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Southeast Regional Report-Tom Leonard

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The assassination of five members of the Communist Workers Party (CWP) in Greensboro, N.C., by Nazi-Klan members must be politically characterized as the action an incipient fascist type. This was not, and I repeat, not, simply a racist killing.

This was touched on in Fred Feldman's article, "Fighting Fascism in the U.S." (Militant, 11/16/79). I found it politically refreshing to read this written in the heat of the Greensboro events.

Unlike our political opponents, we do not loosely tack the fascist label on every emerging right-wing formation, and despite my above characterization, I'm not even vaguely suggesting that we do this now, in the Militant or otherwise.

On the other hand, we should not bend in the direction of some of our opponents, even some of our future allies, who tend to write off right wing attacks as the work of demented racist scum (even though this is true) who are somehow outside the pale of normal political events.

On the contrary, we should view the emergence of new and the re-emergence of old right wing and racist forces as a normal outgrowth of capitalism in crisis, and the spawning ground of incipient fascism.

More concretely, we must view the above process within the framework of our present turn to industry under conditions of a working class and its allies that continue to radicalize to the left.

I make the above political generalizations at this time for two specific reasons, both confined to Southern developments.

1. Sectors of the capitalist class are consciously promoting and giving support to racist right-wingers inside and outside the unions as an extension of the antilabor offensive.
2. In my tour of the branches as Southeast Field Organizer, I've run into a VIEW ~~point of view~~ expressed by some comrades that our work in the unions must be directed exclusively toward Black workers, coupled with a tendency to view white workers as hopeless, racist and beyond approach.

With these two points in mind, and in an educational, rather than polemical spirit, it is useful to touch on some of the highlights of the party's experience with racists, right-wingers, and Klan members over the last ten years, inside the working class and the trade unions.

1. In 1971, following the bombing, subsequent machine gunning of our party headquarters by Klan-Nazi-Minutemen-Birchites, and during our struggle to exist as a legal political party in Houston, we were approached by a Black member of the executive board of the Steelworkers union at Armco Steel in Houston. I had the good fortune to engage him in a series of political discussions during which he pointed out the existence of Klan members on his own executive board. Furthermore, he differed with our critical support to Abel in the sixties, at least in the South, by observing that Klan members rode Abel's coattails into union offices in Houston and Birmingham by supporting his alleged campaign to democratize the Steelworkers union. Lesson to be learned is that the existence of Klanners and other right-wingers in the Southern union movement is not a recent development.
2. During this period, I had a cross burned on my work bench in a non-union machine shop of 50 workers, overwhelmingly white. I confronted this incident and survived on the job. The first person to congratulate my action was a white worker. Lesson to be learned--not all Southern whites are unregenerate racists.
3. In the early seventies a comrade ran a widely publicized campaign for mayor of Houston, subsequently got a refinery job, survived the trial period and a racist, anti-communist attack by right-wingers in the union. Lesson to

be learned--she survived.

4. There were numerous incidents of this type in Texas, including the shooting of a Sadlowski supporter in front of Hughes Tool where we had an active union fraction which survived this right wing attack.
5. The Nazi-Klan attacks on the party in Louisville last year, especially the on the job attacks on one of our comrades in the overwhelmingly white 18,000 member GE plant won us IAM union support to function on the job. In addition, what proved to be a tiny group of right-wingers failed in its attempts to whip up a witch hunt atmosphere against our comrades on the job, despite the company's refusal to take action against right-wing vandalism. Important lesson--company complicity with right-wing terrorism.
6. Birmingham. A full report on the branch's experience will soon be published in the "Party Organizer," but it is interesting to note the assessment of the relationship of forces in the coal mine where our comrades were attacked. A white miner in a private discussion with comrades reported the following breakdown: out of 500 miners only six were in the Klan for sure and possibly six others. Another 100 or so were supportive of the right wing. Some 375, the majority white, were opposed to the Klan, but "were afraid" to do anything about it. Lesson--make a careful assessment of the relationship of forces and adapt tactics to winning over an active majority before head on struggle with the right. In a forthcoming report, note once more Klan-company complicity.
7. In the wake of the Greensboro killings, a party fraction in a plant of 500 workers came under serious attack by right-wingers. This included threats of bodily harm, attempts to keep comrades out of the union, and threats by right-wingers to have a work slowdown or stoppage until the company fired us. In view of the real danger of physical harm, the Piedmont branch had to seriously consider withdrawing from the plant. We met and discussed this latter proposal with several workers in the plant, notably a fine Black shop steward. His assessment and advice was roughly: "There are only 11 or 12 of these nuts (right-wingers) in the plant, and the rest of the workers won't actively support them. If you return to work and lay low for a couple of days, this will blow over." We followed his advice and up to now it has worked, despite the fact that one of our comrades is a widely known SWP candidate. We should note that only 20% of the workers are Black and a tiny minority women.
8. In Tidewater we have noted the existence of Klan members inside the Tenneco yard from first hand information from Black workers. At Norshipco in Norfolk we are aware of the existence of right-wing Klan types. In this yard one of our comrades put us in touch with Navy seamen who were undergoing racist oppression in the service (see Omari's Militant article, 11/79). This follows in the wake of cross burnings and other Klan activity aboard Navy ships in Norfolk, and in Charleston, S.C. in recent months that were widely publicized throughout the Southern news media.

