An exchange of letters on affirmative action

19 November 1998

First of all, I am not a Trotskyite.

I am a member of the Communist Party USA. I must say that the comment in the principles of your party which calls affirmative action 'divisive' is at the very least misguided, and at worst complicity with racial discrimination. In the United States the ultra-right has destroyed much of our affirmative action policies, with the logical outcome that the universities (for one example) have an extremely white and disproportionately male composition. These programs were the only positive actions against institutional racism. Oh, but at least they're not 'divided' .... what an unsocialist, and narrow stand your party has on racial issues.

CJ

Dear Reader:

Your letter disagreeing with our attitude toward affirmative action states it is 'at the very least misguided, and at worst complicity with racial discrimination.' You make no attempt to back up your claims by referring to what we have written and advocated on the question. Nor could you.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes all forms of discrimination and upholds the right of all people--black, white and immigrant--to a high-quality education and a good-paying job. However, as Trotskyists we uphold the basic Marxist conception that the democratic aspirations of the masses can only be achieved by establishing the unity of working people in the struggle for socialism.

What is our basis for opposing affirmative action? For one, it is not a socialistic demand. Nor, for that matter, is it even a democratic demand. It is one of the measures used to transform every social problem in America into a race question, and thereby foster divisions in the working class.

Whatever mistaken beliefs some proponents of affirmative action may have, no one can deny that racial quotas and preferences have the effect of discriminating against white workers and students. You take the position that all those who oppose affirmative action are complicit with racists. What would you say to a working class youth from Cleveland or Detroit whose opportunity to get a job or go to college was blocked because he or she is white?

These programs have done nothing to benefit the working class. Over the last three decades, while conditions for the majority of black workers and youth have stagnated or declined, the benefits of affirmative action have fallen overwhelmingly to a narrow and privileged layer of upper-middle-class blacks.

In no way does affirmative action address the most fundamental question: the endemic economic and social inequality of American capitalism. Millions of working people--black, white and immigrant--are excluded from a college education and good-paying jobs. To address this question requires a strategy to unite working people on the basis of their fundamental class interests and a struggle against all those who seek to divide them along racial and ethnic lines. That is why, contrary to your claim, it is the advocates of affirmative action who play into the hands of the racists.

Why do so many on the 'left,' including the Communist Party USA, vehemently oppose our position and defend race- and gender-based quota systems? This is because they do not believe in the viability of a socialist perspective and do not see as realistic the Socialist Equality Party's policy of uniting black, white and immigrant workers on the basis of a socialist program and the political independence of the working class. These organizations, and none more slavishly than the CPUSA, give support to Clinton and the Democrats, and subordinate the interests of the working class to capitalist politics.

Your characterization of our policy is based on a failure to acquaint yourself with our program, or a deliberate attempt to distort it. No one who reads our

© World Socialist Web Site

statements could equate us with the right-wing and racist opponents of affirmative action.

I believe your letter was sent after reading the statement of our British comrades. We fully concur with their view that affirmative action, 'by calling for preferential treatment in the allocation of jobs and other resources based on race, accepts the framework of the capitalist system and shifts the burden of its depredations from one section of the population to another. It is based on the ruling class lie that the resources do not exist to provide for the needs of all the people.'

Sincerely yours,

Larry Roberts,

Socialist Equality Party (US)

19 November 1998

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site