What Is the Road Forward?

Black Liberation: A Mighty Force

The civil rights and Black liberation movements of the '50s and '60s were tremendous struggles involving tens of millions of people. Not since the Civil War have there been comparable struggles for power and force against the oppression of Blacks, with the masses of Black people, joined by significant numbers of whites, bringing to bear all the power and an end to the misery and repression they suffered.

Many victories and advances were won in the course of these struggles. These victories included partial steps toward integration among the masses of the American people and were an inspiration and spark for the struggle of other oppressed nationalities around the world. The Black struggle is a part of a whole.

In the '70s there has been an ebb in the massive wave of struggle. Many of the gains won have been snatched back by the rulers of this country and its allies. The overall goals, full equality for Blacks and the end to their oppression, as a people, have yet to be achieved. Black people, together with other oppressed minorities, are still subjected to "discrimination," the denial of democratic rights, violent police repression, suppression and mutilation of their cultures, exploitation and oppression as members of the working class, with the lowest positions, constantly high unemployment, the lowest paid jobs, the worst housing, the worst of health care and other social services." (From the Programme of the RCP)

This ebb in the Black liberation movement has not been because the expression of Black people has been ended or because the masses of Black people have ceased to have an struggle against it. The struggle for the emancipation of Black people came squarely up against the need for proletarian revolution to emancipate all the people exploited and oppressed by capitalism.

Again to quote the Programme of the RCP: "The struggle of Black people can and does deal powerful blows to the monopoly capitalists and to the various forms of discrimination and racist trash they foster to make profit and maintain their power. But by itself it cannot end Black people's oppression because the source of this oppression is capitalist rule. The Black people's struggle alone cannot resolve the basic contradiction of capitalism—between the working class and the capitalist class—the contradiction from which all of its ills derives."

Change from '60s

The struggles of the '50s and '60s helped expose the nature of capitalist rule. With the deepening of the crisis of the capitalist system, bringing intensified attacks by the imperialists on the masses of people of all nationalities, and developing resistance, the justice of the Black people today are taking place in a context where it is easier to see how everyone is getting messed over by the same forces, by the same rulers who grow rich off the labor of others and who benefit from keeping people down. Many of the struggles Black people are engaged in today involve workers of all nationalities.

The struggles of the '50s and '60s did open up some opportunities for a few Blacks. More Black people were able to enter professions; large numbers of Black students were able to get into college and the general economic situation at that time in the country, combined with the bourgeoisie's desire to divert the struggle away from a revolutionary direction, made it more possible for some Blacks to open small businesses and enterprises. "During this period, the ruling class, panicked by the powerful upsurge of the Black people and bringing down more savage repression against them, also rushed to build up bourgeois and petty bourgeois forces among them to put a brake on their struggle, and lead it into a dead-end. But because this could in no way change the basic conditions of the Black masses, it has mainly served to intensify class contradictions among Black people, as it becomes all the more clear that the Black bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie cannot lead Black people to liberation." (Programme of the RCP)

In an effort to buy off the Black liberation struggle, a lot of money was thrown into poverty programs and an effort was made to build up some Black politicians. Some of these programs, which were won through bitter struggle, did improve conditions for some Black people temporarily, but for a while they seemed to hold open the possibility of new opportunities. But on the whole, the conditions of life for the masses of Black people have gotten worse.

For instance, while the standard of living of working people overall has been under attack, the average income of the Black people has not kept up with that of the average white family income in 1970 to 584 in 1974. Black unemployment has improved to some extent, but it's still very high, and it's very hard to get a Black person a job on a decent wage. And for the majority of Blacks there is increasingly
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prosperity, the steps they take only lay the basis for

On the internationals scale, as they maneuver to get some advantage over their rival capitalists in the cut-throat competition that goes on in Europe and Asia, they have led to inter-imperialist wars where workers of different countries have been forced to fight and kill one another for the profits of the capitalists. And it always means greater exploitation of the working class and increased national oppression, of the people of the underdeveloped countries of the world as well as blacks and other minority nationalities in the U.S.

