SEP Summer School 2021 Lecture

Race, class and social conflict in the United States

Niles Niemuth
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Introduction

The American ruling class is promoting racialist politics and racial division to undermine the class unity of the working class amidst the rise of social inequality to ever greater heights, the eruption of mass protests over police violence and the growth of the class struggle in the US and internationally. The push to present every social problem in the United States as a racial issue is a reflection of the deepening crisis of world capitalism and an effort by the Democrats, the trade unions and the pseudo-left to stave off a united, independent working class offensive against the capitalist system.

This ruling class initiative comes after more than four decades of unrelenting attacks on living standards and working conditions, which has fueled the rise in the stock market and the wealth of the ultra-rich and upper-middle class. The aim is to confuse workers and young people and redirect their opposition to inequality behind the Democratic Party, a bourgeois party of Wall Street and war, whose historic roots reach back to the dark days of slavery and Jim Crow segregation.

The two years since our last school have been a period of intense and growing class struggle in the United States and internationally. Looking at the US situation, there was the GM strike in the fall of 2019, involving 50,000 autoworkers at 50 plants across the US. That was followed by the wildcat strikes by autoworkers in Europe, Canada and the US in March 2020, which temporarily shut down the auto industry and led to broader lockdown measures as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.

So far this year there have been significant walkouts. At Volvo Trucks in Virginia, workers, with the assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), formed a rank-and-file committee in an effort to oppose a sellout by the United Auto Workers (UAW). Workers repeatedly rejected union-backed contracts at Warrior Met coal, Allegheny Technologies (ATI) and Frito-Lay. Health care workers across the country have protested and gone on strike to demand better working conditions, under conditions where the full brunt of the pandemic catastrophe has been placed on their backs by the hospital chains.

It is in this context that profoundly anti-Marxist, anti-scientific and anti-working class conceptions developed within academia and by the pseudo-left over the last five decades are being pumped into the country's bloodstream, with the financial backing of tens of millions of dollars from major foundations and big business.

"White privilege," "systemic racism," "intersectionality," "critical race theory" are the buzzwords and concepts of the day. This is addressed in more detail in the lecture by Tom Carter. These conceptions are based on the rejection of an objective, scientific approach to history and the dismissal of the revolutionary history of the United States and the class struggle, as seen in the "1619 Project," which is discussed in the lecture by Tom Mackaman.

The SEP rejects identity politics based on race, gender or sexuality as reactionary. Such an approach to politics, which dismisses the fundamental class character of society, benefits only the privileged upper-middle class and the ruling class, while dividing the working class.

The working class in the United States is perhaps the most heterogeneous in the world—drawn from Europe, Asia, Africa, North, South and Central America. The fight for socialism requires the unification of the working class—comprised of people of every skin color, ethnicity, nationality, language, gender and sexuality—in the US and internationally. Under conditions of globalization, in which all countries have been drawn together in the process of production, there can be no national solution to the problems workers face in any one country, let alone among a minority segment of one nation's population.

The origins of racism lie not in the "DNA" of white Americans. Rather, they are rooted in capitalism itself and its historical development over the last four centuries. Racism and concepts of racial difference have been and continue to be promoted by the ruling class to divide the working class and protect the capitalist order.

And contrary to the claim of "1619 Project" architect Nikole Hannah-Jones, African Americans have not fought back alone in the struggle for democratic rights. The impulse in American history has been for unity from below and division from above. From the colonial period and the time of slavery to the Civil War and through to Jim Crow and the civil rights movement of the 1960s, blacks and whites have worked, been exploited and fought back side by side, while the ruling class has sought to use race to divide and pit workers against each other.

The great question of the working class movement has always been the conscious fight against and tearing down of divisions imposed by the ruling elite, and the combating of backward tendencies that take root among workers. This is a fight that has always been led by socialists, opposing all efforts to split and divide the working class.

Objective class divisions cut across every grouping. A black worker has more in common with a white worker than he or she does with the black elite. Reviewing the question of wealth inequality among racial groups recently on the *World Socialist Web Site*, we exposed the myth of the "racial wealth gap" and showed that there has been a pronounced growth in the wealth of the black upper-middle class.

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Those who complain about the racial wealth gap are privileged members of the upper-middle class, the "next nine percent" below the richest 1 percent. While seeing their net worth grow substantially along with the inflation of their stock portfolios, these social layers jealously view the ultra-wealthy above them, the top 1 percent and top 0.1 percent. They deploy identity politics grievances in an effort to attain a greater share of the pie for themselves.

In fact, wealth inequality is greater within racial groups than between them, and when it comes to the bottom rungs of American society there is no racial wealth gap to speak of, since, regardless of their skin color, millions own nothing or are deeply in debt. As much as half of the US population, 160 million people, has zero or negative net worth.

