

SWP

discussion
bulletin

Vol. 25, No. 15

Published by

SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

116 UNIVERSITY PLACE
NEW YORK 3, NEW YORK

page

NOTES ON BLACK NATIONALISM AND SEPARATISM, 1963-65 by G. Breitman	1
ERRATA IN THE 1963 FREEDOM NOW RESOLUTION by G. Breitman	5
MEMO ON BLACK GHETTO RADICALISM by R. Vernon	6

20¢

NOTES ON BLACK NATIONALISM
AND SEPARATISM, 1963-65

By George Breitman

1. Black Nationalism, 1963-65

In 1962-63 black nationalism did not have a nation-wide organization, but the number of people adhering to it, in mood and idea if not organizationally, was steadily growing. Black nationalists felt and acted self-confident, as though the wind was in their sails. The tendency was definitely on the ascendant.

By 1965 this is no longer true. Some of the steam seems to have gone out of the tendency. Organizationally and psychologically, it is stagnant and declining. Some who publicly called themselves nationalists in 1963 no longer do so.

What happened? This is a very brief attempt to explain the change.

(a) The change began around July, 1964. In that month the civil rights bill was enacted into law, and the so-called rioting broke out in Harlem. Neither of these had any appreciable effect on the process we are examining. But there was another event that month, which did have a very strong effect -- the nomination of Goldwater at the Republican convention.

On the average Negro, the only effect of Goldwater's nomination was to intensify his determination to answer the white backlash by electing Johnson. But among black nationalists it produced a serious crisis -- a political crisis.

The incipient black nationalists of 1960 did not find it difficult to reject both Kennedy and Nixon. Some black nationalists in 1964 had no trouble in refusing to support either Johnson or Goldwater; Malcolm X was one, and there were others. But others faltered. They felt under tremendous pressure to support Johnson. They could not see any alternative; the Freedom Now Party had been unable to field a presidential ticket, and they rejected the alternative of supporting DeBerry. Many of them succumbed to the pressure and came out for Johnson; the editor of Liberator was typical of these. A small number came out for Goldwater. Others could not take either of these steps but felt paralyzed or shaken in their perspective.

Political weakness and indecision, starkly spotlighted by the Goldwater candidacy, was the main factor, but not the only one.

(b) Most black nationalists in 1963 were not Black Muslims, because they were not separatists, or for religious or other reasons. But the Black Muslims enjoyed great prestige among the nationalists. They had immense respect for Muhammad and Malcolm -- and hope. They hoped or expected that the leaders of the Nation of Islam -- a relatively powerful organization, with deep roots in the ghetto, a cadre of mostly young people and a national newspaper with circulation in the hundreds of thousands -- would join them, the nationalists, in building a new movement, or would actively back them up in building one. Muhammad, feeling this hope as pressure, even made some gestures in its direction during 1962-63.

The better-informed black nationalists not only had this hope, but also knew about the existence of different tendencies among the Black Muslim leadership. It did not seem at all impossible to them that if the Black Muslim leadership as a whole did not join them in creating a new movement, Malcolm and his tendency might gain the leadership and join with them; or that, in the event of a split, Malcolm might have a majority of the activist elements, and join with them in that way.

It did not occur that way. Muhammad decided to play it safe, and to put an end to internal tendencies by expelling Malcolm. Unprepared for the split in March, 1964, Malcolm took only a small number of the Muslims with him; in fact, he publicly avowed he was not trying to split or weaken the Nation of Islam. It took a few months for the full impact of this development to sink in among the nationalists, and when it sank in, it was demoralizing. Instead of a strong, going organization to count and lean on, they were alone, faced with the task that Malcolm did not hesitate to shoulder -- building a new movement from the ground up against back-breaking difficulties. Some of the nationalists joined Malcolm, but most of them waited to see what he would or could do. Malcolm was abroad half of the time after the break with Muhammad, for reasons that were generally good, but that did not help in rallying the nationalists. Then came the assassins' bullets.