Capitalism the Source of Division

There is no denying that there are many divisions between blacks and whites in the U.S. But the basis for this is the capitalist system itself, which requires the capitalists to rip off and grow rich on the labor of the working class. For in order to move forward in the capitalist system of exploitation, there must be particular heavy exploitation of black workers, keeping them at the bottom, using them as a reserve of cheap labor and preventing the system from discriminating against all black people.

The capitalists keep blacks and whites divided in order to get them to focus their struggles against each other and to keep the class as a whole weak and divided. Among white workers, they promote myths and racist ideology which say that blacks are inferior and not fit to live with whites and don’t want to unite with whites. Because blacks are forced to live in overcrowded ghettos, for example, in the most run-down and dilapidated buildings, because the city governments often don’t watch over the buildings, because there are many areas in the ghettos, because there is tremendous unemployment and poverty in the ghettos and banks and home improvement loans and dreams refuse to make repairs, they say to white workers, “Look at how these people live!” They imply that whites are better than blacks and that blacks have “no desire to improve themselves.”

At the same time they try to get people to focus on black-on-black fights between blacks and to blame the system, the capitalist system, for the oppression of blacks and that in fact they benefit from it. This narrow nationalism, this racist therapy, is used to keep whites as responsible for their oppression, to ignore the fact that the masses of black and white people are fighting together against imperialism, against the racist government, against whites, against black workers, to fight against the ghettos and the black on black fighting.

But while narrow nationalism and national chauvinism (racism) are flip sides of the same bourgeois outlook, white chauvinism is the main obstacle to the masses in exposing the common enemy of blacks and whites and workers and building a unified struggle against it, because it leads directly to uniting with the ruling class in maintaining the system of national oppression that enslaves the masses of black people.

In the context of worsening conditions and in the course of struggle against continuing attacks against blacks, numbers of blacks, primarily from the petty bourgeoisie, seeing their hopes of “making it” fade, are radicalizing and becoming interested in the struggle against national oppression. Some of these people, who were able to make some advances in the past, have taken up a subjective position where they are struggling against things that divide their attacks against whites. They are essentially defeatist, both around waging the struggle against the real enemy and around building unity among blacks and white workers.

Pan Africanism

One of the forms this takes is Pan Africanism, which has attracted some politically active blacks who argue that blacks in the U.S. are an “African people” and should consider their struggle as part of the struggle in Africa, which is the central focus for people of African descent worldwide. (For a fuller treatment of Pan Africanism see “Communism & Pan Africanism: The U.S. in a Socialist Revolution & Black Liberation,” by John Henry, in The Communist, Theoretical Journal of the Central Committee of the RPC, Vol. 1, No. 2.)

This Pan Africanist line takes into account the common roots in Africa shared by blacks in the U.S. and it seeks to solve the question of who are the allies of the Black struggle in the U.S. by pointing to people who share these ancestral roots everywhere. But it ignores the real material interests that tie black people in the U.S. from the various African peoples—differences of language, culture, historical development—and denies the objective unity U.S. blacks have with workers of other nationalities as part of a single U.S. working class. It ignores the material facts that make it plain that people of African descent throughout the world are not one nation in any sense of the word that has any scientific meaning. It ignores the fact that black people in America, kidnaped from various tribal areas in Africa during the 16th and 17th centuries and brought to America as slaves, developed into a distinct and separate nation of people after the Civil War, during Reconstruc tion and its betrayal by the Northern bourgeoisie in alliance with the Southern capitalists of the South. In their struggle to maintain black identity the majority Black people were chained to the land as sharecroppers in the Black Belt area of the South (the old plantation areas) or to the land as laborers in the “Black Belt” because of the cause of the soil, excluded from the mainstream development of the rest of society and segregated by law into areas of oppression and violence. In this way Black people in the U.S. were forced into a course of national development that was different from the course of U.S. society as ohso obviously different from the peoples of Africa.