The promotion of racialist identity politics over the last two years

The first indication of a shift into higher gear by the ruling class in promoting racialist politics was the promotion of racial reparations for slavery at a hearing in June 2019, with testimony by Senator Cory Booker and Ta-Nehisi Coates, among others. A one-time fringe demand, raised by black nationalist groups, and introduced year after year to little avail by Democratic Representative and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member John Conyers since the 1980s, has been adopted by the Democratic Party mainstream. The aim of focusing on reparations was to make race a central pillar in the 2020 presidential election campaign.

Following in these ideological footsteps, the 1619 Project was published in the August 2019 edition of the *New York Times Magazine* rejecting the revolutionary heritage of the American Revolution and Civil War, dismissing Abraham Lincoln as garden-variety racist and recasting all of American history as driven by racial antagonism—that of whites against blacks. Hannah-Jones's thesis is based almost entirely on the writings of Black Power proponent Lerone Bennett Jr., the executive editor of *Ebony* magazine for five decades. Her staunchest defender is the Stalinist and academic fraud Gerald Horne.

Despite the criticism of the 1619 Project's thesis by leading American historians and a stealth edit after its exposure by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the *New York Times* continues to back Hannah-Jones and promote the project. The 1619 Project has been pumped up with millions of dollars in funding and a Pulitzer Prize. It has been spun into a book coming out this fall, a documentary to be screened on Disney-owned Hulu and a curriculum for use in schools.

New York Times executive editor Dean Baquet gave the game away in internal remarks to *Times* staff members about making race the focus in the 2020 election year, which were leaked to *Slate*. Baquet explained:

> [R]ace and understanding of race should be a part of how we cover the American story… one reason we all signed off on the 1619 Project and made it so ambitious and expansive was to teach our readers to think a little bit more like that. Race in the next year—and I think this is, to be frank, what I would hope you come away from this discussion with—race in the next year is going to be a huge part of the American story.

The WSWS published our initial response to the 1619 Project in September 2019, followed by a series of interviews with preeminent historians of the United States: Gordon Wood, James McPherson, Richard Carwardine, James Oakes, Adolph Reed, Clayborne Carson and Victoria Bynum. We were the only outlet that presented a left-wing, socialist critique of the racialist falsification of American history in the 1619 Project, uniquely providing a platform for renowned historians to present their perspectives and criticisms.

Then came the murder of George Floyd, a black man, by a white police officer on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Notably, that officer, Derek Chauvin, had three police accomplices. They included a white cop and a black cop who helped him pin Floyd to the pavement, and an Asian American, who held back a horrified and angry multi-racial crowd as Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes.

Video of the murder in broad daylight, in the midst of the initial surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, went viral online, sparking an eruption of protests against police violence and racism in Minneapolis which rapidly spread across the country and internationally. The multi-racial, multi-ethnic protests were the largest and most widespread protests in US history, with as many as 25 million participating. Demonstrations were held in cities large and small, in rural and urban areas.

Over 13,600 arrests were made between May 25 and June 6, 2020. Journalists were targeted for attack and arrest by the police. Plainclothes federal agents and police in unmarked vehicles grabbed protesters from the street. President Donald Trump came close to invoking the Insurrection Act to mobilize the military to suppress the protests and seize dictatorial power.

The Democratic Party, the pseudo-left and the unions worked overtime to redirect the intense opposition to police violence and racism into racialist politics. The *New York Times* published Hannah-Jones' argument for racially based reparations in June 2020, just a month into the protests.

Demands for the removal of Confederate monuments were turned into attacks on monuments of Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Union commanders in the Civil War. Hannah-Jones quipped that she would wear it as a "badge of honor" if the protests were dubbed the "1619 riots." Riding the wave of the racialist protests, Black Lives Matter brought in $90 million in donations in 2020, including substantial pledges from major corporations and foundations. The trade unions promoted a "Strike for Black Lives," which drew the support at best of only a few thousand union functionaries, with the UAW calling on workers to participate in a token eight-minute-and-forty-six-second "stand down" on June 19, Juneteenth.

Meanwhile, as the presidential campaign developed, black Democrats showed their true reactionary colors. Many city-level politicians endorsed or flirted with the campaign of billionaire former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the mastermind of the racist "stop and frisk" program, enticed by the prospect of millions of dollars from his self-financed campaign and philanthropic organization. Even former Georgia gubernatorial candidate and vice presidential hopeful Stacey Abrams, a proponent of identity politics who has argued that blacks and whites have "intrinsic racial differences," covered for Bloomberg and his billions.

