

INTRODUCTION TO THE
united states

An Autonomist Political History
by
Noel Ignatiev



Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, Pathfinder. Trotskyist history of the CIO. A series of lies complementary to the lies in the one immediately above.

Howard Fast, *Freedom Road*, Bantam. A novel of Reconstruction.

Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, Bewick Ed. World War II.

Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, Liberator. Autobiography of an important CP leader, today a Marxist-Leninist.

Mathew Ward, *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal*, South End Press. Excellent!

Six Radicals Remember the Sixties, South End Press.

Georgakas & Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*, St Martin's Press. Account of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

Hosea Hudson, *Black Worker in the Deep South*, International.

Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Civil War in the U.S.*, Citadel.

Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Bantam. Popular history of American Indian struggles.

Autobiography of Malcolm X, Ballantine or Grove.

Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful*. The major collection of writings from the women's liberation movement.

Gorda Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, Random.

Redstockings, *Feminist Revolution*, Random.

If you would like more general information on topics addressed in this booklet, go to the Radical Information Project bookstore, 2412 E. Colfax Avenue, Denver, Colorado, 80206 (303) 388-1065 .

For more specific information about the Autonomist or anti-white supremacy efforts outlined in this booklet, write Final Conflict Publishing, 2298 Clay St., Denver, CO 80211.

PUBLISHER'S INTRODUCTION

The task of proletarian revolutionaries is to seek out and discover those aspects of proletarian activity which foreshadow the future society, which manifest the tendency of the proletarians to constitute themselves as a ruling class, to link these sporadic activities into a coherent social bloc that exists and struggles under capitalism without accepting the permanency of capitalism, and to transform the consciousness of the participants through the criticism of bourgeois ideas as they exist within the working class.

A revolutionary strategy is, in short, a strategy of dual power. It is the treating of revolution as an act for today, as a part of the continuous struggle, instead of a dream to be indefinitely postponed in the interest of "realism".

From what we have said so far it should be evident that we regard the struggle against white supremacy as the most advanced outpost of the new society and the key ingredient in a revolutionary strategy. The waging of that struggle among whites is the main disinctive task of STO, as befits its character as an organization made up of white people.

READING LIST

The following list of books may prove helpful to those interested in doing additional reading about the United States.

W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, Atheneum.

Lerone Bennett, *The Shaping of Black America*, Johnson Publishing. Should be called "The Shaping of America." If you can read only one book on this list, it should be this one or the one above.

William D. Haywood, *Autobiography of Big Bill Haywood*, International. First-hand account of the IWW, by one of its greatest leaders.

Len DeCaux, *Labor Radical*, Beacon Press. Accounts of IWW, CIO.

C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson-Agrarian Radical*, Oxford Univ. Press. Good biography of an enigmatic and characteristic figure.

Robert Bruce, *1877-Year of Violence*, Quadrangle Books.

Robert & Pamela Allen, *Reluctant Reformers-Racism and Social Reform Movements in the U.S.*, Doubleday.

Al Richmond, *A Long View From the Left*, Houghton Mifflin. An autobiography of a former CP member.

Richard Boyer & Herbert Morais, *Labor's Untold Story*, United Electrical Workers. To be read with extreme caution. Revisionist, white labor apologetics.

This history was initially produced in 1978 as part of a larger project aimed at the further development of an international, extra-parliamentary, revolutionary political tendency. Two national components of this movement, Sojourner Truth Organization in the U.S. and Revolutionary Struggle in Ireland, agreed to exchange delegations toward that end, and as part of this process each produced a political history of its country to be distributed on a national tour of the other, host country. This is the first U.S. publication of the manuscript, written by S.T.O. member Noel Ignatiev, taken to Ireland by the S.T.O. delegation.

This exchange was part of a dialogue that begs for more. Many readers will find this statement's rendition of U.S. history of use in study and discussion groups, as an analysis that has more than withstood the test of time and is still to be grasped and appreciated by most of the left in this country. But its value can best be measured by the practical direction it provides on issues that continue to plague the world revolutionary movement.

Few relationships are as intriguing and potentially instructive as that between U.S. politics and the Irish national liberation struggle. This is true both because the Irish have such strong ties to the Irish-immigrant population of the U.S. working class — and therefore to the U.S. working class as a whole — and because the Irish are European rebels against a bastion of white imperialism, Britain. More than a few U.S. radicals have sought to develop this convergence. One theory is that the Irish can provide a pole of anti-imperialist struggle among workers of European extraction in the U.S., and in doing so link together the U.S. workers' struggle with Irish nationalism and national liberation in general. The bridge between anti-imperialist struggle, especially by peoples of color, and white workers would thus be built upon the framework of the Irish independence movement.

This line of thinking has failed in practice because of the overriding effect of white supremacism. The Irish immigrants, with few exceptions have chosen — despite their long and bitter struggle against the British — to identify themselves as white people. The turning point in this process was 1842, when the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell, issued an appeal to Irish-Americans to join in the anti-slavery movement. They angrily rejected his appeal, saying that if forced to choose between love for Ireland and loyalty to the institutions of their new country, they would choose America, which in that context meant they chose to be white.

Ignatiev's analysis, true to both S.T.O. and the international network it was part of, also emphasizes the independent and embryonically revolutionary character of mass working class initiatives. as the strategic basis for the development of a revolutionary bloc of forces in developed capitalist areas, but not without reference to the issue of white supremacism. Given the obstacle of white consciousness and behavior, the creation of a general revolutionary stance on the part of workers of European descent depends fundamentally on their

rejection of white-ness in the process of their struggle. In practice this means that any proletarian revolutionary project in the U.S. in particular must be simultaneously based on a mass challenge to capitalism and white supremacy. Absent a challenge to white supremacy, anti-capitalist initiatives will certainly lapse into partial white-oriented reforms, at best, and white populist or fascist movements, at worst.

At the time of this publication, with the collapse of Stalinism throughout Europe already accomplished, the intrusion of Western capitalism into Eastern Europe suggests not just the imminent subjugation of millions of workers to Western-style class domination, but also the development of a vast trans-Atlantic White Empire. The revolutionary possibilities of the world working class have surely increased with the collapse of Stalinism, but the potential is as forebodingly white supremacist as it is proletarian. In the end, our ability to understand, confront and overcome white supremacy within the working class movement will be of utmost importance. Toward that end, we present this booklet.

Lowell May
January, 1992



revolutionary Left in Europe. We regard it as extremely necessary that we take part in these discussions, and that end is one we hope to accomplish through the development of closer and more direct ties with our European comrades.

STRATEGY

The position of the working class under capitalism gives rise to two patterns of behavior, each with its characteristic consciousness. On one side are the efforts of the workers to improve their conditions of life while accepting the framework of the wage labor relation. This pattern, which manifest in ordinary trade union struggles, constitutes the basis for reformism. White supremacy, representing as it does the effort of a portion of the working class to strike a separate bargain with capital, forms part of this pattern.

Alongside of the above sort of activity, workers are also compelled to resist their condition as wage labor and assert themselves as producers. Such resistance takes the form of direct action, tends in the direction of proletarian solidarity and challenges the institutional framework that ties the workers to capital.

