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The Centrality of the Black Worker*

The Problem

One of the great paradoxes of this historical period is the existence of a fully developed class society in the United States, with little awareness by the working class that it is an historical formation with an historical mission. In the most advanced capitalist society in history, there is a working class unconscious of itself as a class. This paradox is further sharpened by the ruling class in the U.S. that is aware of its class interests, and deliberately formulates public policy and programs designed to maintain its position of dominance over the working class. Hence, in U.S. capitalist class society at an advanced stage—perhaps even a decaying stage—of development, we observe the objective existence of a powerful and broadly based working class that subjectively fails to see itself as a class antagonistic to a ruling class which exploits it without serious political challenge.

The majority of trade unions, through their bureaucratic structures, serve as vehicles for regulating the behavior of millions of workers in the interest of maintaining and perpetuating the dominance of capital over labor. The masses of people continue to follow and play in the political arena behind the Democratic and Republican parties. Both parties are solidly controlled by monopoly capitalism. The many national minorities have been totally absorbed into capitalist democratic politics, and Black people continue in the expectation that their democratic rights can be achieved within U.S. capitalist society. Why and how has the hegemony of the U.S. ruling class held sway over the masses of working people who objectively exist as an historical class formation?

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Historical Setting

From the beginning of U.S. history, the early formation of U.S. class society, the poor whites, whether servants, freemen or small land owners, were encouraged to identify their interests with the landed gentry and those patricians who had assumed control over the government, the land and economic production. There was a tendency of white freemen to fraternize with Blacks, but laws were passed to discourage social mingling between them. In fact, based on the earlier attempts at exterminating the Indians, the precedent was established that non-white Christians were less than human.

The early supply of workers came to the colonies as bonded servants. They were drawn from the surplus of labor in England, the idle and those most likely to have participated in criminal activity. They were enticed to come to the colonies by the promise that after serving a term as an indentured servant (usually 7 years) they would be granted their freedom and the opportunity to acquire land, which was more than abundant. This incipient form of the U.S. working class was relatively free of racial prejudice and often fraternized with the few Blacks who were in the colonies prior to the beginning of Black slavery.

The slave trade commenced in the latter half of the 17th century. The buying of slaves by the landed aristocracy had become more profitable than the buying of indentured white servants. As more and more slaves were imported into the colonies, the need for white indentured servants decreased, then disappeared. As the white indentured servants went free, the Black slaves took their place as the basic source of economic wealth and development. The dominant class in power realized the danger of an alliance between Black slaves and poor white freemen, so laws were passed to encourage enmity of whites for Blacks. Free Negroes and Indians were forbidden to own Christian white servants. Blacks were to be lashed if they raised up their hands against any white Christian. Masters were forbidden to whip a Christian white servant naked without special permission from a justice of the peace, while Blacks were so whipped and dismembered. Slaves were forbidden to own property and a legal and social distinction was made between a Christian servant and a Christian white servant. White Christians were severely punished for fornication with Negroes. Laws were passed pro-

hibiting miscegenation, especially between Black men and white women. Black women slaves were used as breeders. There was no Black family unit that could not be totally disrupted through sale. Slavery meant absolute psychological and legal impoverishment. Masters were forbidden to free slaves unless they paid for their transportation out of the colony. In short, racism emerged in the United States through legal fiat. It was necessary for the dominant class of landowners to drive a wedge between the Black slaves and poor whites. The poor whites were encouraged to identify their interests with the big landowners. They were given a stake in the evolving political economy of the new nation in formation by and through the imposition of racism, the attitude of white supremacy of the ruling elite.

The ideology of racism was quick to take hold. The more the profitability of slavery became real, the more racism fastened on the body politic. The poor whites and landed gentry knew they were not the same as the patricians, but they were content with the possibility of "moving up" in a society based on slavery, with lots of land and the chance of making it big. We see here the beginning of the split between Black labor and white labor—a split that was to harden into a total system, a way of life, physical, social, cultural, economic and political. The ideology was fully established before "the peculiar institution" became an integral part of the United States.