As the party establishment's preferred candidate, former Vice President Joe Biden, seemed to be floundering, Representative James Clyburn stepped in with a racial appeal to black voters in South Carolina to prop up Biden's campaign and block a possible victory in the primaries by Senator Bernie Sanders. With his nomination secure, Biden selected Kamala Harris as his vice president. Harris ticks multiple identity boxes as the first black/Asian American and the first woman to hold the office, while brandishing reactionary credentials as the former attorney general of California, who defended the state's inhumane prison system.

There are a number of other developments that I can mention only briefly, but which were significant: the controversy over New York University' endorsement of racially segregated dorms for black students; the cancellation of Adolph Reed's speech to the DSA because of his alleged "class reductionism"; the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa race massacre, which stripped one the worst racist pogroms in American history from its class context; the declaration

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of Juneteenth as a national holiday without any examination of the significance of the emancipation of the slaves and its revolutionary implications for the present; growing demands for racial quotas in art from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to Amazon and the Met Opera; and, most recently, the intense furor over "critical race theory."

Marxism vs. Black Nationalism

In countering the middle class racialist politics of the current moment there are important lessons to be drawn for the party and the working class from the debate over petty-bourgeois black nationalism and racialist politics as it developed in the 1960s and 1970s.

The question of black nationalism and racial separatism, and the struggle to lay out a clear working class perspective against it, was critical to the founding of the Workers League in the United States—the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party. The Workers League was guided in the development of this important theoretical work by the leadership of the Socialist Labor League in the UK—Gerry Healy, Mike Banda and Cliff Slaughter.

The minority expelled from the SWP in 1964 for demanding a discussion of the betrayal by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in Sri Lanka formed the American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI) in order to continue the fight for Trotskyism in the United States. The Workers League was founded by the ACFI two years later, following the Third Congress of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which analyzed the significance of the struggle against Pabloism and the efforts to liquidate the Trotskyist movement. This was a period of intense capitalist crisis and an upsurge in working class struggle in the US, including the civil rights protest movement that had been developing since the 1950s and a series of urban rebellions.

The *Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party* (United States), in the section on the formation of the Workers League, explains:

> The growing opposition to the war in Vietnam among masses of students, the eruption of violent protests by African-American workers and youth in major cities, and the militant strikes by substantial sections of the working class were indications of the crisis of American capitalism. The Socialist Workers Party, repudiating its Trotskyist heritage, responded to these developments by adapting to petty-bourgeois tendencies that dominated these movements. Its opportunism found expression in its promotion of Black nationalism as an alternative to the struggle for the unity of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. The SWP's espousal of Black nationalism, including the demand for a separate Black nation, reflected its dismissal of the American working class as a revolutionary force. This perspective expressed the influence of the New Left, which derived much of its theoretical inspiration from the anti-Marxist conceptions of Herbert Marcuse, a leading representative of the "Frankfurt School," who characterized the working class as a "proto-fascist" element in American society.
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> The founding of the Workers League, rooted in the struggles of the Fourth International since 1953, marked a milestone in the fight for Marxism in the United States. The development of Marxism could only proceed on the basis of the recognition of the revolutionary character of the American working class and its decisive role in the struggle against US imperialism. This perspective could be realized only on the basis of an irreconcilable struggle against the myriad petty-bourgeois radical tendencies, promoting various forms of racial, ethnic, sexual and gender "identity" politics, that flourished in the 1960s and early 1970s. In his greetings to the Workers League's founding congress, SLL leader Gerry Healy stated:
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> "The working class in the United States is the most powerful in the world, and it is within this class that you must build your party. This is a basic principle of Marxism and one which applies with particular urgency to the conditions existing inside the United States. It is not Black Power or the dozens of peace and civil rights movements which extend throughout the country which will resolve the basic questions of our time, but the working class led by a revolutionary party. It is at this point that we separate ourselves completely from the revisionists. We emphatically reject their idea that the Negroes by themselves as well as middle-class movements can settle accounts with American imperialism. Whatever critical support we are called upon from time to time to extend to such movements, the essence of our support must be based on making clear our criticisms of their shortcomings."

The Workers League pamphlet *Black Nationalism and Marxist Theory*, written by Tim Wohlforth, then the organization's national secretary, was published in 1969, a year after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and four years after the assassination of Malcolm X. Fred Hampton, head of the Black Panthers in Chicago, was assassinated the same year by the Chicago police, on December 4, 1969. This pamphlet remains a significant document for informing the work of the party in the present period.

