussing it with them you often find that they mean they are defenders of African nationalism, rather than advocates of nationalism in the U.S.) and maybe it can't be overcome at present. That's not too important, however; the only reason I bring this up is because it is very important for our party to distinguish between such groups and genuine nationalists, and not to get

confused by labels. Because we can work with these groups, and we must work with them, while it is exceedingly difficult if not impossible to work with genuine nationalists at the present time (because they don't want to work with groups that contain whites).

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The following remarks about "new moods" are submitted with some hesitation because they are based mainly on (armchair) observation in only two cities and reading of the press. The recent convention panel on Negro work showed that our Negro members have a good deal to contribute on this point, and I hope they will do so in the same frank spirit displayed at the panel. I also should state in advance that the moods I am trying to describe do not yet exist everywhere, among all Negroes, and probably not yet among most Negroes; but I think that they represent part of what is new in the situation, and that they are growing.

An unmistakable feature of the present mood is growing impatience -- impatience with the government, and with all white-dominated organizations, including the unions. Most Negroes who vote for the Democratic Party do so not because they think its attitude to civil rights is sincere or better than that of the Republicans, but because they consider it a lesser evil on economic issues (as most white workers do). Dissatisfaction with the Meany leadership is so strong that the NAACP leaders have found the courage to criticize it openly, and in the UAW Negro Reutherites today speak harshly about Reuther too, warning that he has "one last chance" (to put a Negro on the executive board at the next convention) before they attack him openly too.

In many ways "This is your last chance" is the essential message to white America that the new mood expresses. Robert Kennedy's demagogic comment that a Negro will be able to become president in 30 or 40 years was greeted with universal derision and contempt. Everyone is aware that the rulers of this country have had 100 years since the Civil War to make good on their promises of gradual reform, and there is much skepticism that they will act differently now, when time is running out on the white supremacists all over the world. There is a feeling that the U.S. needs a Now-Now society -- to get the promises fulfilled now, to compel the granting of full equality now.

The tone therefore is sharper than ever before. Negroes feel the need, and are responding to it, to "tell whites off" (and they often include radicals in the telling-off as well as conservatives and liberals). This is part of the warning process; it is also a matter of self-assertion for people who in the past have always been told what to do and have rarely been listened to.

A basic element of this mood is the growing feeling that Negroes can depend only on themselves. It isn't that they don't want allies, but that they feel they themselves must be leaders of their own movements, rather than assistants to well-meaning whites. Failure to recognize the existence of this feeling, and to see its progressive aspects, will be disastrous for socialists.

What is the implication behind the "last chance" warnings? Essentially this, I think: Negroes are telling whites to grant equality now because if they don't, most Negroes, who now want integration, will be compelled to abandon that goal and seek another -- namely, some form of nationalism. I don't think most of them have decided that it will really be necessary for

them to choose an alternative to integration; in part, they raise this possibility as a way of putting pressure on the whites, and still hope that this pressure will be successful.

So I would say, as we have said for many years, that the main trend is still toward integration. But I would also say that a strong counter-trend is developing (expressed by more than the growth of the Black Muslims). The patience of the Negro people is not inexhaustible. If the present situation continues, if the capitalist ruling class continues to deny all but token concessions to the Negro's demands, and if the labor movement continues to default on its responsibilities to the Negro struggle -- then nationalist and semi-nationalist tendencies are likely to experience strong and speedy growth. And I am talking here in terms of years, not decades.

The only thing that will prevent such a development will be the creation and growth of a new militant, even radical, Negro organization and leadership, sensitive to the needs and moods of the masses, entirely free of commitments to capitalism and its institutions, and prepared to go all the way in the struggle for equality. Fortunately, the chances for the formation of such a movement are the best they have ever been.

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What conclusions can be drawn from the above? I suggest the following for the party to consider, discuss and act on:

1. The Negro struggle is becoming more important than before. Our ability to intervene in the struggles now unfolding, influence their course and win recruits will be a test of our party's right to lead the next American revolution. Therefore we must devote more forces to this work and more attention and guidance by the leadership and the party as a whole.

2. Because of the new moods of independence and self-assertion, the need for our Negro members to participate in the Negro movement is greater than before. White members can only be assistants and helpers in this movement, just as petty-bourgeois members can only be helpers and assistants to our work in the union movement. This places a great responsibility on our Negro members, but it also imposes a great responsibility on the party as a whole to help our Negro members prepare for their rightful place among the leaders of the Negro movement.