But this does not detract from Pan Africanists who, despite their narrow view of imperialism, actually deny its obj ective effects. They even deny the reality that black people in Africa have not developed as one nation, but numerous nations, based on the cold division of Africa over decades of imperialist domination.

From these real differences of development flow very different conditions of struggle. The people of Africa were face to face struggle principally against neocolonialism and white minority rule. For the countries and peoples of Africa were faced with an imperialist domination of independence and for Black people in the U.S., who face both oppression as a people and exploitation at the hands of the ruling class, the immediate objective of struggle is the overthrow of the U.S. capitalist ruling class and the establishment of social-ist society against national oppression takes place in this context.

Part of One Working Class

Beginning after World War 1 and accelerating after the beginning of World War 2, the exploitation and oppression of Blacks were radically transformed. Southern agriculture was increasingly mechanized and many sharecroppers were driven off the land to become wage laborers in the industrial cities of the North and the South. This transformation didn’t mean that Black people had achieved any real kind of oppression had ended, any more than the previous transition from slavery to sharecropping did. But it did mean that Blacks were in the majority, part of the U.S. working class, though still facing the whole system of national oppression, discrimination in hiring, on the job and in all aspects of life.

As the RCP Program states: “The ten millions of these nationalities who suffer discrimination and other forms of oppression are people as are, in their great majority, workers, part of the single U.S. proletariat. Their fight for equality and emancipation is bound to a boundless links with the struggle of the working class for socialism, and lends it great strength.”

Pan Africanists like Stokely Carmichael, once an ac tivist in the civil rights movement, think this is a false and that attempts to build the unity of Black and white to fight national oppression cannot happen, at least at this time. He calls on Black people in the U.S. to struggle to go back to Africa and to make the main focus of their struggle support for the liberation movement there. But how the hell are Blacks and white workers going to be united around the demand Blacks go back to Africa? About the only people he will be able to get are the more radical and class conscious Blacks and not the more moderate and growing support for the African liberation movement.

In essence Pan Africanism limits the revolutionary potential of the Black liberation movement by drawing people away from the main struggle against national oppression and class exploitation suffered by the masses of Blacks. And it not only turns people’s eyes away from the struggle against national oppression and class exploitation, it also often turns Black and white people in the U.S. can give real support to the liberation struggles in Africa by exposing and fighting the U.S. imperialists, can thereby support the peoples of the U.S. and the peoples of Africa.

Self-Determination Main Thrust

Another line that has surfaced to direct and create obstacles for the Black liberation movement is a line that puts forward that the main thrust of their struggle is and should be for self-determination, the right to form a separate nation independent from the U.S. This line has been pushed by a small group of intellectuals, usually found in various dogmatist and reformist groups calling themselves revolutionaries and “communi stes” who try to build a separate nation independent from the imperialists. These people are a nation and that this nation was forged and its people once lived primarily in the Black Belt. They too try to separate people from the real background and conditions of the struggle.

The Revolutionary Communist Party upholds the right of all nations to self-determination, the right to establish their own independent state, which is a key aspect of equality among nations, in order to unite work ers of all nationalities against imperialist domination. Black people were formed into a nation, and though now dispersed, that nation has not been eliminated and the right to establish their own independent state, their historic Black Belt homeland in the U.S. remains. But the RCP does not advocate such separation now or ever forever. The struggle must be to pressure the U.S. government to take steps that would be a step toward social. Does that not rule out the possibility that such advocacy might become necessary for the development of the proletarian revolution? But support for a national movement for self-determination is contingent on whether it helps to weaken and overthrow imperialism. And the RCP holds that the main demand raised by the masses of Black people today is to end segregation and the struggle of the whole working class for emancipation is indisputably linked together. But the development of this unity in struggle against the common imperialist enemy will not happen spontaneously or automatically. At every stage of the struggle the working class and its Party must isolate the main enemy to the greatest possible degree and unite all who can be united against it.