These two patterns of behavior are not imported into the working class by reformists or revolutionaries, as the case may be, but arise spontaneously out of the conditions of working class life.

The revolutionary potential of the working class lies in its location in the production process, which compells it to act in ways that undermine the capital relation. Ordinarily, this aspect of working class behavior is subordinated to the dominant reformist aspect; even when it arises spontaneously it is accompanied by reformist consciousness.

but it too will undoubtedly reflect the struggle between white reformism and revolutionary internationalism that characterizes every mass appearing on U.S. soil.

SOME CURRENT QUESTIONS

The U.S. economy is obviously going through a crisis. The abandonment of the dollar as the dominant currency in world commerce, the high cost of energy, the runaway inflation, the recovery of Europe and Japan as competitors, the shutting down of a large portion of the physical plant of the steel industry, the near bankruptcy of Chrysler — all these occurrences point to the likelihood of hard times ahead and the consequent radicalization of the American worker.

The strong point of our organization has always been its grasp of Marxist theory and U.S. history. Our weakness has been analysis of current trends. Recently, under the impact of events and the example of our Italian and Irish comrades, we have begun to take up questions of current analysis. For instance, what is the character of the present crisis? Is it structural, even apocalyptic, or is it another of the familiar crises of profitability and realization? Does it involve a crisis of the law of value itself? In another area, what is the relationship between the multi-nationalization of the capitalist ruling class and the nation-state as an instrument of rule?

The answers to these questions have practical implications. For example, it has always been the practice of U.S. capital, in periods of economic difficulty, to shield the white workers as much as possible from the most severe burdens, by guaranteeing that the heaviest weight of unemployment falls on those sectors where the work force was predominantly Black. In the past, this has meant that Black people have gone through periods of extreme hardship, followed by their re-entrance in larger numbers than before into the basic industries. If the present crisis is of a different character than previous ones, and if the technology that emerges from it — the so-called silicon revolution — is of such a nature as to prevent the expansion of capital bringing with it the expansion of the proletariat, what impact will this have on the position of Black people and other oppressed groups? Will it be the policy of the state to push them into the status of a permanent underclass, a marginalized group with no firm and stable ties to the productive process? And what does this say about the policy of genocide as ruling class policy? What does it say about the relation of the struggle in the productive and non-productive sectors, and about the value of making such a distinction at all? Most of all, what would it mean for revolutionaries seeking to help the working class find the proper response to bourgeois policy, whatever it may be?

The above are some of the questions we have begun to consider, in a process which we expect will be protracted and which will involve our entire organization and all those close to it. We have but recently become aware of the discussions on these questions that are taking place among our comrades in the

PREFACE

I wrote this piece in 1980 on the occasion of a visit to Ireland of delegates from the Sojourner Truth Organization sponsored by the Irish group, Revolutionary Struggle. It was intended to introduce STO to an Irish audience. Final Conflict Publishing, which is reprinting it, has been kind enough to invite me to write a new preface.

The main correction I would make is in the treatment of “the national question.” I conceded too much to those who held that the defining conflict of the epoch is between oppressing and oppressed nations. That view, drawn from some of Lenin’s writings, had by 1980 come to prevail in STO. It cannot do justice to the complex and continuing process of recomposing race and class in the United States. Instead of describing the U.S. as a “cauldron of national oppression,” I would describe it as a place where the stratification of the proletariat takes the form of historically constructed “races.”

The section on the seventeenth century draws heavily on the work of Ted Allen. While I agree that the white race has functioned throughout American history as a social control formation, I now question whether its birth was as much a top-down process as the document suggests.

In addition, there are a number of omissions due largely to my own ignorance: foremost among these are religion as a locus of the radical tradition, the class struggle in the 18th century, and the contribution of the native peoples to American life.

I do not regard the above enumeration as exhaustive.

Noel Ignatiev
June 1991

The women's movement in the 70's, entering the national consciousness to the point that the term "male chauvinist" has become part of the general vocabulary and the most popular demands of the movement are universally known, although often as caricatures. Yet the earlier radical sectors of the movement, who pioneered in the development of new ways of living and who brought the challenge to male supremacy to every sphere of life, have been largely eclipsed by a national leadership which seeks to confine the struggle to improving the position of women through legislative means. Another sector of the women's movement has turned from activism to focus on the building of "women's community" — cultural centers, services and supportive lifestyle. More activist oriented is the anti-violence against women sector of the movement. Its strength lies in women's direct action to free themselves from the danger and degradation of all types of violence. Its perhaps fatal weakness lies in its tendency to form alliances with the state, particularly the racist criminal justice system.

Encouragingly, the radical sector of the women's movement has begun to coalesce once more, mainly around the struggle for reproductive rights, including the right of abortion and an end to compulsory sterilization which is suffered primarily by women of oppressed nationalities. This sector of the movement has emphasized and demonstrated the importance to the women's movement of linking up with the movements of the oppressed peoples within the U.S. and around the world.

A new political force, the gay liberation movement, was also born at the start of the 1970's. In its battle against official and unofficial harassment and repression, the gay movement has shown itself to contain a revolutionary as well as a class collaborationist wing.

Since Three-Mile Island the anti-nuclear movement has become a national phenomenon. Militant demonstrations and attempts at reactor site occupations, along with large marches, have taken place repeatedly, and it is obvious that many new people are being drawn into the struggle. As with every other movement, its potential depends on its ability to link its future with the struggle against white supremacy. In this respect, the anti-nuclear movement has fallen far short, and its weakness in this area plays a large part in determining its general stance. It is still largely dominated, though not without opposition, by the old leaders from the peace movement, including sectors of the Left who seek to limit it to the single question of nuclear weapons and the export of reactors, both of which touch on imperialism, and refuse to take up the "front end" of the nuclear cycle, which relates to uranium mining, most of which takes place on American Indian land. In general, the current leaders of the anti-nuclear movement are doing everything in their power to keep it from developing into an anti-racist, anti-capitalist movement.

When Congress recently reintroduced registration for the military draft, it provoked the greatest response of mass illegality the country in a decade, as an estimated quarter of those called failed to show up. The movement is very new,

There were other exceptions, more positive in character. The movements among the other oppressed peoples, which began to develop later than the Black movement and were not the victims of such early repression, continued to grow. In Puerto Rico, the armed struggle reappeared, taking the form of small-scale, clandestine attacks on the physical symbols of imperialism. On the mainland the Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional, which identified with the path of armed struggle, became the most important revolutionary Puerto Rican organization.

The American Indian struggle reached new heights with the successful re-taking of Alcatraz, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Wounded Knee. Sovereignty and land rights were reasserted in seizures of stolen land by Indian nations across the country. In the last few years Indian peoples have begun to establish links with the anti-nuclear movement in order to end the "energy war" being waged largely against them. Mexicans in the southwest have also begun re-taking their land. All these movements soon began to attract their share of repression, with a number of prominent figures assassinated or jailed.