The 1960s, in addition to witnessing the peak of the civil rights movement's fight for black Americans' voting rights and its push to break down racial segregation, had seen the growth of the influence and notoriety of the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Malcolm X, which promoted black separatism and fanned anti-white sentiment. The group's Harlem temple grew from 1,000 members in 1946 to 10,000 in 1965. Prior to his assassination in 1965, Malcolm X broke with the Nation and founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, adopting the Pan-Africanist ideology that was prominent in the anti-colonial struggle in Africa.

As historian Joe William Trotter Jr. notes in *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America*, "… Malcolm had inspired the movement toward black pride, armed self-defense, and unity with African people around the globe. Following his lead, rising numbers of activists and intellectuals conceptualized the black urban community as an occupied colony of the imperialist United States and, as historians Donna Murch and Robert Self note, they turned to the 'global uprisings against colonial rule, from Algeria to Prague, Luanda and Hanoi' and Cuba, China and Vietnam as fresh new models for advancing the African American freedom struggle beyond the confines of the earlier nonviolent direct action movement."

After having adapted to the reformist middle class leadership of the civil rights movement and called for the deployment of federal troops to desegregate schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, the SWP was, as early as 1963, adapting to the politics of Malcolm X, presenting black nationalism—as it did with other forms of petty-bourgeois nationalism such as Castroism in Cuba—as complementary to the fight for socialism.

The Militant, the newspaper of the SWP, favorably covered and republished the speeches of Malcolm X. Between April 1964 and January 1965, Malcolm X spoke three times at meetings of the Militant Labor Forum organized by the SWP. An interview with Malcolm X conducted by Jack Barnes and Barry Sheppard was published in the March–April

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1965 edition of *Young Socialist*, the SWP's youth publication.

The urban rebellions of black workers and youth between 1964 and 1968 were triggered by racist police violence and fueled by degraded living conditions and limited job opportunities in the segregated ghettos that had grown rapidly after World War II.

In 1966, the "Black Power" slogan was first popularized by Stokely Carmichael, the head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, a shift from the previous period, when the group had organized white and black youth from the North to challenge segregation in the South and organize voter registration drives.

That same year, the Black Panther Party (BPP) was founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in Oakland, California. The Panthers focused, in large part, on recruiting among the most impoverished layers, including lumpen elements, and providing services for poor urban blacks. The group had 5,000 members and 40 chapters across the US by 1970, influencing the development of other radical petty-bourgeois nationalist movements: the Brown Berets (for Latinos), Young Lords (for Puerto Ricans) and the American Indian Movement (for Native Americans).

The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) was formed by black autoworkers in May 1968 at Chrysler's Dodge Main plant in Hamtramck/Detroit. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was formed the next year to coordinate the development of DRUM and similar groups established at other industrial plants. Declaring that its "sole objective is to break the bonds of white racist control over the lives and destiny of black workers," it stated: "Membership is denied to all honkies [a derogatory word directed against whites, which may have its origins in a slur used against Hungarian and Slavic immigrant workers] due to the fact that said honky has been the historical enemy, betrayer, and exploiter of black people. Any relationship that we enter into with honkies will only be on the basis of coalition over [specific] issues."

A list of demands presented by DRUM to UAW Local 3 in July 1968 called for the hiring of African Americans at every level, from plant security to plant manager, and also a position on the Chrysler board of directors. Despite the group's radical rhetoric, the aim was not workers control of production and the overthrow of capitalism, but rather a seat at the corporate table.

Black nationalism—with roots in the early 20th century "Back to Africa" movement of Marcus Garvey—had reemerged as a significant political trend in the 1960s in reaction to the failures of the reform effort led by Martin Luther King and deep disillusionment following his assassination in 1968. Its growth was facilitated by the rejection on the part of the civil rights movement's leaders of the necessity of overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism to achieve genuine equality. Black nationalism went hand in hand with black capitalism as promoted by the political establishment, most notably Richard Nixon, as the best means for African Americans to "get a piece of the action."

Under these conditions, there was pressure to adapt to radical leaders who often made use of revolutionary phrases. The Maoists, Stalinists and SWP all embraced and promoted the black nationalists.

In "The negro, nation and Marxist theory," in December 1968, Lucy St. John, editor of the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League, noted that the SWP was relying on limited discussions with Trotsky on the "Negro question"—as it was then known—which focused on the question of the right of nations to self determination and its possible application to African Americans, in order to justify its rush to support black nationalism and betray the working class:

> Their method and their conclusions have absolutely nothing to do with Marxism, with Trotskyism. Today the question of self-determination for the SWP has become an abstract principle, a moral principle, abstracted from the class struggle. The right to self-determination of nations has become the "right" for groups to control their own destiny or more crudely their right to "do their own thing" if that is what they want. What it boils down to in practice is that if you are black you are never wrong and can never be corrected—whatever you want is good and you are right. The Negro people cannot be given leadership as part of the working class by the revolutionary party.
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> The logic of this position should be clear and was brought home at the YSA [Young Socialist Alliance] convention when the YSAers were addressed by a Black Panther who told them they were not the revolutionary party, that the Black Panthers were the only revolutionary party and he was applauded. Accordingly the SWP should disband tomorrow. What the SWP has done is to raise the conception of an abstract, moral right above the class struggle and the needs of the working class and revolutionary party.