I hope that what I have written above will not be misunderstood or distorted. It is, I think, the main explanation for a change that has taken place. But it does not mean that the black nationalist tendency is finished, dying or dead. Far from

it. A number of black nationalists have traveled a long way in the right direction since 1963, in a revolutionary direction. Others are uncertain or confused, catching their breath or trying to regain their footing. Black nationalism is still a progressive tendency and will still play an important part in the Negro struggle.

A sign of this (and an evidence of the dialectical character of the development) is that while organizationally the black nationalist tendency suffered setbacks in the two-year period we are discussing, ideologically its influence spread far, wide and deep. Many of the ideas, demands and slogans associated with the black nationalists in 1963 are common coin in most sections of the civil rights movement today. Black leadership, black power, work in the ghetto, control of the ghetto, self-defense, racial pride, identification with the colonial revolution and Africa, internationalism, independent black political action -- all these and other things, which were the major and unique attributes of nationalism as it was commonly understood in 1963, are now generally accepted or not argued about, or given lip service, by the civil rights organizations that repudiated or denounced the black nationalist tendency two years ago. This is not merely an ironic twist of history; it testifies to the continuing dynamism of black nationalism.

2. Separatism, 1963-65

This is about the chief separatist organization in the Negro community, the Black Muslims. (Anybody who doesn't understand the important theoretical distinction between nationalism and separatism, drawn in our 1963 resolution, will be wasting time to read further.)

Some of the minorities in the party, who take up so much space in the discussion bulletin that it inhibits other members, are complaining because the 1965 resolution doesn't spend a great deal of space on the Black Muslims. The reason it doesn't spend more space is that what happened is pretty obvious and well-known to party members.

Those who were interested in learning about the Black Muslims (not in just using the subject factionally) knew long before Malcolm's split with Muhammad in March, 1964, that such a thing was possible. In February, 1963, before our 1963 resolution was written, I wrote in the discussion bulletin:

"I tend to think that there is more than one tendency in the Muslim leadership; that one of them is more interested in the Negro struggle than in the religious side of their movement; and that the Muslims, like all other Negro groups in this country, are subject to the pressures of the Negro masses and their 'new moods.'" At our 1963 convention, where I spoke as PC reporter, I stressed the positive side of the Black Muslims in order to motivate our making an approach to them, getting to know them better and finding some fields for collaboration. But I also spent part of my time informing the delegates about tendencies inside the Black Muslims and warning that their movement would experience change, forward or backward. (We did not put such material into the resolution because we did not consider it advisable to discuss it publicly at that time; but the party members were prepared for change, even though nobody could then foresee its specific form.)

The change came with Malcolm's split. We did not hesitate for a moment in pronouncing it progressive and supporting it (although Malcolm continued to call himself a separatist at the time of the split and for a short while after). Instead of competing with Malcolm on the new, wider terrain staked out as a result of the split, Muhammad moved backward; he even stopped making gestures toward the general struggle. The split changed the whole situation. Minus Malcolm and what he represented, the Black Muslims of 1964-65 were a qualitatively different organization than they had been in 1963 before the split, when their role was on the whole still predominantly progressive. All this is so obvious, for people who can see what happens in front of them, that a few sentences suffice.

Detroit, Michigan
August 13, 1965

P.S. (as of August 16): The ghetto uprising of Los Angeles, the most momentous single event in the last century of the Negro struggle, of course attests to the continued vitality, the relevance and the radical character of black nationalism more conclusively than anything anyone can write.

ERRATA IN THE 1963 FREEDOM NOW RESOLUTION

By George Breitman

There are two errors in the 1963 Freedom Now Resolution, as printed in the Pioneer Publishers edition.

One error is typographical. On the sixth line from the bottom of the first column on Page 10, the second word should be separation, not segregation. (This error was noted in a letter to the ISR, where the final draft of the resolution first appeared.)

The other error is transpositional. The editing committee, which prepared the final draft of the resolution after the 1963 convention had approved its general line, made a number of additions based on the discussion at the convention. One of these additions was the first paragraph in the first column of Page 8. But the editing committee, or somebody else, made a mistake about where it should be inserted. It logically belongs, not where it was inserted, but later, in the first column on Page 10, as the first paragraph under the subhead, "IV. Separatism and a Separate Nation."