The recent period has also given indications that the Black movement has begun to rebuild. The emergence of organizations like the Afrikan People's Party, a large demonstration for human rights at the United Nations head-



quarters, and the recent convening of the founding conference of the National Black United Front are all signs of this rebirth. Together with the rebellions in Miami, Chattanooga and else where they offer the hope that the coming years will witness the resurgence of a movement so critical to the development of a radical climate.

INTRODUCTION

What would the United States be like without black people? The answer to this question can be found by considering a country like Canada, which resembles the U.S. in many ways — a vast area of great natural resources, sparsely settled by native peoples before European colonization. Canada differs from the U.S. in only one significant particular — it was never given over to African slavery, nor was it ever implicated in the slave trade. And this particular is at bottom responsible for the difference between one country which has dominated world politics throughout this entire century and today constitutes the biggest exploiter of peoples on a world scale, and another whose impact on world affairs has been far more limited.

If, in the document that follows, we devote a great deal of attention to the history of the "race question" in the U.S., it is not because we are humanitarians but because we recognize it as the key to the history which has made us what we are today, and the key to any future transformation we hope to achieve. It is also because the matter is understood by few people, and not more widely in the U.S. than other places.

Space limitations will prevent us from going into much detail on any subject; yet since the Civil War and Reconstruction constitute the pivot of U.S. history, we shall spend some time on it.

The portion of the document setting forth the positions of our organization on current questions is necessarily truncated. We hope that our treatment of the history will enable the reader to comprehend what we stand for and how, in general, we propose to proceed.

We wish to express our gratitude to our comrades in Revolutionary Struggle who have given us this opportunity to communicate directly with their own constituency, on this occasion of our 1980 trip to Ireland.

THE SHAPING OF AMERICA

Contrary to general belief, the first African laborers to arrive in the English colonies did not come as slaves, and the first European laborers did not come as free men and women. The labor force in the 17th century was composed of indentured servants imported from both Africa and the British Isles. They were bonded for a specified period, usually seven years, after which they became legally free.

The rulers of colonial Virginia were faced with two problems: in addition to the labor shortage, there was the question — who would police the laborers, who were not easily reconciled to conditions of servitude in a continent where land was available for the taking?

The colonies were not rich enough to support a professional police force of sufficient size. It was essential that one part of the labor force be enlisted to police the other — while remaining laborers themselves. Could Africans fill that role? Such a solution would hardly encourage emigration from England, on

which the colonies were still dependent. Therefore, the English would have to be won to perform that function.

Such a role was by no means natural to them. English and African bonded laborers lived under much the same conditions of hardship, so severe that a large portion of them failed even to survive their period of indenture, and they reacted to their oppression as do laborers everywhere, by drawing closer together, intermarrying, plotting escape — and by revolt.

The growing solidarity among the laborers broke out in several bloody revolts, which threatened the security of the government of the Virginia colony (which had two-thirds of the total population of the English colonies as a whole). In a response which is remarkably well documented, the colonial rulers turned, around the middle of the 17th century, to a policy of drawing a line between the English and African bond laborers. Certain privileges — the first being the exemption of female European bond laborers from field work — were conferred on the former, while special laws were passed to fix the status of the Africans: extending the term of servitude until it became permanent and then hereditary, imposing a pass system, denying them the right to carry arms, etc.

The process of encoding the new status took about a half-century, and marks the birth of the “white race” as a social category — the emergence of a class of laborers whose community of interests with their exploiters was legally and publically affirmed, and who functioned to maintain social control over the entire labor force, themselves included. By 1705, the rulers of the Virginia colony felt sufficiently confident of the support of their European proletarians to specify that white bond laborers finishing their period of indenture be given a musket. What a change from barely a generation earlier, when rebel forces — European and African — besieged, captured and burned the colonial capitol of Jamestown and sent the governor fleeing across the Chesapeake Bay, the same bond laborers who, between the years 1663 and 1682 hatched no less than ten servile revolts and revolt plots!

Left historians who are critical of the characterization of the U.S. as the “Land of Liberty” commonly assert that the much vaunted democracy depends on the denial of rights to the African, Native American and other people of color. This is a good example of the “appearance” being the reverse of the “essence” — the development of a system of racial slavery and national oppression depended on the extension of democratic rights to the “white” population as a whole. As early as the 18th century there had emerged the pattern which was to define the distinctive course of U.S. history: U.S. society is not merely bourgeois but bourgeois white supremacist; the U.S. working class movement has been, in the main, not merely opportunist but white racist opportunist; the main form of opportunism in the working class movement is not merely white racism — an idea — but the acquiescence of the white workers in the system of white skin privileges imposed by the bourgeoisie.

The country never passed through a feudal stage of development. The American War for Independence, while it had progressive features, was not a

women’s caucases and committees. Together they made significant contributions to extending the insights of the Black movement into white society, carrying on their battles in the streets, not the legislatures or voting booths.

WHAT DID WE WE DO TO DESERVE THE 70’S

All this motion seemed to end even more suddenly than it appeared. In the spring of 1970 when Nixon sent U.S. troops into Cambodia, there was a mass protest on campuses across the country, which led to the fatal shooting of four students at Kent State, in Ohio. At the same time, there occurred the killing of three students at Jackson State, a Black college in Mississippi. The latter received scant attention from either the media of the white peace movement - mute testimony to the flaw that would eventually lead to its demise.

Then, silence. It was as if all the participants in the stormy events of the previous decade had been gathered at the edge of a cliff and pushed off. What happened?

The Black movement had been subjected to intense repression - the jailing of prominent leaders and thousands of activists, as well as government interference through the notorious “Counter-Intelligence Program” (COINTELPRO) which sought to create dissension and battles among various organizations., this repression, together with a number of serious mistakes that were committed by the leaders, led to a loss of confidence among the masses in the future of the movement and the fragmentation of the most important Black organizations, SNCC, the BPP and the League. The process in the white student movement was quite different: there the students had hurled themselves at the walls of power, to no apparent avail — the war was still going on. Never able to recognize the Black struggle as their own cause, unable to develop an approach to the white worker, the majority of white student radicals turned away from radicalism.

The movements turned inward, towards astrology, Christianity, sterile variants of “Marxism-Leninism,” individual terrorism and private pursuits. One of the manifestations of this turn was the sudden growth of the environmental movement, deliberately fostered and given respectability by the government and the media, which began to take up efforts to save various animal and plant species from extinction - at a time when the U.S. was raining death on Vietnam and the Black community was being beaten, starved and drugged into submission.

The 1970’s were, in general, years of retreat; the only Left groups to show any growth were those, like the CP and the SWP, who played no role in the upsurge of the previous decade and those who deliberately renounced its lessons (the social democrats of the New American Movement, various “M-L” groups.)

was a New Left, and virtually every radical movement now in existence can trace its origin to those days. (The most notable exceptions are the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, Fourth International, who played a very small part in the events recounted above.)

In every case the Leftward movement was first registered in the Black movement and then transmitted to society at large. Those features which became the hallmarks of the New Left — the recognition that racism was not an isolated flaw, the focus on direct action, the internationalization of the struggle — all these took first shape in the movement of Black people.