In 1938–39, the SWP had initiated discussions on how the new American section of the Fourth International could develop its work in relation to African Americans—something which was basically non-existent at the outset—including the formation of a separate mass "Negro organization," which would not put forward demands for socialism and which black members of the Fourth International would participate in but not lead. The party adopted a resolution at its Third National Convention in 1940 calling for black members to work with other militant blacks to form such a mass organization as a means of developing work among the black masses and recruiting the best elements to the Fourth International.

(It should be noted that discussions with Trotsky on the "Negro question" were directed and documents and resolutions largely written by C.L.R. James, who split with Trotskyism in 1940 alongside Max Shachtman and went on to form the state capitalist Johnson-Forest Tendency. James later positioned himself as an advisor to radical petty-bourgeois nationalists like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Eric Williams in Trinidad and Walter Rodney in Guyana.)

The SWP in the late 1930s and 1940s was seeking a way to confront the influence and betrayals of the Stalinist Communist Party in the United States. The Comintern, with Stalin's backing, had endorsed the Black Belt thesis in 1928, promoting the concept of self determination for blacks in the majority black counties throughout the South and the establishment of a separate black republic—a line that never had broad appeal. This was abruptly dropped in 1933 in line with the Communist Party's turn from the Third Period to the Popular Front and accommodation to liberalism and the Democratic Party.

In addition to capitalizing on the legacy of the 1917 October Revolution, the Communist Party had won the support and allegiance of many workers and intellectuals when it came to the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, nine black teenagers falsely accused and convicted of raping two white women in Alabama. The CP organized their legal defense through the International Labor Defense and made it an international issue. It also organized the legal defense of Angelo Herndon, a black Communist Party organizer arrested in Atlanta, Georgia, for possessing Communist literature. The appeal of the case to the Supreme Court (*Herndonv. Lowry*) resulted in the striking down of the state's insurrection law as a violation of the First Amendment. Finally, the party nominated James W. Ford as its vice presidential candidate three times—1932, 1936 and 1940—marking the first time an African American had run as a vice presidential candidate on a major national ticket.

In his discussion with the SWP leadership on the issue of how to reach African American workers, Trotsky upheld the right of nations to self determination as an essential component of the Marxist program and held open the possibility that blacks could become a nation, but did not endorse black nationalism or separatism.

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Trotsky was seeking in brief discussions with American members in Turkey in 1933 and Mexico in 1939 to correct the American Trotskyists' neglect of the "Negro question," orient the party to a critical section of the American working class and facilitate the recruitment of worker members under conditions where the twists and turns of the Communist Party had alienated many black intellectuals and workers who had been drawn to Marxism over the previous two decades.

In the development of its line in relation to black nationalism between 1963 and 1970, the SWP used these discussions as a cover, but departed significantly from what was outlined by Trotsky. The descent of the SWP into open support of black nationalism is traced by Tim Wohlforth in an addendum to his 1971 book, *The Struggle for Marxism in the United States* .

Wohlforth notes that a resolution passed at the SWP's 1963 Convention titled "Freedom Now: The New Stage in the Struggle for Negro Emancipation and the Tasks of the SWP," stripped nationalism of its bourgeois character and imbued it with a progressive potential, declaring, "Nationalism itself is an empty vessel which can be filled with vastly different contents." (This was the same convention that marked the reunification with the Pabloites, 10 years after James P. Cannon's "Open Letter" and the split in the Fourth International.)

The SWP declared in its 1963 resolution:

> Negro nationalism is progressive because it contributes to the creation of such an independent Negro movement…
>
> Revolutionary socialists welcome the growth of such Negro nationalism and give its participants whole hearted collaboration in the fight against our common enemies. For us, Negro nationalism and revolutionary socialism are not only compatible but complementary forces that should be welded closer together in thought and action…

The SWP's 1964 resolution, "The Freedom Now Movement in 1965: Its Progress, Problems and Prospects," noted positively the development of "racial consciousness," but clearly stated the position that blacks are not a separate nation:

> There has been a noticeable decline of separatist sentiment, most conspicuously manifested in Malcolm X's evolution. This has, paradoxically, been attended by a heightening of racial consciousness. This two-sided development confirms the point that Black nationalism based upon an acceptance of self-reliance, racial pride and dignity, identification with Africa and an assertion of independence in action is not necessarily bound up with separatism. In all its manifestations, however, it is bound up with the demand for black unity, autonomy and power.