These errors should be corrected in any future editions of the resolution, and in the meantime should be noted in an Errata slip inserted in remaining copies of the first edition.

Detroit, Michigan
August 13, 1965

MEMO ON BLACK GHETTO RADICALISM

by R. Vernon

What is the Black Ghetto?

Two years ago, the majority of white liberals, Negro Civil Rights "leaders," government officials, radicals, etc., did not even know how to spell "ghetto" and cared less. Today, particularly in the wake of the 1964 summer rash of black ghetto riots, and even before the semi-insurrection of Watts, the black ghetto is a new center of attention for sociologists, social-democrats, do-good white missionaries, Civil Rights liberals, and even LBJ.

"Black ghetto" has assumed major importance in our approach to the struggle of black people in this country, and has acquired something of the status of a loose political definition. It is time to examine our own use of this phrase and concept, clear up some possible misunderstandings associated with the phrase, and attempt to define the mode of class struggle associated with it more clearly. Although "black ghetto" is a useful designation, and says a lot in two words, no term or definition says all that is necessary and nothing more than is necessary.

Urbanization

In 1910, 80% of the Negro population lived in the South, and of these 90% were rural. By 1940, 30% had migrated to the North, most to the large industrial urban centers.

In 1960, half the Negro population of the U.S. lived in the North, with the number steadily increasing. Most of the Negroes still living in Dixie are urbanized. 31% of the U.S. Negro population resided in the twelve largest population centers (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Bay Area, Detroit, Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Baltimore, Boston, Pittsburgh, St. Louis). Washington, Gary (Indiana), Newark, Charleston (S.C.), have all passed the 50% mark in Negro population. In the coming decade, dozens of "inner cities" (suburbs excluded) will be over 50% Negro.

Other important Northern urban centers with large numbers of Negro inhabitants are: Buffalo, Rochester, Paterson-Clifton-Passaic (New Jersey), Akron, New Haven, Cincinnati (25%), Fort Wayne, Indianapolis (25%), Wichita, Seattle, San Diego, Kansas City, Milwaukee.

Big black ghettos in the South are found (% Negro population indicated) in: Washington, D.C. (60%), Baltimore (40%), Richmond (42%), Birmingham (40%), Charleston (51%), Jacksonville (41%), Augusta (45%), Atlanta (38%), New Orleans (37%), Memphis (37%), Miami, Chattanooga, Louisville, Savannah, Dallas, Houston, Bessemer, Mobile, Montgomery, Norfolk, Durham, Raleigh, Tampa, Winston_Salem, Cairo (Illinois) and Chester (Pennsylvania).

Demographic Variations in Ghettos

Obviously, not all black ghettos will display the same social demographic, and political characteristics. Comrades have the job of becoming familiar with the ghettos in their city and in nearby cities, and of familiarizing the entire party with the related local problems, to fill in the nation-wide picture.

Some of the large-scale characteristics by which ghettos will differ are:

- (a) Integration and civil rights problems still prominent (mostly in southern ghettos);
- (b) Compactness; extent to which majority of Negroes in city are restricted to one confined area;
- (c) Population density of ghetto; overcrowdedness;
- (d) Size of ghetto (absolute size; and size relative to the city as a whole);
- (e) Percentage of city population living in ghetto;
- (f) Percentage of Negro population of city confined to ghetto;
- (g) Negro percentage of city population;
- (h) Negro percentage of public school population;
- (i) Expansion or mobility open to individual Negroes able to escape ghetto residence;
- (j) Rate of spread of ghetto per se into new areas in city;
- (k) Relative position of white suburbs versus "inner city" with increasing black population;
- (l) Extent of absorption of black working class in city in local basic industry;
- (m) Condition of ghetto neighborhood, residences, streets.