One of the peculiarities of the U.S. Left, which must be thoroughly understood by anyone who hopes to make sense out of American reality, is traceable to those years. We are referring to the insistence of Black revolutionaries from about 1965 on that the problems of America lay not in the Black community but in white society and that the task of white radicals was not to colonize among Black people but to address themselves to the racism of white America; Black people must organize through their own autonomous efforts. This view, when it was first put forward by Black leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown, caused a lot of agonizing among white radicals who had always harbored paternalistic attitudes toward Black people, but for a time it prevailed in the New Left. Even today there is a line between those Leftists who recognize the autonomy of the Black movement and the movements of the other oppressed peoples, and those who attempt to speak, through "multi-national" parties, in the name of the Black, Latin, Asian and Indian movements.

By 1968, when the popular movements (with a healthy assist from the Vietnamese people) came within a hair's breadth of splitting the Democratic Party, it could accurately be said that there existed in the U.S. a Left that, in terms of size and impact, had nothing to be ashamed of when compared to its counterparts in Europe. The Black Panther Party brought thousands of youth, heretofore without voice, onto the center stage of politics, and stimulated developments in Latin and Asian communities and among white students. The high point was reached with the founding of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a federation of groups from various industrial plants in the Detroit area who had organized themselves outside of the union structures and built links with the Black schools and community, as part of a conscious effort to link Marxism with the Black Revolution. This effort led many white students in SDS to look seriously to the working class as an agent for social change.

The insights of the Black movement — the fight against white supremacy, internationalism, Marxism and an orientation toward the working class — also had their impact on the newly emerging struggles of women. Women who had worked in SNCC, SDS women, women from the broad anti-war movement those who had been activated by the upheavals of the sixties came together and created a revolutionary current within what was to become the women's liberation movement. Many chose to organize separately from men, paralleling the development of Black organizations. Others continued to work in SDS, in

war of a rising bourgeoisie against the forces of feudal absolutism, but instead a conflict between the merchant class of New England (allied with indebted southern planters) and the colonizing power over who would reap the vast profits of the slave trade; over which would be the third corner of the famous "triangle trade" described by slaves captured in Africa, rum and tobacco produced in the West Indies, and manufactured goods from either Liverpool of Massachusetts.

The decades following the establishment of the American Republic saw the emergence of two systems of exploitation: direct slavery in the South, supporting the cultivation first of tobacco and later of cotton; and manufacture based on wage labor in New England and the Middle Atlantic states. The history of the U.S. for the half-century preceding the Civil War is a history of the growing encroachment of the slaveowner's power on the federal government. The Seminole Wars, which were fought in Florida from 1819 to 1821 and which were efforts to recapture slaves who had escaped to join local Indian tribes; the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which extended slavery to the western territories; the 1836 to 1848 wars to wrest from Mexico the vast area that today makes up the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada and Colorado; the filibustering in Central America and the efforts to annex Cuba, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill of 1854 and the Dred Scott decision of 1858, which between them struck down the last legal obstacle to the spread of slavery throughout the entire country; and the efforts to restore the slave trade which had been abolished in 1808 — these events testify to the increasing subservience of the national government to 30,000 slaveholding families.

The slave system required for its survival continued expansion into new territory. Wage labor capitalism required the continued expansion of the internal market, which was impeded by slavery. The forces upholding wage capitalism organized themselves first into the Free Soil Party, then into the Republican Party, around a program of opposing the extension of slavery into new territories. When the Republican Party won the election with a bare plurality of votes among four major candidates, the impending conflict had become irrepressible.

The Civil War began with both sides fighting for slavery — the South to take it out of the Union, the North to keep it in. The real aim of the South, however, was not to secede from the Union but, by secession and war, to reorganize it on a new basis, with the "peculiar institution," slavery, as the foundation of an empire stretching from the Great Lakes to Central America.

The aims of the northern manufacturing bourgeoisie were modest: simply to restrict slavery to those areas where it already existed. As befitted this modest aim, President Lincoln at first pursued a cautious policy, going out of his way to assure the so-called border states (those states where slavery existed but the plantation system did not) that he had no intention of abolishing slavery. The federal military policy, of avoiding decisive battle while attempting to woo the South back into the Union, reflected this stage of the conflict.

This stage did not last long. Two things brought about a change. First was the attitude of the whites enlisted in the Union cause. They opposed the spread of slavery and the breakup of the Union but were hardly enthusiastic supporters of a war that was bringing them extreme hardship while enriching their employers through government contracts. They showed their feelings early by a series of draft riots in New York, Cincinnati and elsewhere that commonly took the form of mob attacks on free blacks.

The second factor making for a change in government policy was the role of the blacks themselves. For decades, free blacks had been the mainstay of the small organizations advocating the abolition of slavery, and the escaped slaves had been both a severe drain on the slave economy and a call to the conscience of the country. Besides running away, the slaves also had developed various means of striking and resisting their exploitation, including launching numerous revolts, the most well known led by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Now, as the War began, the black people began to see it as part of their struggle for freedom. Free blacks in the North understood that the cause of abolition was linked to a Union victory, in spite of Lincoln's protestations that

Turks) and the Caribbean (Haitians, Dominicans, Jamaicans). In addition, there are large numbers of Cubans and Vietnamese, who are a special case because of their designation as "political" refugees, but whose conditions, particularly those of the latter, come increasingly to resemble those of every other persecuted racial minority.

Thus it can be seen that the U.S., far from being a "melting pot" or a "harmonious community of diverse cultures", is in fact a seething cauldron of national oppression and strivings for freedom. And in the 1960's, that pot boiled over.

The 1960's

The decade of the 60's has already begun to pass into the annals of legend, as a host of historical studies, novels and films have appeared to interpret that time for those who didn't experience Jerry Rubin, Eldridge Cleaver, make-love-not-war, Black Power, and Woodstock. One feature shared by virtually all the attempts to interpret that wondrous decade is blissful omission of the fact that from the first borings through each stage of the development, the impulse for the phenomenon known as the "sixties" came from the strivings of the oppressed peoples, and the first place, the Black people.

The 1960's actually began in 1955 when a Black woman, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, as the law demanded. Her arrest touched off a wave of protest and struggle, as the Black community organized itself for a boycott of the bus lines, and in the process created an alternative transportation system and a community-wide system of internal communication and democracy, bringing to prominence the gifted young leader, Martin Luther King.

