

"ROOTS"

Over 130,000,000 people, 85% of all TV-using homes, watched at least part of ROOTS in January. What's the reason for this overwhelming popularity of a story based on the memories of several generations of southern slaves? Why did the capitalist owners and controllers of the TV media sponsor ROOTS? And what's the significance of the show as far as the lives of workers and oppressed peoples in the US are concerned?

Obviously, there are hundreds of reasons why so many people watched ROOTS. But one thing is clear: objectively, it shows that the masses of working and oppressed people are demanding to know their history, their roots, whether they be Blacks from the Black Nation, whose ancestors suffered the brutality of slavery; Chicanos from the Southwest, whose land was stolen from their forefathers; Native Americans, almost wiped out by their 'civilized' colonizers; or Anglo immigrants, whose ancestors fled from oppression in Europe to find it in a different form in the 'new world'.

This thirst for the true history of workers and oppressed peoples is a good thing. Only with a firm grasp of the history and nature of their exploitation and oppression under capitalism will the masses be able to make revolution and put this system where it belongs -- on the scrap-heap of history.

But if knowledge of the history of the many peoples of the US is so important, and it is, why did the ruling class, who own and control the media, push ROOTS? Again, the answer has many aspects. For one thing, they knew it would attract a huge audience and gross profits. At the same time, they figured that whatever historical understanding was gained from watching ROOTS would be limited by the limitations of the story itself: the fact that it focused on generations of one family, who, under slavery, were the relatively more privileged house slaves and skilled slaves; the fact that after the Civil War, they were able to leave the plantation and buy land and 'be free'; the fact that the form of resistance was limited to occasional attempts of escape to the North, without accurately portraying the numerous slave rebellions and insurrections in the slave south.

What the bourgeoisie can't control, though, is the fact that ROOTS, for all its limitations, gave a spurt to the progressive, democratic aspirations of Black people and their allies in the Anglo-American working class and among the oppressed nationalities. It encouraged the masses of people to dig into the history of their people, their social class. With this in mind, we are briefly outlining some of the major historical questions ROOTS didn't deal with, and which are necessary to put the history of slavery in the US into perspective.

WHY DID SLAVERY HAPPEN?

The slavery that accompanied the dawn of capitalism was not because of some in-born racism on the part of European slave-traders, or because the 'civilized' nations of Europe wanted to bring Christianity and a 'better life' to the 'heathens' of Africa, or because of any other similar reasons usually given by bourgeois historians. In fact, slavery of the late 15-19th centuries began as a result of the discovery of 'new lands' by Europe, increased trade, the beginning of capitalist production, or commodity production based on the drive for profit. From the sweat and blood of the native peoples, African slaves, and wage-slaves in Europe, came the primitive accumulation of capital. As Karl Marx pointed out in Capital: "...capital comes (into the world) dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt;" (p 760) and "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment of mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production!" (p 751)

In the thirteen colonies, slavery provided the basis for the enormous wealth and power of the landed aristocracy. In 1793, the cotton gin was invented in England, and cotton production expanded tremendously. Again we quote Marx: "Whilst the cotton industry introduced child-slavery in England, it gave in the United States a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery (i.e. production mainly for the plantation) into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world." (pp 759-760) Features common to capitalist production, such as extreme overwork and speed-up, were grafted onto the already brutal slave system, as the plantation was tied into the international market.

WHY THE CIVIL WAR WAS FOUGHT

By the 1800s it was clear that slavery, to survive, had to expand. Erosion of the soil from intensive one crop cultivation year after year was only one of many economic reasons why slavery had to seek new, fresh territory. For over sixty years a primarily political battle took place, between the slave-owning class in the South and the rising industrial capitalist class in the North. The struggle involved the admittance of territories as either free or slave states (Missouri Compromise, 1820; Kansas-Nebraska Act, 1854), the question of catching and returning escaped slaves (Fug-

itive Slave Law), and the legal status of slavery in the territories (the infamous Dred Scott Decision, 1857, which declared that a slave was chattel property no matter where he or she might be taken). All these reflected the South's efforts to extend slavery, and the North's attempts to keep it in check. But not until the mid-nineteenth century did the Northern bourgeoisie develop the productive forces and accumulate adequate capital and a corresponding political position to challenge Southern domination of the government.

