

Introduction to Lawrence Porter's *Marcus Garvey and the Reactionary Logic of Racialist Politics*

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Mehring Books is pleased to announce the publication of Marcus Garvey and the Reactionary Logic of Racialist Politics by Lawrence Porter, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US).

The following is an introduction to the pamphlet, written by Tom Mackaman, a professor of history at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

The pamphlet can be purchased at Mehring Books.

This pamphlet first appeared as an article by Lawrence Porter on the *World Socialist Web Site* on March 2, 2023. It is a critical contribution to the counteroffensive against the sowing of racial divisions in the working class, and it deserves the widest possible audience.

Workers must take the promotion of the black nationalist Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) by politicians, the media and advocates of identity politics as a warning. As the pamphlet explains, Garvey was a vicious opponent of socialism and working class unity—to the point that he was willing to cooperate with white segregationists and even the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

American imperialism is well practiced in the bloody method of divide and rule. Its strategists would have no compunction about encouraging racial antagonisms to the point of violent conflict if they thought it would preserve capitalist rule.

In fact, neo-segregationist ideas are already being promoted in the US. It is now common for American businesses to organize “listening sessions” in which workers of different races are separated into “safe spaces.” College dormitories have imposed supposedly voluntary “affinity housing” arrangements to create separate living space for “the races.” That such forms of out-and-out segregation are given Orwellian names does not make them any less reactionary.

The *New York Times*, the major organ of American

liberalism, now promotes a view of society and history fundamentally consistent with Garvey's. Its 1619 Project presents American history as a timeless race war waged by whites against blacks. Echoing Garvey's “back to Africa” movement, one of the *Times*' leading columnists, Charles Blow, calls for a mass migration of blacks out of Northern cities and “back to the South,” where, he believes, they might form a racial majority in the areas where chattel slavery once dominated.

The problem for the racialists is that the American working class is more unified, in an objective sense, than it has ever been. This is part of a much larger process. The globalization of economic production has linked American workers of all races more closely with their class brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America than ever before. The task of socialists is to make workers politically conscious of this objective reality by uniting them in struggle against their common capitalist oppressors.

The author of this pamphlet, Lawrence Porter, has spent his entire political life fighting for that perspective. Porter has been a member of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, since 1972. He has been the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US) since its Founding Congress in 2008.

Porter, born in 1953, was raised in the working class city of Chester, Pennsylvania. His stepfather, born into a share-cropping family in Georgia, was part of the Great Migration of blacks out of the South to the North. The migrants came to escape the Jim Crow segregation of the South and the terror of the KKK and to work in industrial jobs. Yet by the 1960s, the decline of American capitalism brought with it the closure of the plants and factories that had drawn the migrants, devastating large

cities like Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Chicago, and small cities like Gary, East St. Louis, Flint and Chester.

Like many young workers of his generation, Porter was radicalized in the 1960s by the conditions in the cities, the collapse of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. This was a period in which radical-sounding black nationalism had a real influence on African American youth. It was the heyday of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers. But Porter was among a layer of the youth won to Trotskyism, precisely in political struggle against these tendencies.

This was fortunate for the working class. Porter's political career now spans a half-century. Working for years as a welder in both steel and auto, including at Bethlehem Steel and Chrysler Corporation, Porter has fought for socialist consciousness among all sections of the working class—autoworkers, steel workers, educators, health care workers—and sought to unite workers of all races.

He has reported extensively on the horrific social conditions that have developed in Detroit over the last 30 years. In 1993, he helped investigate and chaired the Citizens Inquiry into the Mack Avenue Fire, the result of Detroit Water Department's inhuman policy of water shutoffs. In 2010, Porter led a group of Detroit residents in creating the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS). In 2013, he chaired the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA and Pensions. Between 2015 and 2017, he focused on reporting and mobilizing workers against the bipartisan coverup of the lead poisoning of Flint's water supply.

Throughout his career, Porter has been continuously active in opposing identity politics and, above all, fighting to bring an international socialist Trotskyist perspective to the struggles of the working class.

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