This does not exhaust the list of useful criteria, but will do as a start. It should be evident that some ghettos will bear closer resemblances to Harlem than others, and accordingly some ghettos will contain larger numbers of black militants responding to our line on black ghetto radicalism than will others.

It stands to reason that a black population comprising less than 2% of the city population would be unlikely to display the confidence in all-black power, black consciousness, hotbeds of black nationalism, hostility toward whites, etc., found in Harlem, unless its tiny relative size is offset by concentration of that 2% in a compact impoverished slum, by geographical proximity to some nearby huge city ghetto, or by other factors contributing to enhanced militancy and black defiance.

A point of possible confusion: in our propaganda, "the black ghetto" may refer to all Negroes living in a major urban center (whether actually living in the principal ghetto or not), or more accurately to the inhabitants of an impoverished slum ghetto in particular, or may be shorthand for that sector of the black population which is politically like Harlem or Watts, and is responsive to Malcolm X-ism ("...Harlem is anywhere you see us"--Malcolm X). The context will indicate which is meant.

Most Negroes living in a ghetto are not radical, of course. (Maybe Watts, Los Angeles, will now be the first exception.) Martin Luther King could win any popularity poll in any Negro urban center, North or South. But when we say "black ghetto," we are talking about black militants, black radicals, black people responsive to black radicalism, not about still inert, backward Negroes who have yet to wake up to deeper political involvement than sympathizing with civil rights demonstrations they read about, or hear about in church on Sunday morning, or see on TV.

Black Ghetto Radicalism

The massive shift of the Negro population from the rural life of Southern plantations and Southern farms to urban centers in both South and North cannot help but bring about equally massive shifts in American political processes, in the class struggle, in the specific weight of the black sector of the American working class, and in the consciousness of black people concentrated in urban centers, particularly those concentrated in impoverished slums and denied admittance to the much-trumpeted Affluent Society. One of the most conspicuous products of this shift, of enormous importance to us, is the generation by the

Northern black ghettos of a spontaneous and vigorous radicalism, independent of and frequently opposed and hostile to the middle-class, liberal-financed, rural-South-oriented ritualized Civil Rights movement (which also generated some radical components of its own, with their own peculiar features).

Two years ago and earlier, reflecting the discussion going on between Negroes (integrationists) and black people (black ghetto militants, black nationalists), and in continuation of earlier discussion carried on among Negroes and among radicals, we phrased this conflict between the basically proletarian black ghetto and the rural-based or urban middle class Civil Rights sector in terms of black nationalism versus integration.

Some improved approximations are in order. Black nationalism is a natural product of urban ghettos in the North, with features we have pointed out, discussed, probed, and analyzed. But it is one extreme form of black ghetto radicalism, not the only form. Further, not all who apply to themselves the term "black nationalist" are radical, or sufficiently radical to merit the designation "black radical" (though most are). And not all black radicals are attached to the term "black nationalist."

Some comrades tend to have too much of a hang-up on the term "black nationalist." There are disadvantages to such a hang-up, to white comrades spouting abstractions about "the progressive aspects of black nationalism...revolutionary nature of black nationalism," instead of zero-ing in on the actual problems of black people in big-city slums.

The very fact that "our line was proved right," and spectacularly so in the experience with Malcolm X, can cause some complacency and a lag in the understanding of some comrades, who feel that we have found the answer when actually we have made an excellent beginning; who mistake zero-ing in the shots for actually hitting the bull's-eye. (The fact that other "radicals" cannot even hit the side of the barn on this question is true, and does us credit, but we still have a lot to learn.)

Who Is Going To "Organize the Black Ghetto"?

The section in the party resolution entitled "Organizing the Black Ghetto" might lead some comrades to conclude that the "tasks" outlined in that section are tasks for the party to attempt to perform in the coming period. But such undertakings are clearly beyond the means of the party in this period; at our present level of forces, finances, roots and connections, and given the present

level of class struggle. Nevertheless, the problems sketched out are some of the problems that black people in the nation's cities have to face, the problems that black radicals and/or revolutionary socialists will have to attempt to tackle and solve if they are to develop a viable movement among the black urban masses and organize their volcanic potential.