This single event, more than any other, broke the grave-like silence of the Cold War years and sounded the call for the youth who were suffocating under the enforced dullness and conformity of that period. It was followed by the Freedom Rides, in which Blacks and whites got on south-bound buses in the north and refused to rearrange their seating when the buses crossed into the segregated south. In 1960 came the first sit-in, organized by southern Black students. In 1964 came Freedom Summer, when thousands of northern Blacks and whites went to Mississippi to assist in the voter registration campaign under way there under the auspices of the Student Non-Violent (later National) Coordinating Committee (SNCC). When two young whites and a Black were brutally murdered by white racists, the plight of southern Black people was brought to national attention for the first time in nearly a century, and the conscience of the country was for a moment stirred. Later that year, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, based among Blacks in the state who were still denied the right to vote, attempted unsuccessfully to unseat the state's regular delegation to the national convention to the Democratic Party. Out of the experience of the southern freedom movement grew the northern student movement represented by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). There



In liberated areas of the South, black people openly celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation; in areas still controlled by Confederate Forces, Loyal Leagues were organized to spread the news of freedom secretly from plantation to plantation. Engraving from *Le Monde Illustré* courtesy of Chicago Historical Society.

he had no anti-slavery aims. While pressuring the government at all levels to broaden the War to one against slavery, they began to enlist in the Union armies, often against giant obstacles placed in their way by the government which did not want them as soldiers. The famous song, John Brown's Body, commemorating the great revolutionary abolitionist who gave his life struggling against

from it. However, the failure of the democratic revolution closed off the possibility of integration, at least for the next historic epoch, and determined that black people, would embark on the path to separate nationhood. The road to nationhood and national consciousness has been a stony one for black people, because of the incredible obfuscation spread by imperialism. Through the development of a language, a culture, religion and church institutions, and other organizations of struggle, black people have moved steadily towards nationhood and the striving for self-determination. When black people are being discussed as a nation, whatever title is affixed to them (currently "Black" and "Afro American" are most widely favored) should be capitalized, a practice we should follow for the remainder of this paper.

Chinese first came to the U.S. in large numbers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, drawn mainly by the demand for laborers to build the railroads. They were subjected to intense discrimination, including lynchings, and were generally regarded as competitors by the newly founded American Federation of Labor, which sought to prevent their immigration through support for the Oriental Exclusion Act (Lenin commented on this as one of the worst examples of chauvinist unionism).

In recent years their numbers have been augmented by immigration from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Today they are ghettoized in "Chinatowns" in most large cities, victimized by overcrowding, high rents, and extreme exploitation (San Francisco's Chinese population is the largest of any non-Asian city).

The case of the Japanese immigrants is instructive for understanding American reality. Coming from one of the world's most highly civilized countries, significant numbers of Japanese began to arrive on the west coast at the beginning of the century, attempting to take advantage of the plentiful land to establish themselves as independent proprietors. In contrast to the welcome given the Finns, Dutch, and other immigrants from similar background, but of European stock, they were relentlessly hounded by "patriots" and subjected to extra-legal and legal land theft. The most dramatic example was the treatment meted out to the Japanese at the start of the second world war, when thousands on the west coast, including many born in the U.S., had their land confiscated and were rounded up and relocated in concentration camps in the midwest, on the pretext that they were "security risks". The contrasts with the almost complete lack of discrimination directed at the native German, Italian or other groups from "enemy" countries. Largely as a result of this act, to which most of the Left offered no objection at the time, Japanese are now to be found in Chicago, Minneapolis, and other midwestern cities, as well as up and down the west coast.

As U.S. imperialism extended its domination after the second world war over new territories, numbers of people from countries suffering dislocation as a result of American economic penetration began to make their way to the metropolis. Today there are, in most major cities, communities from Asia (Koreans, Filipinos, Thais), the Middle East (Palestinians, Yemenins, Syrians,

slavery, was written and sung by the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, one of the all black units (commanded by white officers).

At first the slaves watched and waited; it was not yet clear where their interests lay. So long as they worked the cotton, the South could place in the field of battle a disproportionate number of its white manhood. The first attempts made by the slaves to join the Union cause were repulsed; fugitive slaves, making their way to Union army camps in the South, were sent back to their owners. Gradually, under the pressure of necessity, the Union's policy began to change: fugitive slaves were reclassified as "contraband of war" and put to work building fortifications, etc. Soon they were enlisted as scouts and spies for the Union armies.

By 1863, the attempt to wage a war against a force whose strength and weakness both lay in the institution of slavery brought about a change in Lincoln's policy. This was manifest in three things: first, the adoption of a more active military policy; second, the decision to encourage the enlistment and arming of Blacks; and third, the declaration of the aim of the war to be the abolition of slavery.

It should be noted that Lincoln's famed Emancipation Proclamation freed no one: it merely declared slavery abolished in those areas then in revolt, that is, those areas where it could not be enforced. But as a statement of intent, it was enough to "loose the fateful lightning" — the six hundred thousand black laborers who embarked on a great working class upsurge, beginning in 1863, a mass withdrawal of labor power — a general strike — which quickly brought the South to its knees.

THE AMERICAN COMMUNE

By 1865, the war was over. How to reconstruct the nation? To restore slavery was out of the question; the nearly two hundred thousand blacks who had fought in the Union armies and the six hundred thousand more who had carried out the general strike, as well as Northern public opinion, which felt a hatred toward the slaveowners, ruled out that possibility. Yet the abolition of slavery had actually increased the legislative authority of the former slaveholders, owing to an increase in the number of free men on whom representation was based. And the defeated but not yet crushed slaveowners were threatening to return to Congress to achieve there what they had failed to achieve on the battlefield: withdrawal of federal troops from the South, validation of the Confederate debt and restoration of slavery in all but name.

Lincoln and his successor as President, Andrew Johnson, attempted to reason with the former slaveholders, offering to readmit the Southern states to the Union with the sole condition that they formally accept the abolition of slavery. When it became clear that the arrogant lords of the lash had no intention of submitting even to this mild demand, public opinion turned toward a more intransigent policy of reconstruction.

Without the secessionist states in the Union, the Republican Party — the Party of northern capital, which had just carried out a war, to some extent in spite of itself, against slavery — held firm control of Congress. Within that Party, the radical wing, which was made up of genuine abolitionists and friends of the freed slaves along with others who recognized the need for stern measures to be taken against the South, gained ascendancy, initiating the period known as Reconstruction, which lasted from 1868 to 1876. For a brief moment, the interests of northern capital, which sought to break the former slaveholders' resistance, and the interests of the slaves and their friends intersected. It was this intersection that made possible the emergence of the former slaves as citizens and voters, a continuation of the process that had made them soldiers.

Once again, the turn in policy was prepared by the actions of the black people themselves, who were everywhere agitating, educating, organizing and arming themselves, in some places occupying the land of their former owners. These former slaves, taking advantage of the plight of the federal government which had forced it to rely on them, proceeded to carry the revolution forward.

The Reconstruction acts passed by the radical-dominated Congress disenfranchised former Confederate officials and stationed federal troops in the South to protect the voting rights of the former slaves. Under these conditions, Reconstruction was carried to its furthest extent in South Carolina and Mississippi, the two former pillars of the Confederacy and the only states with a black majority. Of the delegates to a convention called in South Carolina for the purpose of writing a new state constitution, almost half were former slaves and another fourth were so poor that they paid no taxes. Has the world ever seen a parliament of purer proletarian composition?

The Reconstruction legislatures enacted a series of laws that brought the South the most extensive, and in some cases the only, social reform it has ever known. Child labor laws, free public education, women's property rights, credit structures to enable the poor to obtain land — these and other measures flowed out of the legislatures which the men of property, North and South, denounced as "parliaments of gorillas." And behind these legislatures stood the black masses. Their radicalism generally took the form of an agrarian radicalism, but occasionally went beyond this, as for instance when the New Orleans Republican Club sent a formal message of solidarity to the Paris Commune and applied for membership in the International!

