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A Contribution to the Discussion on the  
Negro Question

By Nat West

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## ▲ CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION

### ON THE NEGRO QUESTION

By Nat West

Some time ago we came into contact with a varied group of young Negro intellectuals in and around several organizations. I don't think there were more than 15 people involved in all. They seemed to have had the following characteristics in common. Little experience either politically or in the mass movement. In fact, in recent years at least, they lived and circulated in bohemian circles. A minority if any lived or live in the Negro community. All seem to have been deeply affected by the colonial revolution in general and the Cuban revolution in particular. Also equally inspiring but perhaps of secondary importance in their thinking has been the rising struggle of the American Negro.

A brief description of the thinking of the main trend of this current is important because of what it represents.

On the surface it appeared that their general approach was very similar to ours in a vague way. There seemed to be agreement on the necessity of a socialist final solution. There seemed to be an appreciation of both the independent national character of the Negro struggle and the connection with the workers aims, needs and tasks. At the same time they possessed a strong "nationalist" inclination. However, while organizing along black lines, they did not reject in principle collaboration with whites, at least outside of the Negro struggle itself. Such things also, indicating a "nationalist" bent, as rejecting use of the term "Negro" as objectionable and other more subtle and minor nuances of difference, such as the emphasis, perhaps a little exaggerated, on Negro history and culture, etc.

The attitude toward a Robert Williams seemed to indicate a favorable view of his policies which included the fight against segregation as well as his rejection of pacifism. However, this was never clear.

Later on another corner of their thinking revealed itself in a peculiar organizational form they introduced into their organization. Whites were permitted to "join" as "associate members." They were expected to meet separately with a responsible person, assigned to them by the executive, to direct all activities. The associate member paid dues, was expected to carry out assignments in a disciplined way, but had no vote or representation on policy-making bodies.

The motivation for this organizational form runs along these lines: Because of the realities of this society Negroes do not get the opportunity to develop these abilities that would make them effective in organizational and policy-making capacities. Their experience has been that in organizations where whites are present, even though a small minority, the inculcated habit of Negroes to defer to the organizationally and politically "sophisticated" whites, even the most sympathetic and reliable whites, tends to hold back the development of Negro leaders. For if, as an example, there is present at all times someone to tell you when you are about to make a mistake, even assuming he is always right, the potential Negro leader, supported by a crutch, so to speak, finds his organizational and political leadership talents atrophying before they have a chance to develop. The right to make his own mistakes and learn from them is withdrawn from him thereby.

This is a legitimate concern.

The second part of their rationale is their appreciation of the necessity of support and indeed advice from whites. The "associate membership" device is their attempt to "resolve" the contradiction.

Whatever we may think of their approach, their right to choose it is unquestionable. Experience alone can prove to them its advantages and disadvantages.

I might make this comment. The "associates" idea, obviously is an attempt at turning the tables in the "normal" relations between Negro and white. Though open and undisguised, it reveals a potentially dangerous, cynical, unrealistic, petty-bourgeois attitude to the struggle, and relations with allies. This danger became real in the incident of the two defense committees. I don't intend to go into the tedious details concerning these events. Other comrades, closer to the situation, have reported and will give a full report at the proper time.

I don't think that this phenomenon is in the least unusual or accidental. It is another manifestation of the kind of thing we have seen before and will see again many times when oppressed people are groping for a solution in critical and changing times. It is an expression of the feeling of the contradictory nature of the struggle without a fully conscious understanding of it. It is a kind of "centrism" in the Negro liberation movement.

The Stalinists in the thirties, for example, in their own inimitable way and for special reasons and through different kinds of mistakes, expressed the same contradiction. Cannon in an article in the Summer 1959 ISR relates

the contradictory line of the CP on the Negro question in that period wherein they projected a separate nation perspective and carried out an integration policy in real life.

Isn't the approach of these young Negro intellectuals an inverted expression of the line of the CP in the thirties? These people have a united integrated socialist perspective with what turns out to be a separatist line in the day to day struggle.