3. The possibility now exists for creation of a new Negro movement that will unite the younger elements like Robert F. Williams and his sympathizers and groups like the Liberation Committee for Africa and the On Guard Committee for Freedom. We should become ardent advocates and supporters of such a movement, proposing it now, participating in its creation and seeking to influence its program and leadership. We should be careful to avoid even the semblance of ultimatism toward such a movement, understanding that it will proceed in its own fashion and find its own way -- and that this way will lead logically to the most irreconcilable anti-capitalist struggles. Advocating such a movement now can only benefit the party, even if it turns out that the conditions for its formation are not yet fully ripe.

4. To the NAACP we should continue the same policy as before. When it engages in struggle or is under attack, we work with it and in it and we

defend it against its Jim Crow enemies. But now we recognize that in most cities it no longer attracts the best young fighters, who are knocking on other doors. We do not assign most of our forces to work in the NAACP when there are other groups that offer better prospects.

5. The passive resistance movement is another in which we work at the same time that we seek to build a new militant organization. In fact, we will find many of the best recruits for a new movement among the young people who now follow King and CORE. Patient and systematic education on the limitations of passive resistance will have its effect because it will be supplemented by the education that these young people will get from their experiences with the ruling class and the white supremacists.

6. The Black Muslims and other nationalist groups we must defend against repressive attacks by the government and police. Our criticism of their doctrines must always be differentiated from that of the liberals: we criticize them, not because they speak angrily against their oppressors, but because their tactics are wrong (unlike Africa, the Negroes here are a minority, who need allies among the whites; the nationalist position lumps all whites together, when the task is to divide them on the civil rights issues); because their analysis of the cause of racial oppression is wrong (it is not some inherent antagonism between the races, but basically an economic cause -- the desire to exploit labor); and because even their demand for a separate nation is vague (they say God will take care of it, but the fact is that only a revolutionary struggle could force the U.S. ruling class to grant this demand). It is difficult to make contact with the Black Muslim rank and file because they are forbidden to discuss with groups like ours. This difficulty will be partly overcome, I believe, when a new militant Negro movement appears on the scene.

7. The Cuban revolution must become a key feature of all our propaganda and agitation in the Negro struggle. We must convince the members of the proposed new organization that they can attain their goals in this country only by doing here in the field of race relations what the revolution accomplished in Cuba. We must show the members of the NAACP and other gradualist groups that Cuba proves it isn't necessary to wait more than 100 years before equality is achieved. We must call the attention of the youth in the passive resistance movement to the much better and faster and surer gains resulting from revolutionary action of a non-pacifist character. We can use the Cuban events to refute the nationalist claim that whites and blacks can never live in harmony, thus undermining their most basic positions and compelling their members to think anew.

8. I think we should also be prepared, if a labor party is not formed soon, for the appearance of local Civil Rights or Equal Rights parties, based on the Negro community's demands and running Negro candidates for office. Since such parties will be merely an extension of independent Negro campaigns of the kind we have supported critically in the past, our attitude toward them should be positive and cooperative.

August, 1961

RECOMMENDED READING

PARTY RESOLUTIONS: "Negro Liberation Through Revolutionary Socialism," adopted by the 1948 convention, amended in 1950, printed in Fourth International, May-June, 1950.

"The Class-Struggle Road to Negro Equality," adopted by the 1957 convention, printed as a pamphlet by Pioneer Publishers.

PARTY DISCUSSIONS: On the 1957 resolution
Discussion Bulletins Vol. 18, Nos. 11 (Sept., 1957), 12, 13 and 14 (Oct., 1957) and Vol. 19, No. 1 (April, 1958).

On Negro nationalism
Discussion Bulletins A-19 (August, 1954), A-21 (Sept., 1954) and A-30 (August, 1955).

On independent Negro candidates
Discussion Bulletin Vol. 20, No. 7 (May, 1959).

RECENT NON-PARTY PUBLICATIONS:

"Challenge to Negro Leadership: The Case of Robert Williams" by Julian Mayfield (Commentary, April, 1961).

"Nobody Knows My Name" by James Baldwin (Dial, 1961).

"The Black Muslims in America" by C. Eric Lincoln (Beacon, 1961).

The Crusader, published by Robert F. Williams.
Liberator, published by the Liberation Committee for Africa.

On Guard, published by the On Guard Committee for Freedom.

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