

# Ebonics and the danger of racial politics

## A socialist viewpoint

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*The following lecture on the Ebonics controversy was delivered by Helen Halyard, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, in a series of appearances on college campuses in Michigan and Pennsylvania. Halyard spoke to student audiences at Wayne State University, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and the University of Pennsylvania in March and April.*

The main issue in the dispute over Ebonics is not language, but perspective. Those who base themselves on the permanence of capitalism are seizing upon racial differences in order to make them a barrier to unifying working people in the struggle to change society. They promote the conception that the great division in American society is between black, white and Hispanic or American born and foreign born.

The great unmentionable in American politics is that we live in a society that is becoming more and more polarized socially. Everything in this country is described in racial and ethnic terms, rather than from the standpoint of class.

As socialists we reject these false views and call on black, white, Hispanic and immigrant workers to unite in the struggle for social equality. Having a decent and secure job, a comfortable retirement, quality education, health care and housing ought to be considered as social rights and must be provided to everyone, regardless of race or ethnic background.

We see human progress as bound up with the fight to unify workers internationally for the purpose of reorganizing society on the basis of human need, not profit. As socialists we have a firm belief in the ability of mankind to overcome backwardness and oppression.

Throughout history the greatest minds have held the perspective that mankind could overcome the conditions of poverty and hunger and fight for a just and humane society. As Marxists, it is to this goal that we subscribe.

Opposing this view are those who promote nationalist solutions within the framework of the capitalist profit system. In Ireland it is Protestant against Catholic, in Sri Lanka the Tamils against the Sinhalese, in Canada French-speaking against English-speaking and in America, black against white, native born against immigrant.

### Why is Ebonics being promoted and who will benefit from it?

Ebonics, a term coined in 1973 by Robert L. Williams, was promoted by a narrow layer of black separatists. Until recently the very term was unknown outside of academia. Ebonics is the offshoot of a broader outlook called Afrocentrism, an ideology which holds that identity is based solely on skin color and that blacks have a unique culture, history and even language.

What is revealed in the debate over Ebonics is the gulf between an upper

middle class black layer and the more impoverished minority youth. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that there are not sincere teachers and liberals who may be seeking different methods of instruction out of a genuine desire to overcome the educational problems facing black youth. But such motives cannot be ascribed to the originators of this proposal.

The very same school board that adopted the resolution on Ebonics and claims to be concerned about the low test scores of black youth was engaged last year in a vicious strike-breaking operation against the school teachers.

The strike raised the demand that class sizes be reduced through a cut in administrative funding. Oakland spends a higher percentage of its budget on administration than most other large districts in the state. The Bay Area average is 15.7 percent, while Oakland spends 19.1 percent.

The school board rejected the teachers' demands. Instead, it formed a task force ostensibly to discuss troubling performance levels among black students. With barely any discussion, the school board passed the recommendation from the task force that Ebonics be recognized as the language of black students.

The action of the Oakland school board served to further foment racial division, at the same time that the basic needs of students remain unresolved. The main beneficiaries of this resolution are not the youth, but a small privileged layer of blacks.

"Ebonics" instruction has spread to a number of California schools. It has already become a multimillion-dollar affair, creating comfortable careers for academic theorists, lavishly paid consultants and textbook writers.

This divergence of interests becomes even clearer when we examine another case in which Ebonics became a central issue. In 1977, four families who lived in a housing project in Ann Arbor, Michigan, sued the local school district for failing to meet the needs of low-income children and misplacing them in special education classes.

One of the parents recalled in a recent press interview: "The teachers didn't put as much quality time into making sure our children learned. The assumption was that we were poor and we didn't care." What these parents demanded was equality; that their children be afforded the same standard of education that children from wealthier parts of Ann Arbor were receiving.

The lawyers representing them, however, brought in research provided by Dr. Geneva Smitherman, a proponent of Ebonics, who claimed that the problem was the failure of teachers to recognize "black English."

When the case went to court, the charges related to social, economic and cultural deprivation were dismissed--but the charge related to black English was upheld. In essence, the judge dismissed the parents' demand for equality, saying, you can't have that, but we'll give you Ebonics.

I attended a recent meeting at Wayne State University, where Geneva Smitherman spoke in favor of Ebonics. When I raised the Ann Arbor case, explaining that the focus on language was used as a diversion from the real issues of equality and increased funding, Smitherman made a

revealing reply. She said, "I agree that some of the socioeconomic issues being raised are important, but we do not control the means of production."

Exactly. The black nationalists accept the status quo of an economic and social system based on exploitation, inequality and oppression. Within that system they seek to carve out a privileged position for a very thin middle class layer which they represent.