Let me carry through the thought begun with the characterization of this approach as centrism. I mean by this a position in between petty-bourgeois nationalism and equally petty-bourgeois liberal integrationism on the right, and revolutionary proletarian "nationalism" and again equally revolutionary proletarian integrationism on the left -- with both tendencies on the right rejecting any important role in the Negro struggle for the predominantly white working class.

So long as the working class stands aside from the struggle of their natural allies, the Negro people, this centrism will tend to capture the minds of the rebellious Negro. Notwithstanding the dangers, centrism in this period represents a positive development in the gigantic shake-ups in thinking it reflects. This detour in consciousness arises because though we may try our best, and we do, the action of a small group demonstrating its eagerness for a genuine alliance with the Negro masses is hardly a substitute for masses of workers demonstrating in action their desire for such an alliance. The small group is open to suspicion, partly because of the betrayal by whites in the past and partly because of the little a small group has to offer in the way of material support to back up its proposals for an alliance. The proposed "deal" appears one sided.

The potential of Negro centrism tends to exaggerate its immediate importance. Consequently they demand that we demonstrate our seriousness by choosing between them and the Negro lefts, a no less important tendency, to say the least. In their eyes (the centrists) it may appear a choice between their revolutionary policy and a policy of reform and compromise. To the Negro left and to us it is a choice between centrist sectarianism and adventurism, and revolutionary balance and responsibility.

It is difficult to make clear under these circumstances that we are motivated by respect for the Negro movement itself -- for its interests -- for its indicated choice of the road to equality through integration, and not out of a chauvinist desire to dominate the course of the struggle.

In this connection the Leninist conception of self-determination is again as so often in the past misunderstood and misused. Self-determination means what it says: the people shall determine the road to freedom. Would Lenin have opposed the integration of the Georgians within an all-Soviet society if that was their indicated desire? No, to Lenin it meant they had the right not to integrate, the right to separate should they so choose.

How do we determine what it is that the masses of the Negro people want? Granted, the "spokesmen" don't necessarily express the will of the mass. It's not enough to assert what the people "want." How do we prove it? We can't get inside their heads. We have to look outside for evidence of what is in their heads. We can only determine by the actions they support in their overwhelming majority. It again is not valid to conclude that since the majority do not act they favor this or that other course. We can only say this much: Insofar as the masses have acted they have indicated their choice. Why the majority do not take part is another question. It may be because the leaders have held the struggle back, side-tracked it or led the advanced contingents ahead too far and too fast.

A materialist approach to movements of masses of people is based on the premise that the movement throws forth its leaders, good, bad or indifferent. Leaders, good bad or indifferent, don't throw forth movements. Leaders may encourage, cultivate and accelerate, but they cannot create movements. The converse idealist view does not hold up in any serious, concrete analysis of social phenomena.

So far the phenomenon of nationalism, while growing, has still been restricted to a narrow layer of the Negro people. At this point in history the counterposing of nationalist-oriented separatist tactics can only blunt the struggle of the majority of the Negroes in motion. It tends not to carry it forward, beyond the limits set for it by its misleaders, but to derail it. Tomorrow a different road may be indicated by the Negro masses. Different tactics may then be necessary to carry the struggle beyond the limits set by a different misleadership. But today is not yet tomorrow, and that kind of tomorrow does not have to come.

It must be remembered that the goal of the Negro masses is freedom from oppression. This no one can deny. They have also clearly demonstrated up to now that the strategy to be employed shall be through integration. They are wisely taking advantage of the pretensions of their oppressors to democracy. It is up to the advanced workers to help them drive a wedge into white society, separating all possible allies from enemies, on the basis of their strategical demand. Moreover, the strategy of integration happens to be

the most favorable grounds upon which to forge an alliance between Negro and white, mainly, but not only, because of the identity of class interests of the majorities of both groups.

It is in the white workers interests to unite politically and economically into a tremendous social force to further the interests of both partners in the alliance. The oppressors are doing everything possible to prevent this alliance. If the white workers fail to come through in time and the Negro masses in bitter despair turn away from the strategy of integration and towards separation, this will represent a defeat to both Negro and white workers. It would then be necessary to recognize the defeat and to help rebuild the alliance on the new more unfavorable grounds of separatism. A much harder task.

That fortunately is not yet the case.

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