How the Division Based on Slavery and Color Hardened into a Social System

Well before the industrial revolution in the U.S., white labor was divided from Black labor because of slavery and racism. It was the landed gentry and white freemen who fought the British under General Washington. They had a stake in the overthrow of British colonialism, a form of economic exploitation that bore heavily on the middle and poor white farmers and artisans. Their stake in the revolution was clear: "No taxation without representation." Why should they continue to enrich the British crown and bourgeoisie at their own expense? The birth of a new nation with unlimited possibilities was asserting its historic necessity. It emerged from its inception, therefore, with a

divided working class, a division formed in an agrarian economy that carried over with the growth of towns and industrialization.

As W. E. Burghardt DuBois so eloquently states:

Indeed, the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded, and which persisted to threaten free labor until it was partially overthrown in 1863. The resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalism was adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over. Thus the majority of the world's laborers, by the insistence of white labor, became the basis of a system of industry which ruined democracy and showed its perfect fruit in World War and Depression.

Until it was partially overthrown in 1863, slavery forged the character of white labor in the United States. As DuBois further states:

This brings us down to the period of the Civil War. Up to the time that the war actually broke out, American labor simply refused, in the main, to envisage Black labor as a part of its problem. Right up to the edge of the war, it was talking about the emancipation of white labor and the organization of stronger unions without saying a word, or apparently giving a thought, to four million black slaves. During the war, labor was resentful. Workers were forced to fight in a strife between capitalists in which they had no interest and they showed their resentment in the peculiarly human way of beating and murdering the innocent victim of it all, the black free Negroes of New York and other Northern cities; while in the South, five million non-slaveholding poor white farmers and laborers sent their manhood by the thousands to fight and die for a system that had degraded them equally with the black slave. Could one imagine anything more paradoxical than this whole situation?

Abundant land, boundless economic opportunity in a developing capitalist economy, and the thought of becoming a planter or capitalist motivated white labor in identifying its interests with the system that exploited them. That white workers were used to help the planters in police patrols to prevent slaves from running away and keep Blacks "in their place" further confused and distorted the basic antagonism between labor and capital.

After the Civil War, the labor movement grew and developed as a segregated institution. Starting with the formation of the National Labor Union in 1866, the Knights of Labor in 1872, the American Federation of Labor in 1885, and the Congress of Industrial Organiza-

tions in 1935, the major contours of organized labor divided white labor from Black. Throughout, Black labor repeatedly attempted to join with white labor but was spurned. They had to set up Black segregated unions and were relegated to the lowest paying, menial, and unskilled jobs. The formation of the CIO was obliged to take in a sizeable number of Black workers for the reason that they were based in big industry and could not have been left out of the organization of workers along industrial lines. The fact of the matter was the CIO unions were white led and provided little opportunity for Black workers to move up the ladder to the skilled sector of labor in basic industry and to be represented on the leadership level of the unions. As recent as 1955 when the AFL-CIO merged, it was necessary to set up a Civil Rights Department to create the appearance that the merger was concerned with abolishing race bias from the labor movement.

As of 1979 very little has changed. Black workers are still grossly inadequately represented in the skilled sectors of industry. Many unions continue outwardly to deny membership to workers of color. On the level of union leadership, we find at best a token representation of Black workers in unions where Blacks make up a sizeable part of the rank and file.

Let us assume for the moment that during the building of CIO unions the embryonic Black caucuses, many of which aided in the building of CIO unions, had maintained their independence and succeeded in organizing countrywide. Would this development not have profoundly contributed to the building of a labor movement capable of achieving real working class unity? Would it not have prevented the cooptation of much of the CIO leadership into bureaucratic appendages of the ruling class?

It should come as no surprise that organized labor is still mainly a conservative political force in American politics. From its inception most of the leadership of white labor in the organization of trade unions excluded Black workers from equal participation. The U.S. labor movement emerged and was nourished by a system of racism. It is still mired in racism. Hence the conservatism of organized labor. Could it be otherwise?