In 1968, the youth movement of the SWP, the Young Socialist Alliance, passed a resolution titled "On The Revolutionary Struggle Of Black America For Self-Determination."

For the first time, and with no apparent discussion or controversy, the SWP defined blacks as a separate nation:

> Hence the position of Black people as super-exploited beasts of burden involves a dual state of oppression: oppression deriving from being black, i.e., national oppression, and oppression as members of the working class.
>
> Black people make up what is known as an intra-colonized nation.
>
> The application of this theory to the wilderness of North America produces the inevitable conclusion that the enchained Afro-American nation will achieve its complete liberation, i.e., self-determination, only through a socialist or anti-capitalist revolution.

This process found its logical and ignominious conclusion in September 1969 when the SWP adopted "A Transitional Program for Black Liberation." It was, in large part, a rehashing of the Ten-Point Program the Black Panthers had adopted in 1967. Putting forward demands and rhetoric that did not provide a revolutionary perspective but adapted to bourgeois nationalism, following the line on Castro and Cuba, it marked the open rejection of the line Lenin had laid down on the national question which had guided the Bolsheviks in the fight for working class unity.

Variations of the term "black community" appeared 38 times, the term "working class" just twice—once to dismiss the idea that revolution by the working class in the US was an imminent perspective. It featured anti-Marxist phrases like "white possessors of power," "white bloodsuckers" and "house-slaves and handkerchief-heads." The claim was put forward that "To one degree or another almost every Afro-American shares the sentiments if not the ideology of black nationalism."

The SWP proposed an "independent mass black political party" and defined African Americans as an oppressed nationality that must have national self-determination. "This means," it stated, "that black people must form and unify their own organizations of struggle, take control of the black communities and all the institutions within them…"

It called for the building of "black fortresses which will be centers of black counterpower to the white power structure in the principal cities of the United States."

What this amounted to was a program for hyper-segregation, with the suggestion that coalitions could be built with poor whites at some later time. Among the demands of this new Transitional Program were separate black schools from nursery school through college, all-black police forces, all-black juries for black defendants, black studies courses in high schools and colleges and the preferential hiring and advancement of blacks.

"The unity of black and white workers is indispensable to combat and overthrow capitalism," the SWP insisted on the one hand. "But where white workers are privileged and black workers are penalized, black unity in action must precede and prepare the ground for black-white unity on a broad scale," it declared, in practice making working class unity impossible.

Thus it called for the formation of separate black caucuses in the unions. Its argumentation was analogous to the Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution, asserting that only after the formation of perfectly separate racial blocs could there at some point emerge the possibility of the disparate blocs of workers allying in a revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Following this logic, the SWP went as far as discouraging romantic relationships between its black and white members.

Black Nationalism and Marxist Theory originally appeared as a series in the *Bulletin* between February and March of 1969 and in the Socialist Labour League's *Newsletter* in the UK between March and April. It was written as a response to and analysis of the SWP's adaptation to black nationalism and its criticism of the Workers League's perspective as laid out in the above-cited article "The negro, nation and Marxist theory" by Lucy St. John. The Workers League's approach adhered to the line laid down by Lenin and not the zigs and zags of the Stalinists or the SWP.

St. John wrote:

> Today every black capitalist and petty bourgeois has taken up the

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demand for black culture. Black capitalists such as Jesse Jackson are seen as the friends of the black transit workers.

Today the Ford Foundation has become the hero in the fight for black control of the schools, pouring millions of dollars into community control while the workers, the teachers become in the eyes of the nationalists the enemies. As Lenin said, cultural nationalism draws the working class closer to the bourgeoisie.

Black nationalism has served to split the working class. This is exposed particularly within the trade union movement. Where white and black workers have joined in struggle against the boss as in the UAW and the Chicago Transit strike, with the intervention of the nationalists, this unity has been broken with the demagogy of black capitalism, black is beautiful. Rather than amalgamating the working class in a united organization, the nationalists call for separate organizations, separate unions. In every single instance, black nationalism has served to divide the working class. We say that black nationalism is absolutely against the interests of the black workers and that it will only lead them to defeat.

The Workers League stands today 100 percent against black nationalism in all its forms. We say that the key to the class struggle must be the unity of the working class, united in the trade union, in the revolutionary party. Racism cannot be fought through black nationalism, which is a diversion for black workers to keep them from fighting their real enemy, the capitalist class, economically and politically. Black nationalism only aids racism; it prevents the mobilization of black and white workers against the system of which racism is an inherent part.