If billions of dollars were being poured into the educational system and young people lived in economically vibrant neighborhoods, the issue of Ebonics would never even be raised. It surfaces under conditions where the polarization between wealth and poverty in all the advanced industrial countries is greater today than at any time since the Great Depression. And it is for the purpose of diverting attention from this reality that the dispute over Ebonics was seized upon in the news media.

Blacks do not speak a separate language in the United States. Of course there are particular expressions that are used in a black or for that matter, any white, Hispanic or immigrant community. There are also traditions stemming from long years of racial oppression.

The speech patterns of every section of modern day American society are the product of social and historical factors and are bound up with the development of the United States itself.

There are many different components that determine how people speak. Wave upon wave of immigrations, for example, of poor Southern blacks as well as whites to the industrial north, have played a part. So too have geography, technology and, crucially, class divisions.

The very poor English spoken in all impoverished neighborhoods, black, white or Hispanic, is a product of social decay. It is not the language of blacks, but that of oppression.

The black nationalists have seized upon the misuse of grammar to be found in more impoverished neighborhoods in order to invent a new language that they claim is racially determined.

## **The international context**

This growth of racial politics is not unique to the United States. Unwilling and unable to offer any serious remedies for the growing suffering of millions, the ruling class is turning to the same type of communalist politics at home that it employs abroad.

Look at the situation in the former Yugoslavia. The collapse of the bureaucratic Stalinist regime there led to the formation of separate states carved out on the basis of ethnicity. Leading up to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, local nationalist cliques began to raise linguistic differences. It had been widely accepted for decades that Serbo-Croatian was a common spoken language, understood by all and distinguished only by the use of different alphabets. As the debates over Yugoslavia's fate became more bitter, however, the Croatian delegates began demanding that the Serb speakers be translated into Croatian.

The emergence of this type of reactionary nationalism today, whether in Yugoslavia or in the United States, is bound up with fundamental changes in the economic system itself. Developments in computer technology, telecommunications and transportation have created the conditions for an unprecedented global integration of capitalist production, with giant multinationals coordinating operations on every continent.

In preparing this lecture, I was able to access every article written on Ebonics internationally through the world wide web. We are living in an era of globalized economy, where developments in computer technology have made possible instantaneous communication, linking together peoples from the most disparate parts of the globe.

Yet the obvious question raised is why these developments in

technology haven't resolved the conditions of world poverty, hunger and oppression or served to break down national and ethnic conflicts between the world's diverse populations?

It is because these developments have taken place within the framework of capitalist property relations and the nation-state system. They have enabled multinational corporations to direct global operations in which they scour the world for the cheapest sources of labor and raw materials. The competition between the advanced capitalist nations for the control of markets has been intensified, while impoverished nations compete with each other to offer the lowest wages and best conditions for exploiting the native masses.

It is within this framework that new national separatist movements emerge. There is nothing progressive much less revolutionary about them. They represent the egotistical strivings of privileged layers who are seeking not "liberation" for the masses of working people, but a more lucrative connection between themselves and globally-mobile capital. The black nationalist tendencies promoting Ebonics are part of this worldwide trend.

## **Race and nation**

While the concepts of race and nation are taken to express particular phenomena, an understanding of the historical development of each is crucial in approaching political issues today.

These concepts are political and not biological. The way the concept race has been used in capitalist society serves to obscure, rather than clarify how society is organized. There is no such thing as a pure race of people.

In a recent publication entitled "The Meaning of Race," author Kenan Malik, who opposes the renewed racialization of society, explains that the modern meaning of race developed and gained prominence because of the conflict between the ideals of equality, as the ideological basis of the enlightenment, and the conditions of growing social inequality.

Malik's book emphasizes the following, "Geneticists have shown that 85% of all genetic variation is between individuals within the same local population. A further 8% is between local populations or groups within what is considered to be a major race. Just 7% of genetic variation is between major races."

The historical development of the nation and the rise of nationalist ideologies is reviewed by historian E. J. Hobsbawm in a book entitled "Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Program, Myth, Reality."

In the nationalism that arose prior to and during the nineteenth century, the development of the nation-state marked an advance over feudal society, with its hundreds of distinct municipalities. Great nations were social and economic units and were not based on ethnicity or a common language.

With the development of modern capitalism, the ideology of nationalism was no longer progressive. The developments in industry, science and the growth of world economy meant that the nation-state was itself becoming an impediment to the growth of the productive forces. Nationalist ideologies are advanced by middle class layers, whose social position becomes threatened in capitalist society.

Very often, the growth of reactionary nationalism takes a linguistic form. Citing the conflict between the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) and Walloon (French-speaking) in Belgium, Hobsbawm makes a point which is extremely pertinent to the issues raised by the present Ebonics debate.