No comrade could gain a serious hearing from union militants by simply stating his support for the "progressive aspects of trade unionism" while remaining ignorant of and indifferent to the multiple and complex problems which actually trouble and irritate workers and their families. Similarly, it is not enough for revolutionary socialists to "support the progressive aspects of black nationalism." At least some, if not all, comrades must become conversant with the specific problems of ghetto life and the ghetto-centered class struggle. We must have comrades capable of running down the intricacies of the problems to other comrades, to black ghetto radicals, to prospective party recruits. Our comrades must be capable of demonstrating in wealth of detail and within a revolutionary Marxist class-struggle framework just how and why the many piecemeal reforms now attempted are and will be impotent in solving the problems of black slum ghettos and of impoverished slum neighborhoods in general. Included among these reformist ameliorative gimmicks are the War-on-Poverty bread and circuses, and white missionary work of the Office of Economic Opportunity, CORE, church groups, SDS, Haryou-Act, Mobilization for Youth, Civil Rights organizations, and even the black nationalist self-help schemes.

Reforms within a capitalist framework won't work, and only revolutionary solutions are possible -- we all agree on that, but we have to be able to prove it in detail, we have to be on top of the ghetto situation, in order to make serious inroads for revolutionary socialism and/or black radicalism among the "community people." A general radicalization sweeping the entire country, a powerful revolutionary mass movement rooted in factory and neighborhood, could attempt serious work on these problems, but that's the cart before the horse. Our problem now is how to channelize this radical potential in the present stage, when only black people are radical, generally speaking, and no powerful allies are in sight. All of this requires special attention from comrades, some of whom must have specialized knowledge of this area of the class struggle, on a par with the Marxist knowledge other comrades command in the area of trade unions, the history of other revolutions, the class nature of this or that state, etc.

It is in this sense that the many ghetto problems are posed for analysis and for development of a transitional-program approach in the coming period.

Black Ghetto and Trade Unions

It is instructive to carry the distinction between the black ghetto struggle and the "Civil Rites" movement into other areas, including the relationship of the trade union movement to black people. There is certainly a partial default on the part of the organized labor movement towards the "Civil Rites" struggle, to which Reuther and Meany give lip service (Reuther is one of the white liberals on the NAACP board of directors). And there is some occasional resentment on the part of Civil Rights militants toward the failure of the AFL-CIO to give more than token support to their struggle.

That organized labor defaults on the Civil Rights front is not particularly surprising, since the big and little Reuthers and Meanys have been defaulting on everything outside the interests of the bureaucrats and the most privileged workers. They default on solidarity with the Teamsters, on unorganized white workers, on the unemployed, on organizing the South, on nearly everything in the class struggle.

But the default is total, and unashamed, on the deeper aspects of the class struggle reflected in the black ghetto struggle. Like the white liberals (and the white "radicals"), the trade unions do not even recognize the ghetto sector as a legitimate and vital front in the black struggle, and have never even thought of giving it so much as lip service (lagging behind the sociologists and the Great Society architects on this point).

The hostility toward the organized labor movement on the part of black people is primarily the hostility of black ghetto militants and black slum workers. "Civil Rites" people seldom evince such sharp and bitter hostility toward either white liberals or toward unions. The hostility of black people toward the Reuthers and Meanys and toward privileged white workers is not anti-working class, but on the contrary the hostility of that most combative and deprived sector of the working class toward more privileged workers and their even more privileged bourgeoisified representatives.

In the ghetto sector of the class struggle, satisfied suburbanized white workers overlap with the white middle class (and the Negro middle class) as enemies and/or competitors of the black ghetto workers for their respective share of the municipal

pie. In these struggles, our solidarity with the oppressed black workers must take precedence over any desire for "unity" between different layers of the workers. Solidarity can be preached to the privileged white workers in this situation in the hope of neutralizing or reversing the hostility of at least a fraction of them, but the party must side unreservedly and unhesitatingly with the black ghetto workers, inside the trade unions and outside on the streets.