The above, incomplete thumbnail sketches deal with examples of Klan activity inside the working class, more specifically, the trade unions. We will make some observations about their meaning at the conclusion of the report.

First, it is necessary to take a more general look at the escalation of Klan activity in recent months.

As nearly as I can perceive, the recent sharp upturn in Klan activity began in the period immediately preceding and following the Supreme Court decision on Weber. During this period last spring, the capitalist press gave extensive coverage to Weber and his line supporting the democratic "rights of whites." The opposition to the Supreme Court decision was especially virulent in sections of the Southern white press, which ran many editorials, feature columns, etc.

In the wake of the Klan invasions of the Black community in Decatur and Birmingham last spring, Klan organizations began to escalate a more visible presence in the South with meetings, cross burnings, and demonstrations. All of this was widely reported in the capitalist press in a not unsympathetic manner. The press went even further, by having on occasion full page stories on the resurgence of the Klan and its program. At the center of this program is the "democratic rights" of white people, a position, as I have indicated above, put forth by large sections of the boss press.

Equally important for us is the appearance of direct company complicity with acts of Klan terrorism which we witnessed in the experience of our miner comrades in Birmingham and to a lesser degree with our comrades in Louisville. We face a similar situation with our IAM fraction in Piedmont and there are perceptive signs of a similar process in Tidewater.

In attempting to arrive at a scientific explanation of the resurgence of the Klan-Nazi-Right-wing in the South, including inside the trade unions, it is necessary to see it in connection with bourgeois institutions and their complicity, if not open collusion. These include the police, local government, the courts, and to an increasing degree, corporate management. It is only within the organic relationship of these factors that we can speak of incipient fascism, at an embryonic stage.

All of these factors were involved in the CWP assassinations and the subsequent campaign to criminalize the CWP, which explains my opening remarks in this report.

Let us return to the point on the extension of the capitalist antilabor offensive that now includes the promotion of right-wing activity inside the union movement.

Racism has been a permanent feature of the Southern working class since the transition of Black labor from chattel to wage slavery. An historical understanding of this process is indispensable in winning over class conscious union militants--Black and white--to revolutionary socialism.

What we are interested in, however, is racism in the present epoch, or, more precisely, the period of the rise of the civil rights movement, the enormous gains won by Black labor in winning jobs in basic industry, and its political meaning, which is spelled out in the 1979 SWP political resolution.

Alongside this process we have also observed a massive capital investment and expansion of industry in the South, resulting in broad layers of white workers drawn into industry, from a rural background. Many bring with them a legacy of backwardness and bigotry and include in their ranks Klan elements.

The synthesis in class struggle and union organizing between these layers of Black and white workers is the dynamic for the political radicalization beginning to occur in the South.

The ruling class is not unaware of this dynamic, and seeks to split it by circumventing the legal and democratic gains won by workers.

One way they are doing this now is through the promotion of and in some instances direct complicity, with Klan-right wing campaigns inside the unions. This is supplemented in part by Klan participation in the electoral process by running a candidate for mayor of Birmingham, a projected campaign in Piedmont, and a presidential slate.

In effect the Klan is being elevated from a relatively passive defensive role to one of offense. It is in this sense that I cite the extension of the capitalist offensive. I tried to convey the evolution of this process in the modest, but important

experiences of our comrades in Southern industry, in the eight points at the beginning of this report.