And what of the white workers — what was their attitude toward these momentous changes? To answer that question, it is necessary to go back a bit, to before the Civil War. The trade union movement was basically a Northern phenomenon, since slavery had blocked the development of wage labor in the South. The unions well understood that free labor and slavery could not co-exist. Instead of opposing slavery, however, they opposed the slave, seeing in him the cause of their own degradation. Instead of enlisting behind the banner of abolition, which they feared would throw a mass of low-wage competitors on the labor market, the unions attempted to restrict the spread of slavery and free

fell before several waves of western settlement; their land was stolen from them in a series of massacres and swindles and they were pushed off to the margins of society, left to die out. In a similar situation to that of the Indians are the other native peoples, the Eskimos of Alaska and the Polynesians of Hawaii.

Between 1836 and 1850 the U.S. took nearly half of what then constituted the territory of Mexico, including a large population of mixed Indian, Spanish, and African stock that made up the Mexican people. In spite of treaty assurances to the Mexican government that the conquered peoples would enjoy civil rights equal to those of all other U.S. citizens, such has never been the case. Since that time, in response to the needs of capital for more labor power — first in the building of the steel mills and the railroads, later in agriculture and diverse industry — this population was augmented by large-scale immigration from Mexico, so that now the Mexican people make up a significant element of the population in cities from Cleveland to the west coast. They are generally confined to the lowest rungs of society, are the victims of legal and, particularly in the originally territories, extra-legal terror and often, in the case of immigrants, the constant fear of deportation as the demand for their labor slackens. There are over fifteen million of these people within current U.S. borders.

Puerto Rico is a nation which had achieved self-rule within the Spanish empire and was conquered and occupied by the U.S. in 1898. It is still maintained as a direct colony, although there is some talk of making it a state as a way of forestalling independence. Beginning after World War I, when they were made U.S. citizens by Act of Congress, and especially following World War II, Puerto Ricans began arriving in large numbers on the mainland; today there are two million, concentrated in New York and other eastern cities and as far west as Chicago. This compares with three million on the island itself, who for many years were an important source of imperialist profits in agriculture. The islanders are now jeopardized by the growth of the petro-chemical and other capital intensive industries and the conversion of the island into a U.S. military fortress. These developments tend to make the island population superfluous to the plans of U.S. imperialism.

Among the subjugated peoples which inhabit the current borders of the U.S., the largest group, and the one whose history is most intertwined with the history of the country as a whole, is, of course, that population drawn from African, native American and European stock, known variously as black, Black, Negro, Afro-American, New African, Bilalian and "colored". The so-called "Negro Question" has long been a thorny one for U.S. Marxists, who have few successes and many failures to show in this area. In our view, there was nothing predetermined about the evolution of the black people of North America into a separate people. It is not at all excluded from possibility that, had the revolutionary democratic tasks of Reconstruction been fulfilled, black people could have joined their culture and blood with the other peoples who inhabited the continent to develop a single nation north of Mexico and the territories taken

There is another side, however, to the question of fascism. The institutions of official society are undergoing a deep crisis, symbolized by the name, Watergate. As has already been mentioned, there is a pervasive lack of trust among the population in the conventional ways of redressing grievances. (And unlike England, the U.S. has no characteristic tradition of "We'll muddle through.") The bitterness and anger on the American scene, among whites no less than among people of color, can hardly be exaggerated. It is likely to increase in the coming years. If this is taken into account, and if it is borne in mind that fascism is not merely a docile tool manipulated by a conspiratorial ruling class but has a definite autonomous component, then it is not out of the question that fascism, or something like it, may come to the fore, before the bourgeoisie is "ready" for it. If this happens, it will be based not on the independent petty bourgeoisie, which no longer exists, but on the masses of white workers reacting to a declining economy and increasing political disenchantment. Some black publicists have already noted that the white worker could be transformed from the rearguard of reaction into its vanguard. Signs of this tendency have already appeared. It is questionable whether old-style liberalism, or even a new social-democratic coalition, could prove an effective barrier to this possibility; only the proletarian revolution — the dictatorship of the anti-white supremacist working-class — can offer a convincing alternative to fascism to the ever growing of white workers who are hostile to official society to the very backbone of their souls.

THE NATIONAL QUESTION

For many years, the ideologists of capital boasted that the U.S. was a "melting pot", where diverse nationalities were blended together and came to lose their distinctiveness. In recent years, the line has shifted to one of touting "ethnicity", the preservation of diversity within a harmonious whole. Both of these versions of history are racist lies, denying the reality of national oppression which is the characteristic feature of U.S. life.

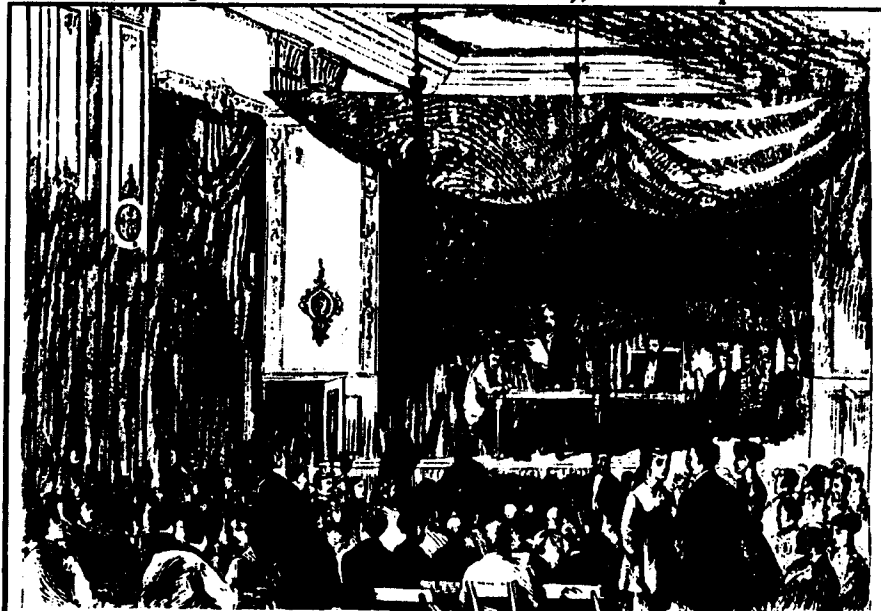
The various European groups that immigrated to the U.S. passed through a similar experience: one generation of discrimination followed by assimilation, marked by their beginning the process of escaping from the lowest ranks of the working class they at first occupied. This pattern held true for the Germans, Scandinavians, and Irish, the groups that constituted the bulk of the immigrant population prior to the Civil War, and for the Slavic peoples, Italians and Jews, who began to come in large numbers in the last decades of the last century; the differences in the rate of assimilation were largely due to differences in degree of urbanization prevailing in the country from which they emigrated, the proximity of their language and culture to English around which the assimilation took place, and so forth. All these immigrants shared a common feature; they all came with two passports: the official paper from the government and — their white skin.