The material basis for building the unity of struggle is that all exploitation and oppression stem from the same source: the capitalist system. The fact that the majority of Black people are members of a single, multinational U.S. working class.

Unity Built Through Struggle

The ruling class recognized this potential for a pow erful revolutionary alliance between the masses of op pressed... Continued on Page 17
Philadelphia, April 9—a demonstration called by Driving Force and receiving community support, members of the Transportation Workers Union march demanding: A Decent Contract, Restore All Cuts in Services, No Fare Hikes!

Workers Go Back Bitter, Determined
43-Rule SEP Strike Sabotaged

In early May workers for the South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) voted to end their strike. They had held out for 43 days, five thousand strong, against the combined forces of SEPTA, Philadelphia’s notorious Mayor Rizzo, the Philly capitalists acting under the watch of the Chamber of Commerce, and the treachery of their own union officials. But after one and a half months on strike, the majority of workers, members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU)—by a vote of 2192 to 1929—felt that they could no longer continue the battle at this time.

Workers are near unanimous in denouncing the contract which doesn’t keep up with inflation, bring back the laid-off workers or do anything about the high pressure working conditions. While the defeat of the strike is a setback for the SEPTA workers, no one can take away from them the strength they displayed in striking, the blows they dealt the capitalists of Philadelphia, or the growing unity and organization forged in the course of the strike. They went back to work bitter but determined. As one old-timer put it the night the contract passed, “This is only the beginning.”

The strike began in March when the rank and file smashed through a settlement agreement granted upon SEPTA, Rizzo, and their union “representatives” with a resounding No vote that beat the contract by over 88 percent. The impetus for the No vote came from the Committee for a Decent Contract (CDC) and Driving Force, an ongoing rank and file fight against their oppression and mobilizing in leading many of the battles of SEPTA workers and helped to initiate the CDC. (See article, Revolution, May 1972.) From the beginning the strike hit hard at SEPTA and the whole class of exploiters in Philadelphia. Down-town merchants had their business slashed 50 to 70 percent, the drivers couldn’t sell their newspapers and sensitized the threat of a court injunction by their militance. And from the beginning the authorities in Philly attacked the strike with a vengeance.

The capitalist tried every trick in the book to demoralize the strikers and try to divide the transit workers off from the rest of the people of Philadelphia. There was even national TV coverage that accused the workers of being overpaid and blamed them for everything including the power outage and the downtown energy crisis (because of the increase in auto traffic). In the face of these attacks the union officials sat on the sidelines and watched the ringleaders go down. They talked it over at their meetings on the side of their mouths that “we’re standing firm” while waiting for the rank and file to start back to work. This sabotage was one of the biggest weapons in the hands of the enemy. The head of the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce put it this way: “We see this as a chance to recover the heart of the line because the union is divided.” It was divided all right—the rank and file who wanted to fight and the leadership that didn’t.

Rank and File Stands Up

A demonstration initiated by Driving Force united some community groups and others behind the strike and pointed the finger of blame directly at the authority for the strike and the degradation of the public transportation. Two weeks later, rank and file anger was mounting so sharply that the union leadership was forced to endorse a car call by the rank and file drivers from one depot. The caravan of 70 cars tied up traffic all along the main streets, then parked

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pressed Black people and the working class as a whole and they did everything in their power to drive a wedge between these struggles. But their system forces them to plant their boot ever harder on the necks of the people. As the crisis of their system worsens they are less and less able to bribe or buy off sections of the people.