"The working classes, as we have seen, were rarely apt to get excited about language as such, though it might well serve as a symbol for other kinds of friction between groups. That most Ghent and Antwerp workers

could not even communicate without translation with their comrades in Liege and Charleroi did not prevent both from forming a single labor movement, in which language caused so little trouble that a standard work on socialism in Belgium in 1903 did not so much as refer to the Flemish question: a situation inconceivable today."

He goes on to explain: "The classes which stood or fell by the official use of the written vernacular were the socially modest but educated middle strata, which included those who acquired lower middle-class status precisely by virtue of occupying non-manual jobs that required schooling. The socialists of the period who rarely used the word 'nationalism' without the prefix 'petty-bourgeois,' knew what they were talking about. The battle lines of linguistic nationalism were manned by provincial journalists, schoolteachers and aspiring subaltern officials."

### **The ideology of a privileged layer**

The proponents of Ebonics, many of them out-and-out charlatans, constitute a privileged layer which is seeking to preserve the position carved out for it after the ghetto rebellions. Following massive uprisings in the 1960s, then President Nixon called for black capitalism and provided funds to cultivate a middle class stratum that could serve as a buffer between the ruling class and the masses of oppressed black workers.

In preparing this lecture, I reviewed one of the major texts used in Black Studies Departments across the country. It is a book by Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership*. Written in 1967, at the height of the black power movement, Cruse calls on the new layer of academics and intellectuals to reject the class struggle as the driving force of history and to elaborate a new synthesis for the blacks in the United States.

In commenting on this work in *Heroism and the Black Intellectual*, Jerry Gaffio Watts, an associate professor at Trinity College, makes an important observation about the social layer involved on the campuses, "The willingness of many black intellectuals to join the black nationalist bandwagon often stemmed from their desires to legitimate themselves to the broader black activist community and to subsequently gain access to the mobility that the political system offered to black nationalist intellectuals in response to the maintenance of quietude in urban areas. Despite its militant-sounding rhetoric, black nationalism became an ideology of economic and status mobility for bourgeois intellectuals."

I cite this passage because it summarizes the class outlook and perspective of those promoting racial theories. Furthermore, it points to the impossibility of fighting against the conditions of racial oppression on the basis of nationalist and chauvinist theories. Racial oppression is not racial oppression pure and simple, but a product of class society.

Once this layer had their comfortable jobs in universities and corporate board rooms, the black power demands receded. However, today, feeling threatened by the growing social crisis, they advance pseudoscientific jargon that is dangerous and divisive. If implemented it would lead to the Balkanization of American society.

This present-day layer of academics stands in sharp contrast to those black intellectuals who in the first decades of the twentieth century associated themselves with struggles to improve the conditions of the impoverished masses through democratic reform.

During the period of the Harlem renaissance, in the early part of this century, there was a flowering of poetry, literature, music and art. In the works of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston and others, one finds the articulation of problems affecting blacks because of racism and the legacy of slavery.

The aim of many writers was to demonstrate the incompatibility of the ideals that guided the Civil War with the racial terror and discrimination that was taking place at that time.

While the writers of the renaissance were not of one mind or one specific literary movement, they were driven to uplift the cultural and educational potential of blacks. They fought the white supremacists' lies that blacks are inferior or that integration is impossible. They organized meetings, lectures and participated in struggles against economic and social discrimination.

In 1923, Claude McKay, who wrote many poems and a novel called *Home to Harlem*, traveled to Russia and participated in the 4th Congress of the Communist International. Commenting at the time he said, "Millions of ordinary human beings and thousands of writer's were stirred by the Russian thunder rolling around the world."

The October Revolution in Russia marked the culmination of the decades-long struggle by the Marxist movement to organize the working class as an independent political force ideologically and politically. It had a massive impact on intellectuals and artists all over the world. They saw it as the beginning of a new era, as the proof that the working class could put an end to the oppression of one man by another.

### **Trotsky on the "Negro question"**

During the congress McKay wrote down a series of questions for Leon Trotsky, one of the principal leaders of the October Revolution and the Marxist opponent to the Stalinist bureaucracy in the first workers state. Trotsky's reply to McKay on what was then called the "Negro question" is very prescient and holds as true for today as it did in the 1920s. What Trotsky elaborated was the perspective of proletarian internationalism against all forms of nationalism.

Trotsky explained: "It is of the utmost importance, today, immediately, to have a number of enlightened, young, self-sacrificing Negroes, however small their number, filled with enthusiasm for the raising of the material and moral level of the great mass of Negroes, and at the same time mentally capable of grasping the identity of interests and destiny of the Negro masses, with those of the masses of the world, and in the first place with the destiny of the European working class.