If the organized sector of labor emerged and developed with racism, the unorganized sector—the overwhelming majority of working people—emerged and developed within the same racist context. The unorganized sector had none of the liberal pretenses of the organized sector, and it has been totally at the mercy of the employer class. Without union protection, the unorganized workers have been more severely exploited and racism, encouraged by the boss and accepted by the white workers, has contributed to the most extreme forms of economic exploitation and racial discrimination.

In short, the history of white workers from the early beginnings of the United States to the present has been written by the oppression and most extreme forms of racism against Black workers. This historic division has, more than any other social development, prevented the emergence of a working class conscious of itself as a class, with the historical mission of transforming the social system of the United States.

The Centrality of the Black Worker

History has placed Black workers at the core of the working class in the United States. They stand, Black men and women, as the most decisive lever for a thorough transformation of the U.S. social system. White workers, no matter how militant in struggle for their economic uplift, cannot perceive the class character of their struggles unless they understand how they have been misled and taken by a system raised and developed on their exploitation. White people, workers, men and women and youth, can only perceive their class enemy through a political embrace of Black folk. In a fundamental sense they must be “reborn” after centuries of social existence based on “white supremacy.” To acquire class consciousness, they must understand their history. To understand their history, they must understand their relationship to Black people. They cannot understand that relationship unless they understand how slavery and racism contradicted their social existence. For white working class people to understand their history, Black workers must interpret and teach them the meaning of Black oppression and economic exploitation. The thrust of this change must come from and be carried forward by Black working men and

women. From the most oppressed and exploited sector of the U.S. working class, downtrodden for centuries, must come the political, economic, cultural, social and ideological leadership of the U.S. people. Notwithstanding the heavy weight the system places on Black working folk, they must emerge as leaders of the whites, to teach the white majority the centrality of the Black minority in the making of United States history. The Black worker bears historic responsibility for combating racism, national oppression and class exploitation. Not alone but with whites who, however contradicted by a social system based on plunder, must, if we are to build a new society, transform themselves to transform society. The resolution of this contradiction decides the historical political contest between the working class and the U.S. ruling class. There can be no class struggle without white workers accepting leadership from the heart of their class. The future of human society is at stake. The conflict is real.

Black workers bridge the gap between the oppressed nation of Black people and the white toiling masses. They bring into play the sharpest contradictions of U.S. imperialism, capitalism in international crisis and decay. Carrying forward struggle for self-determination, ending racism and economic exploitation, the Black worker arouses consciousness among his white brothers and sisters. The Black worker can and must teach white workers, through struggle, the lessons of struggle in making of history. White workers can and must learn from Black folk. How to effect this relationship is the great political challenge of the moment.

How to Build Unity Based on the Centrality of Black Workers

The isolation from each other of the many Black community and caucus groups throughout the country can only retard the forward thrust and development of a Black workers’ movement. Every localized struggle of Black working people must be brought together decisively into a national formation, thereby reinforcing local action through national support.

In every Black community of this nation, Black working people are in trouble and they respond by organizing on a local level to do battle

against racial oppression in one of its many forms. Rather quickly they discover that white racist oppression to their advance is not local, nor does it lack national, including governmental, power. The opposition to Black workers is national, indeed international in scope, and it dwarfs all local community struggle. A Black local organization cannot deal with white national opposition to equality for Black workers. When we observe the unions, we observe that they are either regional or national in scope. Behind the unions and employers is the government, unquestionably national in scope and serving to perpetuate racial discrimination in every major industry in this country. Localized, fragmented Black struggles are therefore doomed to failure when confronted with white national racist opposition and oppression. It takes a national movement to deal with national oppression, and the quicker Black workers understand this, the sooner will we pose a serious challenge to the system that oppresses us.

A national Black organization is also necessary to combat racism within the ranks of the white working masses. There cannot be a conscious working class movement in the USA that fights for all working people as long as Blacks are limited organizationally and whites are captured nationally. We must find the way to liberate Black and white workers from the historic shroud of racism so that workers can come to grips with the real problems and struggles affecting them. The advancement of class awareness among white workers calls for a national organizational program of Black workers determined to combat racism. Such an organization must seek and develop support among the most politically advanced white workers, students, and intellectuals.

