

### III. Who Benefits and Who Loses From Racism?

When workers in a mostly-white factory demand a raise and their boss tells them there are hundreds of unemployed minority workers ready to work for less than they make now, the workers might think twice about pushing their demand. They will also tend to develop the idea that minority workers are their enemies.

As we saw in chapter two, minorities are directly oppressed by racism. They certainly do not benefit from it. For them, the fight against racism represents a striving for equality in jobs, pay, housing, health care and education. It is not hard to see minorities' interest in the anti-racist struggle.

But what of white workers—do they gain or lose because minorities are super-oppressed? In the example above, the losers are the workers of all colors and the winner is the boss.

Racism that separates whites from their minority brothers and sisters does not benefit the white workers. They suffer worse pay and working conditions than they would have if minorities had equality.

A basic understanding of who benefits from racism is helpful for clarity on the issue. Even more, it is vital for developing the best methods of fighting discrimination, too. Minorities and whites alike will benefit when everyone has a clear knowledge of who the enemy is and who our friends are.

Racism is not merely a matter of antagonistic attitudes between people. It is a systematic method for increased capitalist exploitation of the entire working class. The capitalist class is the group of businessmen who employ people to operate the means of production owned by the capitalists—factories, offices, banks, big farms, etc. The working class is made up of all those who must sell their ability to labor for a wage or salary. The working class includes both low- and middle-income workers. It also includes unemployed workers, who need to sell their labor power but cannot find jobs. Most students come from working-class families and will become or already are workers themselves. The working class and its families make up 90% of the population of the country. The capitalist class is the richest one or two percent. There is a



third group of small businessmen who own little shops or businesses but do most of their work themselves instead of hiring workers. It makes up about eight percent of the population.

Businessmen profit twice from racism. In addition to becoming richer off the worse conditions of minority workers, capitalists benefit again from the division sown within the working class. A fragmented working class is not an effective force for economic, political or social change. Keeping workers divided, economically and politically, benefits the same handful of businessmen over and over again. Capitalist rule depends on splitting the working class. Without such divide-and-conquer tactics, the powerful handful of monopoly capitalists who run this country for their own profit would hardly be able to maintain their rule.



Disunity is a tremendous roadblock to effective struggle for higher wages, better working conditions, better housing, more schools and more teachers. If minority and white working-class brothers and sisters do not unite, we all lose and the boss gains. If we fight among ourselves on the shop floor, who wins? The boss. If we fight over who should get laid off first rather than against all layoffs, who wins? The boss. If we are together, fighting side by side, the boss is isolated and vulnerable while we become strong enough to win.

Racism means profits—not only the superprofits sweated from the lower wages and rotten working conditions of minority workers, but also profits fleeced from the backs of the whole working class. When the working class is split by racism, it weakens our struggle.

It is hard for many people, even many who consider themselves progressives, to see that white workers are actually, materially hurt by racism. They see conditions for white workers better than those for minority workers, and they draw the conclusion that somehow one group is benefitting from the oppression of the other group. Instead of pointing out to white workers that it is actually in their own interests to fight the effects of racism, they feel that white working people can only support the just demands of minority workers for ethical or moral reasons, not economic ones. While it is true that many good people are moved to action because racism outrages the elementary sense of fairness and democracy, many more can be swung to fight racism if they are shown the economic basis of racism and the importance of fighting it for the interest of all workers.

Statistics help prove that racist discrimination means a lower not higher income for white workers. In cities across the country where racism is most intense (as expressed by a low ratio of black to white family income), it is also true that the richest 1% of white families (the capitalists) get their biggest share of income and leave the least for the great mass of white families.<sup>1</sup> The gap between white and black incomes is no privilege for the white worker; this differential represents racist inequality that holds back the struggle of the entire working class, keeps wages low, enables the capitalists to minimize education and other public services and enlarges their profits.