This pattern never extended to the red, brown, black and yellow peoples who also make their home in North America. The native people, the red Indians,

black labor as well, by supporting the Free Soil (for whites only) movement. On the very eve of the war, the unions took no official notice of slavery, regarding it, at best, as a subordinate part of the general labor question, less important than minor legislative reform. When the war broke out, instead of embracing the cause of the slaves as their own, white labor had to be dragged by the bourgeoisie kicking and screaming into the war, especially after the first wave of enthusiasm was spent.

They followed the same course after the war. Highly incensed at the growing might and arrogance of the industrial bourgeoisie which dominated the government through the Republican Party, white labor turned toward efforts to build its own party, bringing it into direct conflict with Southern blacks, who had in many places transformed the Republican Party into a labor party in fact. Looking at the masses of newly freed slaves, white labor saw them not as part of their own class but as competitors and potential scabs, and attempted to restrict their employment by organizing them — when they agreed to admit them to the unions at all — into separate bodies. For the legislative accomplishments of the Reconstruction governments they cared not a rap, focusing their attention on the charges of corruption and on the so-called waste of stationing federal troops in the South.

What was true of the union movement was, sadly, also true of the disciples of Marx (although it was not true of Marx himself), who were quite influential



The National Labor Union's Philadelphia Congress, August 1869; the NLU voted to exclude black workers, and its leaders opposed the Reconstruction governments in the South. Black workers then organized their own National Labor Union, closely allied with Radical Reconstruction. The refusal of white workers to unite with blacks weakened the entire labor movement nationally. Engraving from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* courtesy of Library of Congress.

in some sections of the labor movement. So it was that New York in 1871 witnessed a march of 20,000, demonstrating solidarity with the workers of Paris — 20,000 radicals who were able to look across the ocean to the Paris Commune but were unable to look five hundred miles to the South to the South Carolina commune!

When white labor turned its back on Reconstruction, the end was in sight. The northern industrial bourgeoisie had no desire to see the continuance of the southern black revolt against property once it had accomplished the aim set for it of liquidating the former slaveholders as a class. The industrialists, therefore, in control of the Republican Party on a national level, carried through a legislative maneuver in 1877 which led to the withdrawal of federal troops from the South.

The Reconstruction governments and the black masses were confronted by the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist terrorist formations which had been mobilizing for just such a day. White supremacist “redemption” governments were set up in South Carolina and Mississippi, parallel to the legally constituted Reconstruction governments. The counter-revolutionary violence, which had never really ceased, became more intense, and after a few months, the reactionaries succeeded in crushing the Reconstruction parliaments and gaining official recognition from the authorities in Washington. Then began several decades of White terror. Black elected officials were ousted, black voters were eliminated by force and fraud and black power fell before the armed quasi-official counter-revolutionary mobs, given a free hand by the federal government. It was at this time that took place a little known episode in history, the “Kansas Exodus” of 1879, in which 90,000 blacks attempted to emigrate from the south; all but a few were halted by terrorism along the route. Sojourner Truth, who had been a prominent abolitionist and advocate of women’s rights even before the Civil War, was one of the leaders of this “walking strike.”)

The industrial bourgeoisie now held sway over the whole country. Though the first external manifestations of U.S. imperialism were its seizure, in 1898, of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Phillipines, the birth date of imperialism as a stage of capitalism can be fixed as 1877, when the southern black masses went down to historic defeat. Northern labor, mainly white, would soon feel the cost of its failure to come to the defense of southern black labor.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

The year 1877 saw the outbreak of a great strike, in which railroad workers seized the terminals from Baltimore to Chicago, and in which the bourgeoisie unanimously saw the specter of revolution. It was both symbol and substance that the troops hurled against the strikers were in many cases the military units that had recently been withdrawn from the south. In St. Louis the workers, under the leadership of the Workingmen’s Party, went beyond the seizure of the terminals and began to exercise power in the city through mass assemblies!

fundamental compact on which white racism rests, namely the black, brown, yellow and red interests shall be served only after the needs of the white workingmen have been fulfilled. An additional point: in no other developed country is there such widespread cynicism toward the electoral process as in the U.S. It is taken for granted among all sectors of the working class and the entire population that all politicians steal and take bribes, that political parties are motivated purely by vulgar self interest, and that nothing of real value can come from the parliamentary game. The proportion of eligible voters choosing to cast a ballot has steadily declined, and it is likely that the upcoming presidential elections will witness for the first time the non-voters outnumbering the vote totals of all the candidates combined.

Given the observable cynicism of the American voter toward bourgeois politics, together with the deeply ingrained national tradition of lawlessness, it is conceivable that the working class will never go through a labor party phase, or else that it will give rise to a labor party as a side product of the emergence of revolutionary dual power forms. On the other hand, there is a possibility that the black movement may succeed in launching a mass black party; there have been signs of this development on and off in recent years. If that happened, it would represent the essential elements of a labor party, regardless of its label, and we would orient toward it wholeheartedly.

FASCISM

Everything in the U.S. must be viewed through the prism of the white supremacist contract on which bourgeois hegemony rests. Denial of rights to, and violence against, people of color is not fascism but the ordinary operation of bourgeois legality in the U.S. Indeed, this violence is premised not on the denial of bourgeois rights to the rest of the population but on the continuance of these rights. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan, resisting through the most savage violence even the slightest concession to people of color, have had as their aim not the destruction of unions, constitutional legality, etc. but their maintenance and strengthening — for whites only. (For example, in one fifteen year period in the last century, there were over fifty strikes on the southern railroads with the aim of driving the black workers out of the industry and strengthening the bargaining position of the white union in relation to management. Even today, in many localities, the Klan does not oppose but leads union locals.

There do exist fascist groups, and they have some base, but if fascism is understood as a movement, with some degree of autonomy directed against “ordinary” bourgeois rule, then it must be said that, excepting for a short period in the early 1930’s, fascism has never been favored by the capitalist class in its dominant sectors. (This is not to deny growing pressure toward more right-wing, repressive policies within the existing institutional framework.) Why should the bourgeoisie favor fascism? Hasn’t white supremacy served to maintain its rule so far?

incorporate the union into the system of industrial legality as soon as it won recognition in 1940. It enabled labor to play its role as part of the Grand Alliance that steered the country through World War II. It led to the emergence of the coalition of bourgeois liberals, the official labor movement and Negro reformism which has dominated U.S. politics for four decades and continues to do so, although its stability is now shaken.

Politics as serious business disappeared with the cementing of the "historic compromise" of the late 1930's. When real politics reappeared over two decades later, it was largely due to the refusal of black people to accept any longer the results of that compromise. But we shall take that subject later.

We now turn to several topics which are among those often raised by European Leftists and which reveal some of the distinctive features of the U.S.: the question of the labor party, the question of facism and the national question.

THE LABOR PARTY

Why has the U.S., alone among the developed countries, failed to produce a mass labor or social-democratic party? Is American prosperity so overwhelming or are U.S. workers so backward that they have felt no need to take any initiative that would lead them out of the two major capitalist parties? We believe the answer lies elsewhere.