Fortunately, there is no strategic need to preach solidarity to black workers. Knowingly in a minority nationally, black people will always be ready to join with any real white allies who are actually supporting their struggle (as distinct from supporting "Civil Rites"). Proof of this is evident in the attitude of Malcolm X and other black radicals, who "forgot" their alleged hatred of everything white the instant they found common cause with the SWP on their side of the barricades. All the other white "radicals" go around moaning about Negro-white unity, but we are the only ones to achieve black-white unity with supposedly anti-white black radicals, precisely because our unity does not call for subordination of black radicalism to white "radical" liberalism, to Civil Rites liberalism, or to the interests of more privileged white workers.

Unfortunately, those Negroes who identify with trade unions as their preferred organization of social struggle in this period are usually out of touch with the black ghetto struggle and its dynamics. Conversely, black workers who live and breathe black ghetto radicalism feel little identity with trade unions, and see them as merely part of the power structure. Black workers appreciate the trade unions for handling of on-the-job grievances, for the same reasons other low-paid workers favor unions, but would never think of the presently existing unions as viable vehicles for social struggle for radical goals, for black ghetto goals.

Our contribution here could help to convince black radicals of the need to overcome this sectarianism, to make use of their black following in the plants, to build a black wing (as distinct from a Negro trade unionists wing) in the union, to pressure the unions to tackle ghetto problems which the poorly organized, penniless, poorly staffed black ghetto radical organizations have difficulty in dealing with effectively. Our job is not to preach to black people about their "allies" in the union movement, but to encourage black radicals to build a fire under the labor movement and "Civil Rites" movement, to utilize these sectors as arenas for effective mass work, much in the unsectarian Bolshevik manner that we attempt to do or aspire to do.

Black, Afro-American, Negro, Colored

The heated rejection of the word "Negro" by some (not all) black radicals continues to present some problems in party propaganda. Two white radical tendencies, PL and the Marcyites, have sworn off the term "Negro" (even in quotes, it seems), and are applying "black" and "Afro-American" to all and sundry.

There is no reason for the SWP to follow their example of blind apish imitation of what they think is black vocabulary. However, there are a few subtleties in Harlesemese which we would do well to consider.

There are black nationalists who demand that the term "Negro" be abolished, immediately if not sooner. But an important competing trend has arisen which places special connotations on the several words.

The terms "black" and "Afro-American" now tend to be applied to black nationalists and to black ghetto types in Harlesemese, and the terms "Negro" or, even worse, "colored" or "cullud", are used as pejoratives to describe the type who is "American first, and Negro second."

In this style of Harlesemese, one would say: black nationalists, black radicals, black ghetto, black revolutionists, black working-class, etc., but: Negro liberals, Negro "Civil Rites" movement, Negro businessmen, Negro middle class, Negro integrationists, Negro Americans. (The distinction tends to reflect the degree of alienation from American society, not militancy versus Uncle Tomming; civil rights activists can be militant and courageous, but are Negroes in Harlesemese.) "Negro nationalist" is an absurdity, unless the insulting inference is intended that the individual so described is a phony, and is not entitled to be called "black."

In this style of Harlesemese, it would be grotesque and even blasphemous to refer to Martin Luther King or to Bayard Rustin, or the likes of them, as "black" or "Afro-American."

This style permeates all of my writings from early 1964 on. I recommend its use in articles directed primarily towards a black ghetto audience, but there is no need to impose it on the party press in general. A good rule of thumb for us is to observe this style in reference to any black radical who objects

to the term "Negro," thereby defining himself ipso facto as a "black man." Outright assimilationists and integrationists who have no "soul" (or black nationalist tendencies) should never be referred to as "black" or "Afro-American." Radicals like Malcolm X should never be referred to as "Negro" or "colored."

But in general, the choice of term applied to black people abstractly will not matter outside of the above context ("22 million Negroes" or "22 million black people"). Negroes who do not object to the term "Negro" are outside the Harlemitic frame of reference alluded to, and the term will carry no pejorative or degrading implications on our part when we employ it.