

White Blindspot

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

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

Letter to Progressive Labor

By Noel Ignatin

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

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

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

—Ibid., p. 16

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

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

“In the United States of North America every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. (Capital, Vol. I, Chapter 10, Section 7)”

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

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

The Greatest Barrier to Class Consciousness

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

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

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

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

The Original ‘Sweetheart Agreement’!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ‘Parallel Struggles’ Fallacy

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

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

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

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

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

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

Programmatic Error: A Hypothetical Case

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Fair Employment Through Full Employment’:

A White Supremacist Slogan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If It Goes No Further Than That...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘The Real Secret’ – An Instructive Parallel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Only Choice

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

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

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

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

The Subjective Factor Was Ignored...

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

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

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

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

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

The 'peculiar institution'

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

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

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

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

Noel Ignatin—March, 1967

A Letter Of Support

By Ted Allen

Dear Noel,

A few comments on your draft letter to PL:

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

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

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

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

Argument No.1:

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

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

Argument No.2:

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

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

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

Argument No. 3:

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

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

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

Argument No. 4:

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

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

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

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

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

Ted Allen—1967

Can White Workers Radicals Be Radicalized?

By Ted Allen

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

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