The Civil War was clearly 'the continuation of politics by other means.' It had been brewing for years, and erupted finally in 1861 when the Southern slavocracy realized it would have to act or submit to the growing strength of the industrial bourgeoisie

For the Northern capitalists, the war was not fought over a 'moral issue', that is, because it felt slavery was evil. For the most part, they were concerned only with stopping the expansion of slavery, and opening up new territory to capitalist exploitation. 'Emancipation' became a slogan only later, under pressure from the slaves and their allies both North and South (including Abolitionists, poor Anglo farmers, and workers), and out of fear of losing to the South. Even under the slogan of freedom, however, we should recognize that the Northern capitalists were bound by their own class interests: freed slaves would not only help them to win the war, but serve as a source of cheap labor afterwards, so necessary to the fast-expanding capitalist system. In essence, the Civil War was a phase of the bourgeois-democratic revolution which had begun with the fight for emancipation from England in 1776. As Marx said, "The present struggle between the South and North is, therefore, nothing but a struggle between two social systems, between the system of slavery and the system of free labor. The struggle has broken out because the two systems can no longer live peacefully side by side on the North American continent. It can only be ended by the victory of one system or the other." (The Civil War in the United States, p-81).

RECONSTRUCTION

The abolition of chattel slavery and the military defeat of the slave-owning class reopened the period known as Reconstruction. But all the popularized (bourgeois) versions of these approximately twelve years deliberately ignore or distort the fundamental significance of Reconstruction: it was a time when a revolutionary solution to the land question was entirely within the reach of the Northern bourgeoisie. The break-up of the old plantations and their redistribution among the freed slaves and poor Anglos would have allowed for the most complete transformation of Southern society that was possible under capitalism. Throughout this period, the ex-slaves raised the demand for the land they had earned through years of back-breaking toil. In some instances, as for example the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Florida, land was actually seized by Black and Anglo militias. The cry was raised for the right to vote and secure other bourgeois democratic rights as well, and for several years, the Reconstruction Acts did extend certain bourgeois freedoms to Blacks and poor Anglos in a number of Southern states. But as time went on, it became clear that 'freedom' meant two different things to the freedmen and their poor Anglo allies, and to the Northern bourgeoisie. As the North consolidated its political and economic power over the South, and as wealth and power continued to become centralized in fewer and fewer hands; as the demands of the ex-slaves and poor Anglos in the South and wage-slaves and farmers in the North grew more and more threatening; the most reactionary wing of the Northern bourgeoisie gained dominance, and gradually the gains of Reconstruction were substituted by outright reactionary terror. Chattel slavery was replaced by share-cropping, often on the same plantations, under the same masters, controlled by Wall Street. The Civil War did not free the slaves. The chains of slavery were replaced by the bondage and oppression of the share-cropping system.

What significance does this have for workers and oppressed people in the US today? Karl Marx once said: "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the

Black it is branded." (Capital, Vol. 1 p 301) The fact that the land question was not resolved after the Civil War in favor of the ex-slaves and poor Anglos meant that the economic basis for genuine freedom was denied them, and this fact persists to this very day! When we say that a Black Nation exists in the deep South, we can trace its origins back to this failure of Reconstruction to divide the plantations up among the freedmen and poor Anglos.

Workers and oppressed peoples have the right to know their true history, but we won't get it from the bourgeoisie. As we've seen, ROOTS was not an exception to the bourgeoisie's control over the media, but it did give a forum for more widespread interest in and understanding of the real origins of the Black National Question. It is our duty to build on this desire of the masses to know their roots, to fight for a correct understanding of the national question in the South, and to struggle ever harder for the formation of a genuine communist party that will unite the many streams of protest throughout the country to overthrow the bourgeoisie, and establish a socialist society where true freedom exists for the masses of people.

Note: The MLC will soon be publishing a revised position on the Black National Question. We are presently reviewing our earlier position, 'Free the Black Nation'.