What is a labor party? It is the extension of the legislative arena of the usual trade union practice of bargaining for better terms in the sale of labor power. It represents a continuation of efforts to improve the conditions of the workers within the frame work of the wage system. Thus, while a struggle for a labor party can embody great mass energy and even revolutionary potential, in its realized form it represents class collaboration.

U.S. workers, by and large, have managed to achieve within the two-party system much the same degree of influence and social reform legislation that their European counterparts have achieved through mass social-democratic and communist parties — in some areas, more. In many respects the CIO was more party than union: aside from drastically altering the face of industrial villages (e.g. Gary, Indiana and Flint, Michigan, major steel and auto manufacturing centers respectively; in such places the police are no longer called out to break strikes, and workers are not evicted from their homes during strikes or layoffs) the CIO also managed to acquire on a national scale influence within the Democratic Party equal to that of the unions within, say, the British Labour Party. Of course this political influence is conditioned, as it is in England, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, France and Italy, on the unions agreeing to confine their reform efforts to limits acceptable to capital, even if not to particular capitalists at a particular moment. As has already been explained, in the U.S. this means specifically avoiding a challenge to the white supremacist contract on which bourgeois hegemony rests. Thus the unions, both in their economic functions and in their political activity, have at best striven to redress some of the most glaring "excesses" of white racism, while leaving intact the

Consider for a moment what would have been the impact on U.S. (and world!) history had white labor chosen to make common cause with the great upheaval of the black toilers of the South? Will it ever be possible to know how different might the outcome have been had there existed among the thousands of professed Marxists in the country at the time even a small organized group that understood the world historic significance of Black Reconstruction and undertook to establish links between it and the militant labor movement of the North?

Because White workers did not forge these links with black labor, a continuing pattern of labor control reasserted itself. The bourgeoisie was able to redefine the white skin privilege from that of not being a slave to that of having access to the bourgeois political process. Because of the inability of white labor to see its reflection in the struggles of black people, labor militancy was transformed into fight for white labor's interests. The subsequent history of black/white labor cannot be detailed here but a few illustrations will indicate the general direction.

Within a decade after the counter-revolution of 1877, there arose once again in the South a movement which threatened the sway of capital — this time among poor white farmers, angry at extortionate interest rates and monopoly control of prices for supplies and farm products. This movement, organized in the Populist Party, for a time threatened to blow apart the "solid south" of the Democrats. The black masses extended their support to Populism and attempted to broaden its program to address the needs of sharecroppers and hired laborers as well as independent farmers. At first blacks were accepted into the movement and even defended as public speakers at its rallies. But the ruling class posed a choice to the insurgent white masses: accept the blacks into your ranks, and you will bear the full weight of state repression; break ranks with them and some of your demands will be granted. After a stormy period, the movement decided to take the latter choice. Thus, southern populism to this day continues to combine outpourings of wrath against "the banks" with adherence to white supremacy. Observe the curious spectacle of Tom Watson, the most prominent leader of early Populism, who was only allowed to take his seat in the U.S. senate after having accepted the racist compromise, making a speech in defense of the Bolsheviks on one day and another in defense of lynching on the following day.

The Socialist Party, which was born around the turn of the century and attained considerable influence over the next two decades behind the figure of its well known and popular spokesman, Eugene V. Debs, was also fatally marred by its acceptance that the notion politics, even radical politics, was "white men's business." There were better and worse currents within American Socialism (the best broke with it early to join the Industrial Workers of the World) but the prevalent view was that the party could gain legitimacy in the eyes of the white workers only if it distanced itself from the black masses. Thus it organized racially segregated locals in the South (when it admitted blacks at all) and failed

to oppose the racist "oriental exclusion" immigration policies favored by the reformist union officials.

It would be inaccurate to present a picture of unanimous adherence to the white supremacist contract within either the rank and file or the leadership of white labor. The Knights of Labor, organized in the last century, welcomed members of all colors. The anarchists grouped around Albert Parsons, hanged in Chicago in 1886 in the Haymarket affair (the origin of the May 1 holiday), were staunch defenders of proletarian solidarity. The IWW, organized at the beginning of this century as a self-conscious revolutionary movement, in many respects the best and most successful revolutionary organization the country has known since the ending of the Reconstruction, broke with the pervasive racism of the American Federation of Labor. (Irish readers may be familiar with the IWW, since James Connolly was an active member during his sojourn in the U.S.) Yet these efforts, in spite of some successes which we treasure, were never able to win the bulk of white labor away from the racist ideas and practices which tied it to capital.

It was not until the Great Depression of the 1930's that there appeared on the scene a multi-racial revolutionary organization that sought to make the "Negro question" a central feature of its activities. The Communist Party, under the influence of Lenin and the October Revolution, began to challenge the notion of what constituted the labor movement, and to insist on the recognition of the strivings of black people as a vital part of the general revolutionary process.

The CP, which began the decade as an organization of about 2,000 people, most of whom were foreign born and non-English speaking, had an important influence on the course of events of that time. It came to national attention through its role in several important strikes, particularly in the San Francisco general strike of 1934.

Until the Depression, the workers in the mass production industries stood largely outside of the unions. The San Francisco strike along with other battles, most notably the sit-down strike at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan at the beginning of 1937, showed the more farsighted sectors of the capitalist class that the old policy of confrontation with the proletariat would no longer serve their interests. These elements, represented by the Roosevelt Administration, decided instead on a policy of legalizing the unions and incorporating them into the framework of bourgeois legality.

The Roosevelt Administration offered concessions of considerable value: the ending of the open tyranny of the steel barons and the bringing of the Constitution into industry, as well as the passage of much needed social welfare legislation, in which the U.S. was decades behind the most advanced European countries. These concessions gained significance in the context of the world march of facism, viewed fondly by those sectors of the ruling class who were unreconciled to the Roosevelt policies.



In return, the Roosevelt Administration demanded that labor, for its part, forego its political independence and in particular that it entrust its fate to the coalition represented by the Democratic Party. This course seemed reasonable enough in places like Detroit where the CIO exercised considerable influence on the Democratic Party.

The problem was that the party of the northern liberals was also the party of the southern lynchers. Any attempt to organize the southern working class would inevitably come up against the system of racial segregation. And any attempt to challenge the system of segregation would find itself quickly spilling out of the economic arena into politics, to confront the Democratic Party. As events had already shown in the campaigns to organize southern agricultural workers, the challenge would in no way limit itself to peaceful and legal forms. The idea of southern rural black toilers organized and in arms was not acceptable to any sector of the capitalist class, no matter how liberal and reformist. If the CIO and the Left chose to follow that course they could expect not a sympathetic hearing at the White House, but machine guns and tear gas.

Faced with the alternatives, which were posed concretely over the course of several years, labor and the CIO Left, for a variety of reasons, chose to follow the line of least resistance. The Left-led organizations of southern black toilers were merged into national CIO unions, where they were allowed to languish; the efforts toward a labor party were indefinitely postponed in the interests of unity behind Roosevelt; and in general the CIO Left settled into a position as the legal left wing of the liberal-labor coalition.

The acceptance on the part of the CIO Left of the race policies of the dominant sector of capital represented the "historic compromise" of that epoch. It made it possible for Ford, traditional fortress of anti-unionism, to