There is no separate solution for the Negro people outside of the struggle of the world working class. There is no separate program. This Trotsky made clear. The fight against racism and every form of discrimination must be combined with the class struggle as a whole. The fight for equality, for black representation must become an integral part of the fight for socialism. The Workers League, rather than accepting the divisions created by capitalist society and adapting to them, calls for the organizations of the working class to take up the struggle of the Negro people and to unite the class politically in the fight to create a political arm of the entire working class, black and white, a labor party.

Expanding on this, *Black Nationalism and Marxist Theory* begins by examining the international context of the growth of black nationalism in the US. There had been similar outbursts of a peculiar kind of nationalism in the advanced capitalist countries in the 1960s: in Belgium, in the form of Flemish speakers vs. French speakers; in the UK with the growth of Scottish and Welsh separatism and the explosion of Catholic and Protestant antagonisms in Ireland; in the growth of French Canadian separatism in Canada; separatist agitation in Brittany in France; and, finally, demands in French-speaking Jura for separation from the German language-dominated canton in multi-lingual Switzerland.

The SWP, Maoists and Stalinists all responded in the same way to these developments, taking each in isolation and applying Lenin's defense of the right of nations to self-determination as an abstract formula and using it as a cover for their adaptation to bourgeois nationalism. However, as the pamphlet explains, the Marxist approach requires that an analysis begin with the international class struggle, placing the national question in this context and understanding it in its concrete historical development.

The position of Lenin and the Bolsheviks was to uphold the right of a nation to secede, but not to fight for its secession. Lenin was staunchly opposed to autonomy in cultural matters—e.g., the separate control of schools—which sows divisions within the working class while making little difference to the bourgeoisie, which will carry on as it pleases in its private schools and associations. Instead, Lenin fought for the ever-closer amalgamation of the working class.

As is explained in *Black Nationalism and Marxist Theory*, "the party does not tell an oppressed minority that it must secede—in fact under certain circumstances it might agitate for them not to secede. The principle involved is that the revolutionary party in the oppressor nation must uphold the right of the oppressed nation to secede."

Furthermore, Lenin saw no legitimacy in the demand for the right of nations to self determination in countries where the bourgeois democratic revolution had been long completed, meaning Western Europe and the United States. The demand was legitimate in multi-national states where one national bourgeois grouping dominated over oppressed nationalities, as in Russia, and in the colonial and semi-colonial nations oppressed by foreign imperialist powers, as in Africa and Asia.

On this alone there could be no legitimate basis for a Marxist party to support black nationalism. As to the question of whether African Americans constitute a nation, the answer is clearly no.

A review of the history of the US and the development of the class struggle since the Civil War ended slavery makes this clear. The Union victory in the war and the destruction of slavery marked the conclusion of the bourgeois democratic revolution in the United States and opened the way for enormous industrialization and growth of capital in the next four decades, which laid the foundation of the emergence of the US as the dominant imperialist power after World War I.

The threat posed to the ruling order by a combination of black and white farmers in the agricultural South and workers in the industrial North—expressed most clearly in the Populist movement of the 1890s—gave rise to the promotion of racial prejudice and legal Jim Crow segregation in the former slave states, along with de facto segregation in the cities. The scuttling of Reconstruction, the failure to redistribute land to the freed slaves, along with the movement of blacks away from the sharecropping system of the rural South and into the industrial North and southern urban centers closed off the possibility of the development of African Americans as a separate nation.

Black nationalism, rejecting the revolutionary role of the working class, turned African Americans away from a struggle to end the capitalist system and toward the pursuit of cultural autonomy in one form or another. This perspective blocked an understanding that the inability of bourgeois reforms to resolve the problems confronting black workers—and all workers—was international in scope. "Acceptance of black nationalism is thus deeply connected with a pragmatic retreat on the part of the revisionists from an international outlook and an acceptance, not of the crisis of international capital and the struggle of classes," the Workers League said, "but the permanence of capitalism and its race divisions."

In a line that brings to mind the works of Hannah-Jones and others who adopt a racialist perspective, the pamphlet noted that "… once the monstrous method of thinking in national and race terms creeps into one's outlook it takes total control and nothing, nothing can be seen in anything but racial terms."

The position of the black nationalists, as with the petty-bourgeois racialists of today, was that America is a white racist society, meaning that all whites are racist and enemies of blacks. Today, racism is presented as an indelible fact of life, i.e., "structural racism." But as the pamphlet explains, "Racism can only be fought by refusing to accept its existence as permanent instead of accepting race divisions by asking for black control of black ghettoes. Our position is one of complete and absolute opposition to every form of racial discrimination."