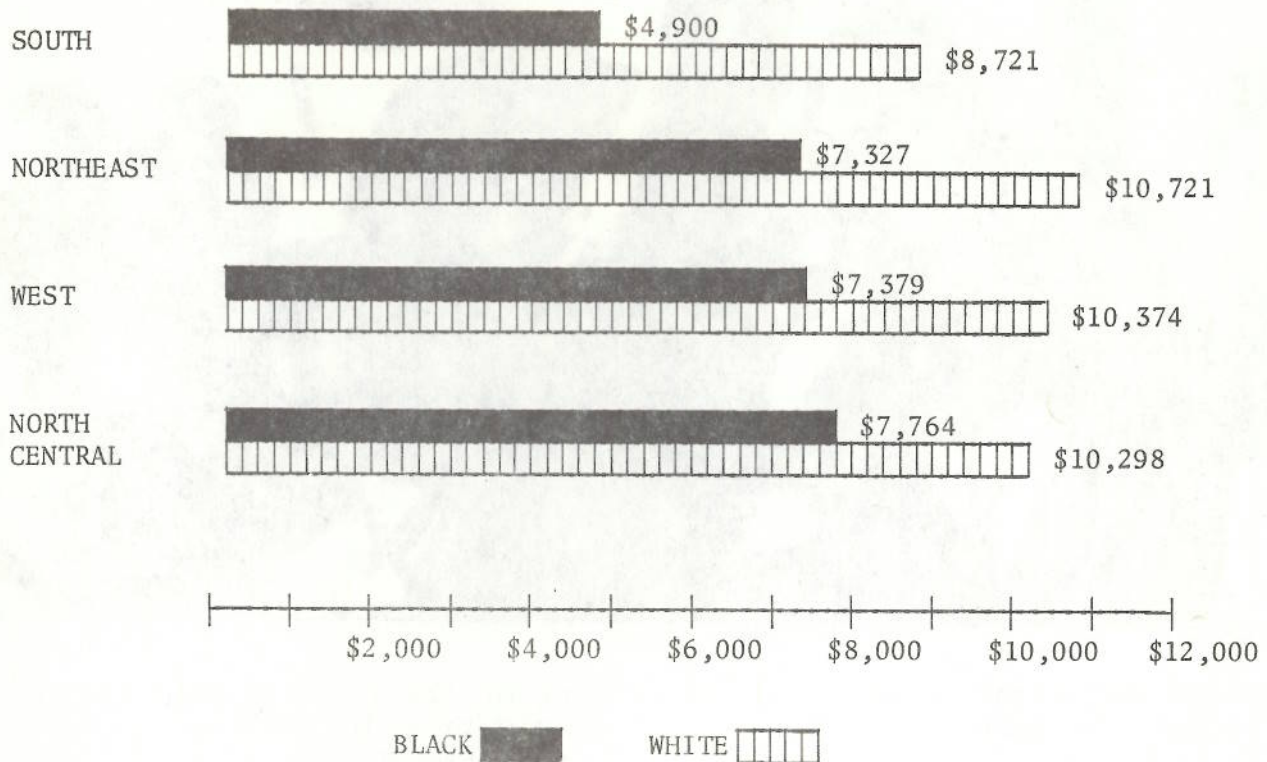
The chart gives a summary by



regions showing how the most racist region is the worst one for white working people, too:

### MEDIAN INCOME

REGION



Region	Degree of racism (deficit of black income)
South	44%
Northeast	32
West	29
North Central	25

The ordinary white working family in the South falls \$1500 to \$2000 behind the rest of the country—a loss, not a gain, for being divided from black people. In the South, white families outnumber black families by more than 13 million to 2½ million. The capitalist class makes profit two ways: by superexploitation of black people and even more by division of the working class and the consequently lower position of white working people, too. The degree of racist exploitation is a greater burden on black people, but the larger mass

of profit is derived from dividing and subjugating all working people.<sup>3</sup>

The conclusion is inescapable: looking exclusively at race or nationality builds the illusion that those are the lines that divide working people. In reality, workers of all colors share common material interests. The capitalists—the tiny one or two percent of the population who own everything and who make their living from profits extracted from the labor of workers—are the ones who thrive on





racism and who stand to lose in the anti-racist struggle.

To keep that from happening, the bosses have one more trick to divide people along lines of race and nationality. It is called "reverse discrimination," the idea that white workers lose when minorities advance. An example might be an unemployed white job applicant who is told that he is more qualified, but the boss must hire a Latino to fill a quota. The white worker's response, encouraged by the boss and by the U.S. Supreme Court with its Bakke decision, may be to blame the Chicanos that he did not get the job. He might think that his interests stand at odds with the fight against racism.

When we put our class knowledge to work, we can see through this fraud just as easily as the fraud that white workers keep minorities down. First, as we have seen, the idea that minorities have overcome discrimination is a lie, so that

part of "reverse discrimination" is pure capitalist illusion. The Chicano unemployment rate is still far higher than the rate for white workers. Second, the whole exercise is again intended to divide workers and keep them from unity and struggle. White workers do not run the capitalist economy with all its inequality—the capitalist class does. The bosses say they have to favor one group or another because there are only so many jobs, so many promotions and so many places in college to go around. If the working class gets together and fights for more jobs, more college admissions, and no layoffs—with the lion's share of the increase going to minorities so they can catch up—then all workers will be better off, and the bosses will pay.

The idea of class is very important for anti-racists. Class unity means the difference between victory and defeat. It is a fact of life under capitalism that workers



have to struggle against the capitalists for their livelihood. Workers under attack face two paths: the individualist path of trying to beat down someone else, and the collective path of united struggle against the bosses. The individualist path is a dead end. Trying to push down other workers gets no advantage. If "they" are laid off, you will be sped up and subject to layoff, too. If "they" must take low-wage jobs, your wages will be dragged down, too.

But the collective path leads to victory. Together, fight for equal wages and higher wages for all. Together, fight for fair advancement and good working conditions. Make the capitalists pay!

Workers achieved such unity and advance in the 1930's, when they broke out of the narrow, racist confines of the AFL craft unions and built the CIO industrial unions. In the late 1960's, such unity and advance obtained a number of victories in higher education, in the black liberation movement, and in the struggle against the U.S. war of aggression on Indochina.

When the capitalists turn the screws hardest and things look bleak, that is when workers unite and resistance to oppression bursts forth in new waves of struggle. With the growing crisis of the U.S. economic system, plagued by inflation, unemployment, manipulated energy shortages, and a collapsing dollar, new waves of struggle are certain to rise. It is a time for all workers to unite, to support the just demands for equality and to make new gains for all!

#### NOTES

1. From a study of the 48 largest cities of the 1960 Census by Michael Reich published in Schooling in a Corporate Society, Martin Carnoy, editor, New York: David McKay Company, 1972. Reich

found a correlation of .55, where 0.00 would indicate racism had no effect on white income and 1.00 would mean that racism and white working people's income were in a fixed relationship. A social-democrat (phony Marxist, really a reformist), Reich goes on to speculate that an irrational, racist attitude by the white worker provides "psychological benefits" with an effect that "compensates for one's own misery." Since a successful battle against racism would do away with the poverty and the misery, it is Reich who has the irrational attitude. By accepting views promoted by the wealthy, workers with racist attitudes help reinforce their own poverty.

2. 1969 income. Source: 1970 Census, U.S. Summary, Table 135.
3. For example, if the South could be brought up to the levels of the West, capitalists would lose \$6.2 billion to black working people and \$22 billion to white working people. Altogether, the working people would win nearly \$30 billion annually in 1969 dollars from the capitalist class.