Most of our Southern industrial fractions have been in existence only a few months, some a matter of weeks. They include comrades not only new to the South, but on their first industrial jobs as well. Their experiences confirm that Black workers are more class conscious and political, and therefore easy to approach with our ideas. Comrades correctly spend a great deal of time with these workers. As a result we have recruited several Black workers and have several excellent sympathizers.

On the other hand there is a tendency to ignore white workers who are more difficult to politically win over. This leads to some comrades believing that we can't even approach Southern whites as I observed under Point B.

This thinking will lead us into some serious errors and I will cite only three. First of all it ignores the living experiences of recent class struggles in the South such as Newport News where black and white unity is indispensable if the Steelworkers are to win. The same applies to union organizing in the piedmont and other parts of the South.

This Black and white unity has the contradictory character of existing side by side with continuing racism. Some white workers resolve this contradiction by making a fundamental break with racism. Under the continuing blows of capitalism this process will continue. We should observe this process and seek out white militants moving in this direction, recruit them to the Party and or YSA, or at the very least consider them allies in the development of a class struggle left wing. Failure to do this will result in reducing us to a small well meaning sect in the unions, and not a viable Trotskyist tendency.

Secondly, ignoring white workers, puts us to the right of the assessment of Black militants in the unions. Many are confident in their ability to win white support, including support for affirmative rights on the job, as well as in running for union posts.

I cite as an example the lengthy discussion I recently had with a Black IAM shop steward in Winston Salem, N.C., who worked in a plant of 500 only 20% Black. He explained how he had been asked to run for union president, that white and Black workers would support him, and he had an excellent chance to win. He modestly declined to run only because he felt he wasn't educated enough in general union functioning to do a good job.

Thirdly, by not paying attention to white workers we seriously diminish our chances to survive right-wing company attempts to drive our cadres out of industry and the unions. Such abstention will tend to also diminish the support of Blacks who otherwise respect our intransigent anti-racism. After all they have more than 350 years of struggle under their belt on this question.

I will conclude with some observations on the relationship of forces on the worker level inside industries where we are trying to build fractions, some defensive procedures to follow in building fractions and running candidates on the job, and areas of union work we are or should be involved in at the present stage of our Southern turn. This is based on the experience of comrades and non-party union members.

For the purposes of observation we can categorize workers at the shop level as follows:

1. On the left are the Black workers.
2. Close to the black workers are a very small layer of white militants.
3. Moving to the center we find the majority of workers, usually white and more backward.
4. To the right of center are a minority of white workers who tend to support the right wing.
5. To the far right are the spewers of racism and reactionary ideas and programs

5. and the instigators of attacks on us and other militants.

We must get to understand these layers and the spokesperson that represent them as soon as possible. This is relatively easy. As a matter of fact union militants often provide our comrades with this information without being solicited.

When announcing a union comrade as a candidate, and keeping the above in mind, it is useful, to let the workers in the plant know first. Then go to the union, and finally the company with a letter announcing our campaign.

This procedure has resulted in discussions among workers who generally accept our democratic right to run for office and hold a job. The letters have the effect of putting the company on the defensive legally. In the case of Klan-right wing attempts to drive us out of the plant, we are at this time in a very weak position and must be on the defensive, erring on the side of caution, and avoiding one-on-one confrontations. If physical threats are involved we should follow the procedures outlined above for candidates, with one important difference. We must immediately set up meetings with worker militants, especially Blacks who have a great deal of on-the-job experience in dealing with these elements over the years. If we listen and learn from them, they will give us sound tactical advice on how to survive.

In the Piedmont incident, for example, a Black worker explained how Klan racist types lived in small outlying towns that were in effect enclaves of reaction. On occasion they get whipped up on an issue and become transformed from relatively passive crackpots into volatile and potentially dangerous ones. During these periods the majority of workers seek to avoid them and they usually cool down after a few days. This will occur time and time again and poses a special continuing problem for some of our Southern fractions.

As we gain more experience, and have been able to demonstrate our ability in building and defending the union movement, we will win support and allies who will enable us later to deal more effectively with this problem. In connection with this, comrades are becoming involved in union organizing work in New Orleans and Piedmont. In Tidewater, the teamsters fraction is discussing participation in a union membership campaign. They are combining this activity with helping to build the LERN action.

In my opinion, I consider LERN work the singlemost important union activity leading up to Richmond, especially for our Southern fractions. It is the most important action in the South on behalf of the working class and its allies since the Newport News strike and will definitely have a longstanding impact in the union movement.

Comradely,

Tom Leonard
December 7, 1979