"Our program for a solution to the democratic aspect of the Negro question is the program of **equality**," the Workers League declared. "There can be no compromise on this question. Any and every manifestation of discrimination because of race must be eradicated from the working class movement first of all and then from society as a whole."

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Therefore: "Precisely because this essential democratic demand, a demand which affects all classes of Negroes, can only be realized through the struggle for socialism, the demand must find expression as an essential part of the general transitional socialist program. The fight for this program requires the organization of the workers on a class, not a racial, basis. This means the revolutionary party must be the party of all workers, regardless of race, and caucuses and other organization forms thrown up to struggle around the program must likewise organize workers as workers, not as a race."

Recognizing that capitalism was in its terminal decline and therefore incapable of fulfilling democratic demands—in this case the elimination of discrimination and racism—the Workers League was firm in its stance that only the fight for socialism could resolve the problems confronting the working class.

Conclusion: The fight for the unity of the working class and the building of the SEP and ICFI

Today's purveyors of petty-bourgeoisie racial politics make no pretense of "black liberation" or radical anti-capitalist politics, in contrast to many black nationalist tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s. They are transparently focused on the scramble to further enrich themselves. The touchstones of the current movement are not Hampton, Carmichael or Malcolm X, and definitely not Martin Luther King, but those inveterate charlatans Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton.

American history is rewritten and distorted to place race and racism of whites against blacks as the central driving force, instead of class. Today's promoters of racialist politics promote the fiction of "white privilege," blaming white workers for inequality and deflecting from the real source of inequality—capitalism.

Their slogan is not liberation, but remuneration. They are for the self-determination of the individual to make as much money as possible, crassly using race and claims of racism as a lever to gain positions and privilege. Their racial nationalism embraces the nationalism of flag-waving American patriotism and adoration of war criminals like former President Barack Obama.

While a layer of African Americans has been integrated into every level of the ruling elite, including the presidency, vice presidency and Pentagon—overseeing the imperialist killing machine—the vast majority of African Americans continue to confront decrepit schools, crumbling infrastructure, poverty and exploitation. Over the past several decades there has been a significant increase in the number and wealth of black billionaires and millionaires, and the expansion of a privileged layer of upper-middle class blacks, while conditions for the vast majority have significantly worsened. The infusion of tens of millions of dollars into Black Lives Matter and those who promote racial ideology has done nothing to slow the place of police killings in the United States.

Racism and racial inequality—to the extent that it remains an issue—is fundamentally a class issue. One of the essential issues facing the socialist movement since its inception has been the unification of the working class. The fight against racism, various forms of chauvinism and communalism, and for equality has been an essential component of the fight to build a powerful working class movement and establish socialism in the United States and internationally.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks' defense of the right of nations to self determination was never a pass to capitulation to bourgeois nationalism, nor did it imply support for racialist politics.

Furthermore, as was shown by the experience of the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the slogan of national self determination could be used to cover over the most reactionary socioeconomic and political perspectives. Such tendencies were promoted by US and European imperialism for their own geopolitical interests. It was absolutely necessary, in the interests of the unity of the working class, to oppose separatist movements that emerged or reemerged in the era of globalization.

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution confirms the dead end of all national and ethnic-based—and, for that matter, racial—politics. There is no viable perspective for the working class in any country outside of world proletarian revolution.

I will conclude by quoting from Joseph Kishore's December 2019 lecture, "Perspectives for the coming revolution in America: Race, class and the fight for socialism," which outlines the perspective that guides our political work:

> The insistence on the unbridgeable chasm between blacks and whites does not reflect reality. While racism exists, attitudes toward race have transformed enormously over the past half-century. Globalization has integrated the working class of the entire world into a single process of production. The masses of workers and youth who are being driven into struggle throughout the world are not motivated by issues centered on race, gender, age, sexual orientation or any other identity, but by issues of class. The obsessive focus on race and racial division by the *Times* and the Democratic Party will only play into the hands of Trump and his fascistic advisors…
>
> The working class cannot allow itself to be divided along national or racial lines. It must reject the chauvinism of Trump as well as the racial politics of the Democrats.
>
> The fight for the right to a job, to health care, to public education, to a livable income, to a secure retirement; the fight against war and authoritarianism; the fight against the return of fascism is a fight against capitalism and for socialism. It requires a frontal attack on the wealth and privileges of the corporate and financial elite, a massive redistribution of wealth, and the transformation of the giant banks and corporations into publicly controlled utilities, run on the basis of social need and not private profit.

Against the proponents of racial conflict and division, the working class must respond with the methods of class war and socialist revolution.

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