More and more people are brought into struggle against them, and as this happens, it becomes more obvious that it is the same forces that are responsible for the oppression of Blacks and the exploitation of the working class. Building the fight against national oppression as part of the overall class struggle requires working “from two sides.” This involves mobilizing the masses of Black people into a struggle against their oppression and mobilizing the working class as a whole to take up this fight. In the process the working class and its Party must bring forward its own ideology and its common interest in fighting to end all exploitation and oppression. Historically in the U.S. unity between Blacks and white workers was built in the course of mighty struggle. The working class, led by the Communist Party when it was a revolutionary party of the working class, took up the fight against discrimination, against lynching and other terror the capitalists used against Black people in the North and the South.

In the famous case of the Scottsboro boys in the 30s, nine Black youths falsely accused of raping two white women, a struggle was built which became a symbol of the national oppression to which Blacks were subjected too. Hundreds of thousands of white workers, themselves suffering the effects of the great Depression, rallied under the leadership of the CP to demand their freedom.

Today, as millions are being drawn into struggle against the capitalists, and millions more are certain to come forward to fight for their lives, their families and their future, this is the period of struggle between the struggles of Blacks and other oppressed minorities and the working class movement at a whole will be built through the course of struggle based on people’s common experience of exploitation and oppression and the work of class conscious revolutionaries. These struggles are bound to be long. It is in this way that the proletariat as a whole and the masses of Black people will, at long last, win complete emancipation.

three lanes wide across city hall forcing the police to try futilely to reroute traffic in the center of town. 250 union members marched around the mayor’s office, forcing the mayor to concede to sending his right-hand man to the negotiating table.

Union President DeDonne beaked the call to mass march on City Hall three days later. Angry workers made him change the time of the march from 9 AM to 7 AM so they could be up before hour traffic. By all of sudden acting militant the union officials were able to reassure some control over the strike they had tried to reassert in the first place.

But DeDonne’s backbone was shown when Rizzo confronted him in the lobby of the Sheridan Hotel, over a caravan and the proposed pickets Rizzo had gone running after him to apologize and cancelled the march. He had stuck his head a little way out of Rizzo’s back pocket and the mayor shoved it back in.

The rank and file reacted with disgust at this act of spinelessness and the failure of the union officials to take up other tasks like building a strike fund (they even refused money offered by other unions). But while many rank and file workers responded to this treachery with more determination to build the fight, the overall effect of this, coupled with divisive activities of some opportunists aspiring to union office who tried to split the ranks and CDC, was to disorganize the struggle. For these reasons the rank and file was unable to carry through with the march after the union officials had caved into Rizzo and stabbed it in the back.

Many of the workers who voted to return to work did so because, as some put it, “we’ve got to regroup, throw out the old union leadership and vote in some new guys who will be in a better position to fight.” But while the upcoming union elections will be an important field of struggle and plans are underway for a rank and file slate, Driving Force has stressed the importance of not trying the struggle of the rank and file to the outcome of the election or relying on individual leaders.

SEPTA workers took some great steps forward in taking matters into their own hands and waging a blow for struggle against the whole system of union. No matter how hard the bosses try to sum up the strike as a dead loss, the workers can see the growing strength of the workers movement through the contract and in the strike itself. Before the strike workers knew only those in their same depot. Now the bosses in union offices have joined the SEPTA system. Now ties have been built between workers in different locations. Fighters have stepped forward and have identified each other.

SEPTA workers have also gained new insight into the nature of the enemy they fight. SEPTA workers saw how their enemy is organized far beyond the front of one company or even one city, how that enemy is backed up by the politicians and the press. In the course of this struggle SEPTA workers have come to see the need for the working class to organize and stand together, across industry lines and nationwide, as well as to continue organizing within their industry. In this spirit, some SEPTA workers joined with Driving Force to participate in the May Day march. SEPTA workers are now stepping up the call to form a national workers organization.

The SEPTA strike was an important face-off between the workers and the bosses taking the profits from their labor. It ended in a temporary defeat, but the sense of strength and common cause that grew in the last few months has not been eradicated and is bound to reassert itself.

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