

VVAW POLITICAL EDUCATION

BLACK LIBERATION IN AMERICA

Black people have throughout their 350 year history in North America been an oppressed people. Because of their unique historical development they are today the most advanced section in the anti-imperialist struggle here in this country.

I. SHORT HISTORY

Portugal was the first European country to begin plundering Africa for slaves and by the 16th century the rest of the colonial powers (England, Spain, the Netherlands) had joined in. In the North American colonies, once the white settlers had pushed back and subdued the native population, they turned to the slave trade to get the workforce for their newly aquired lands and plantations.

Slavery provided one stimulus for the development of capitalism in Europe and created the conditions for independant industrial development in North America. The slaves produced tobacco, cotton, and other goods primarily for the European market and only secondarily for the northern manufacturers. During this period of rapid industrialization there was no demand for black labor outside of slavery. After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, cotton became the single most important influence on the expansion of the economy. By 1859, cotton accounted for 60% of all U.S. exports. Most of the cotton went to the textile mills in Manchester, England and British manufactured goods were shipped to the southern planters in return. The effect of mercantile capitalism (based on trade rather than industry) was to separate the south from the national market. The northern industrialists realized that if they were to have control over the cotton production and the whole national market, they were going to have to smash the power of the southern planters.

Once capitalism had reached a certain stage in the U.S., slavery was no longer useful to the businessmen and it was becoming a hinderance to further industrial development. The emerging elite, J.P. Morgan, Rockefeller, Fisk, James Mellon and the like were itching to open the south to trade and investment. But their advance was blocked by

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
DATE 7/27/95 BY SP/BJL/LLP

3950

the southern slavocracy, the planters. It was becoming obvious that the two social systems--SLAVERY--and--CAPITALISM--were in conflict. The antagonisms came to a head with the Civil War. In 1861, Marx spoke of the revolutionary aspect of that war and pointed out that, "the two systems can no longer live peacefully side-by-side on the North American continent. It can only end by the victory of one system or the other."

Black people resisted bondage right from the start. More than 250 rebellions and insurrections have been documented from the colonial period onward. The Cherokee County Enquirer in Texas reported things this way in 1857, "Servile insurrections seem to be the order of the day in this state." When the Civil War broke out black people recognized the revolutionary potential of the struggle and took up arms. No less than 186,000 black people fought with the Union army during the war. And despite the efforts to divide up the races, the former slaves and freedmen fought side-by-side with white workers to protect the Union and bring an end to the oppressive conditions of slavery. It should also be recalled that the momentous struggle was not without international support. The English working class actively blocked England's entry into the war on the side of the Confederacy. Worker's meetings concerning the American Civil War took place all over England in 1862. At one such meeting at Manchester some 6000 workers passed a resolution urging Lincoln to end slavery immediately. The British ruling class did everything possible to convince the workers that victory for the Confederacy would mean more jobs and more prosperity. Yet, even though the conflict meant hard times for the workers who depended upon the shipment of cotton, they refused to be fooled by the British ruling class.

The Civil War ended with victory for the northern industrialists and capitalism. Slavery as a system was abolished. But, the military and moral defeat of the plantation owners was not sufficient to insure an end to the oppression of black people. Initially, though, in the period of Reconstruction, the northern businessmen agreed that black people should be given the vote. But they ignored the demands of blacks in the south that the plantations be seized and the land distributed to blacks and poor whites. This gave the cotton planters (the former slaveholders), time to fight back.

Almost immediately, they began to divide blacks against whites. Frederick Douglass spoke of this in a debate with President Johnson. "The hostility between the whites and blacks is easily explained. It has its root and sap in the relation of slavery and was incited on both sides by the cunning of the slavemasters. These masters secured their ascendancy over the poor whites and blacks by putting enmity between them. They divide both to conquer each..."

Federal troops were stationed in the south during reconstruction to ensure that the new social order was set up, and that black people were granted minimal democratic rights such as education and the vote. One of the authors of the Communist Manifesto, recognized the class forces operating during the period, predicted in 1862 that the northern businessman would make a deal with their former enemies, the planters, to halt the progress of black people and keep them oppressed as peasants. So after years of struggle and progress, the industrialists sought to stabilize the conditions in the south, at the expense of the blacks and poor whites. To accomplish this they agreed to let the former slaveholders run things in the south. With the army gone, the planters intensified their campaign of hate and terror against black people.

The industrialists of the south were beginning in the 1880's, but the demand was almost exclusively for white people. Black people were forced to work on farms, many as sharecroppers. The few industrial jobs which were open to blacks; coal mining, railroading, and lumbering; were located in the rural areas. In the north, at the turn of the century, the economy was expanding so rapidly it was necessary to import 15 million europeans to fill the jobs. Here, as in the south, black people were shut out of all but the most menial jobs.

With the onset of World War 1, immigration from Europe stopped. The industrialists had but one source left--the black labor reserve, in the southern countryside. This demand for black labor resulted in mass migrations out of the rural south and a dispersal throughout the urban north in 1915. The migration and the new type of employment transformed the class position of black people from PEASANT to WORKER. New industries, such as auto, steel, and meat-packing, opened up to blacks for the first time. With World War 2 the demand for black labor was rapidly accelerated. Now more and more people fled the countryside and moved to the cities, with the majority moving northward.

After the defeat of Reconstruction, the black nation was consolidated as a semi-feudal, semi-colonial nation, surrounded by the dominant white nation. Again, at that time most black people were in the countryside working as share-croppers, but when the economy changed, black labor was needed. The migration from the rural areas into the urban, from the south to the north, again, changed the class position of black people from peasant to worker. At the end of 1929, after the first wave of migration, four-fifths of the black population lived in the south. After W.W.2 nearly half the black population of the U.S. was dispersed outside the south, mostly in urban or metropolitan areas.

II. PRESENT SITUATION

Since W.W.2, the trend toward urbanization and proletarianization of the black nation has continued. Today we find large concentrations of blacks in the basic industries; auto, steel, mining, etc.. Watching the shifts change at A.O. Smith or American Motors is enough to prove this. In addition, black women make up a higher percentage of the female workforce than any other group. (percentage employed, not total numbers)

However, the saying, "last hired, first fired" still accurately describes the situation of black workers. In 1950 the official unemployment rate for whites was 4.9%, while it was listed as 9.0% for blacks. In 1970 the rate for whites was

listed as 4.5% and 8.2% for blacks. Because of figure juggling by the government, these figures are really a very low estimation. Today the position of black workers (especially with the growing economic crisis) is much less secure than even the already insecure position of white workers. Since blacks are concentrated in the unskilled jobs, their livelihoods are very much in danger.

This brings up the two aspects of black struggle in America. On the one hand, since black people are essentially workers, their struggles are intertwined with the struggles of whites and all other workers. On the other hand, since blacks form a special form of oppression both on and off the job, their struggles also have a national character.

" the evil system of colonialism and imperialism arose and thrived with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the black people."

----Mao Tse-Tung

WHAT IS A NATION?

A nation is primarily a community, a definite stable community of people. It is not racial or tribal, but is a historically constituted community of people.

A nation is a community of language, the entire nation speaks a common language.

A nation is a community of territory, manifested through an internal economic bond which welds the various parts of a nation into a single whole.

A nation is a community of economic life.

A nation is a community of psychological make-up which manifests itself in a community of culture.

"It must be emphasized that none of the above characteristics is by itself sufficient ~~to~~ to define a nation. On the other hand, it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be absent and the nation ceases to be a nation.--Stalin