"Needless to say, the work is not to be carried on in a spirit of Negro chauvinism, which would then merely form a counterpart of white chauvinism, but in a spirit of solidarity of all exploited without consideration of color."

The writers who made up the Harlem renaissance sought to expose the conditions created by capitalism for the purpose of changing them. Today, we have a layer of academia which wants to preserve all the rot of society for its own selfish interests. Thus, street slang becomes a distinct language and impoverished inner city ghettos the basis for a separate culture.

The Communist Party in the 1920s played a central role in forging a layer of young black intellectuals and working class fighters who called for the unity of the working class against capitalism. There was a growing sense of optimism in communities like Harlem that the great mass of industrial and service workers in America could transcend the racism promoted by the bourgeoisie to maintain its class rule in society.

What became of those expectations? To understand this requires a study of the degeneration of the Soviet Union and the role played by Stalinism. At the heart of the problems of this century stands the catastrophic betrayal of the October Revolution and the vilification and distortion of socialism by Stalinism and the Communist parties throughout the world.

In relation to the struggles of black workers and youth, the Communist Party played a really treacherous political role. They tied the fate of black

workers to the Democratic Party and, during the 1960s, to the pacifist politics of the NAACP.

The growth of black nationalism in the 1960s was the product of the betrayals of the working class by Stalinism and another political tendency which came out of the Fourth International, Pabloite revisionism.

The Pabloites called for the liquidation of the Fourth International and adapted themselves to all forms of bourgeois nationalism throughout the world, from peasant guerrilla movements in Latin America to the black nationalists in the United States.

Today these so-called left petty-bourgeois protesters in groups like the Workers World Party, Socialist Action and Revolutionary Workers League embrace Ebonics. Totally immersed in identity politics and rejecting any struggle to unite the working class, their politics serve as a supplementary tool of the ruling class in sowing racial division.

The only party that opposed nationalism in the sixties and seventies was the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party. Our party, firmly based on the perspective of proletarian internationalism, understands that not a single problem that faces the working class in any country can be solved within the framework of national boundaries. Workers can not take a single step forward without recognizing and understanding the international character of the struggles they are engaged in and the need to organize as an independent international force.

## Social polarization

While the civil rights movement and earlier militant struggles led to the formal recognition of racial equality, the conditions of housing, employment, health care and education facing millions of black working people are worse today than they were 30 years ago. Racial discrimination still exists.

However, deterioration of social conditions is hardly unique to blacks. Throughout the United States, and indeed internationally, the growth of poverty at one pole of society has gone hand in hand with the amassing of wealth at the other. Particularly from 1970-1990, there was a growing polarization between wealth and poverty in the United States. Workers' real wages have fallen steadily, while the number of millionaires and billionaires has grown at an unprecedented rate.

This phenomenon has assumed a particularly sharp form, however, within America's black population. During this time the percentage of black families with a median income of over \$75,000 nearly doubled, from 2.5 percent to 4.7 percent. This was the largest increase, in percentage, for any layer of the population, black or white.

A recent study pointed to the following statistics: "While the socioeconomic status of the most disadvantaged members of the minority population has deteriorated rapidly since 1970, that of the advantaged members has significantly improved.... The number of blacks in professional, technical, managerial and administrative positions increased by 57% (from 974,000 to 1,533,000) from 1973 to 1982, while the number of whites in such positions increased by only 36%."

The growth of poverty in capitalist society is not a race but a class problem. It is bound up with the changing forms of world economy. In major capitalist countries throughout the world, the welfare state is being dismantled and funding for public education, drastically reduced.

When one considers the present crisis of education, affecting every section of the working class, the thoroughly reactionary character of those promoting Ebonics comes sharply into focus.

At the opening of the twentieth century, the United States' literacy rate was approaching 100 percent for those who had attended school. Today, there are 42 million American adults who cannot read. Thirty-three

percent of patients who receive prescription drugs can't read the labels.

California, which in the past had one of the best public school systems in America, now ranks 43rd nationally in education spending. Its classrooms are the most crowded and neediest in the country. In 1995, the United States Department of Education ranked California's fourth graders at the very bottom, tied with Louisiana's, in reading skills.

If one takes seriously the need to reverse this decline in the educational level of society, it involves reorganizing the public school system. Billions would have to be poured into education to repair old buildings, build new schools, hire teachers and acquire computers, in other words, vastly expanding the facilities that presently exist.

This requires a struggle to transform the social system under which we live. Society must be reorganized to meet the needs of the majority of working people and not the profit drive of a small layer of rich. Such a goal cannot be achieved on the basis of racial or national separatism. It requires unifying the struggles of all working people, black, white, Hispanic and immigrant, in the common fight for social equality.



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