Hence, the historic question in the United States is how to bring about a national formation of Black workers geared to the overthrow of racism in American economic life. How is this done? The obvious answer is to organize a national Black workers' movement behind a program involving struggles for job equality within trade unions, industry and government, along with economic programs for the community such as massive low-rent public housing. Such a movement must seek broad community support, and can be initiated by organizers who contact the local caucuses and community groups and relate them to a national program. Through this initial organizational groundwork, the basis for a national conference must be laid. The organizational program to be projected would include the following:

1. To bring together Black trade union caucuses for a common assault on racism within organized labor.
2. To bring together Black community groups in struggle against economic inequality.
3. To establish a national organ or system of communications.
4. To coordinate struggles and activities of Black workers on a national level.
5. To confront the federal government with a practical legislative program of economic uplift for the Black community.
6. To raise necessary funds among the workers and in the Black community to support national organizing and to maintain the independence of the effort.
7. To begin the building of an independent political party based on Black working folk.

Though there have been many efforts in American history to forge such a national Black workers' organization, they have failed. Such efforts have failed in the past because:

1. There was a lack of politically aware leaders committed to organizing Black workers around economic issues.
2. There was a dependence on outside forces who were either politically opportunistic, or who represented wealthy whites and prevented a genuinely independent organization from evolving.
3. There was a diffusion of issues, a separation of political, social, educational, cultural and economic. There was no clear-cut economic program around which a Black workers' organization could coalesce.
4. There was a lower level of political awareness among Black workers and their communities in the past than exists at present.
5. There was no effective on-going organ or system of communications.

While the initial organizing program must be around those economic issues directly affecting Black workers at the point of production or in their communities, it does not exclude political action. Politics must be based on the organization of workers around an economic program. As workers become organized around economic issues, they will understand the necessity of struggling for political power and will have the basis for doing so. The first stage for organizing a national Black workers' organization therefore must be clear-cut, easily understood, and economic and political in character. It should be formulated by a preliminary convening conference committee made up of key representatives from different caucuses and community groups around the country. A national conference should then take place as soon as possible.

For this organizational campaign to succeed, the Black community must provide real support. It is therefore important to understand how the community has been kept from developing to the realization that a workers' organization is the genuine vehicle for community uplift. Take any particular Black community and we observe many factions and class strata. Every Black community is sorely divided, and if the Establishment continues to have its way it will keep them divided. So-called anti-poverty programs, many different religious denominations, Democratic and Republican organizations, special programs for the well-educated Negro to divide him from the Black worker who never had a chance to go to a decent school, certainly not to college, all are perpetuated by the System to prevent the workers from gaining hegemony in struggle for Black people.

Therefore, a clear identification of the issues in the community directly bearing on the everyday experiences of workers is necessary. The struggle for decent jobs and training for young Black workers, adequate low rent housing, quality schools in sufficient numbers with community control, greater representation of Black trade unionists among union officers, and political education classes for workers are some of the issues. The crazy battles for more anti-poverty programs are not. Governmental programs in support of "Black Capitalism" are not. The workers must define the issues and programs they deem to be in their best interests, and must project them for the entire community. A workers' program is of the greatest importance in organizing the

community, as is the resulting community support for a Black workers' organization. In this endeavor, there is no room for the hustler.

There must be a real independent organizational alliance between Black and white workers based and rooted in real, not rhetorical or ideological, organized struggles against militarism, inflation, high taxes, growing unemployment, corruption in government, and for a major redistribution of wealth from the rich and big corporations into the pockets of the working people. Therefore, the independent organizational development of white workers must initiate and develop organizational programs among those sections of whites who are prepared to challenge racism in all its forms and manifestations in the shops, trade union halls, and white working class community. Unless independent organizational leadership emerges among white workers, independent organizational programs for Black workers will remain limited in combating white racism. Continued failure of politically conscious whites to initiate and carry forward the organization of white workers in support of the independent organizing drives of Black workers can have a politically disastrous effect for the entire American working class. The old Wobbly slogan, "Organize or Perish," is as appropriate for white workers as it is for Black. There should be no further procrastination by white rank and file leaders on this score.