

WHITE SUPREMACY IN U.S. HISTORY

by Ted Allen
April 28, 1973

A speech presented at the Guardian Forum April 28, 1973. Ted is presently engaged in writing a book setting forth a Marxist theory of United States history. He is also a member of Harper's Ferry Organization in New York City.

Comrades and friends, I speak tonight on behalf of my own Harper's Ferry Organization and of Sojourner Truth Organization of Chicago and I thank the Guardian Forum for the opportunity to present our views on the relationship between the question of proletarian revolution and Black liberation.

From the first we have made it clear that we would not be presuming to present here a theoretical analysis such as is possibly suggested in the title of this Forum. In the past it has been the Black Marxist-Leninists who have led in developing theory on this question. It is reasonable to assume that they do the same again. The importance of that work cannot be exaggerated. We ourselves are studying the question and we will be glad to share with others the results of our research and thinking.

We believe that three centuries of history show that the key to bourgeois domination in this country is white supremacy, as we have said before: The principal aspect of United States capitalist society is not merely bourgeois domination but bourgeois white supremacist domination. It follows from this that proletarian revolutionary strategy in the United States must direct the main blow at white supremacy. Historically the principal aspect of the US working class movement has been not merely opportunism but white racist opportunism. The principal aspect of opportunism in the US working class movement is not merely white supremacism, but the acquiescence of white workers in the system of white skin privileges imposed by the bourgeoisie.

It is *from that standpoint* that we can, without presuming, say a few things about the question of the theory of the Black nation. First, we are sure that whatever answer is ultimately accepted by the Black Marxist-Leninists, the central struggle will still be directed toward the overthrow of the bourgeois white supremacist order. Second, the theoretical position taken by the Communist Party (with the help of the Communist International) in 1929 and 1930 was a body blow to white supremacist ideology—whatever the eventual judgement may be made of it in other respects.[\[1\]](#) It removed the question from the sphere of "natural" history impervious to social action, and placed it as a phenomenon of social history, of class struggle. Now the proletarian movement had

in its hand a guide to escape from its congenital curse of white racism. For the first time an American vanguard party was to challenge the *white* workers to their primary proletarian duty to "seize by the throat" the beast of white chauvinism, the historic despoiler of revolution in this country. Third, experience showed that under ruling class ideological pressure the tendency developed to forget the part of the resolution on fighting white chauvinism and to do essentially as the Socialists had done before: leave everything to the magic solution of self-determination which would come with socialism. This subverted the intention of the resolution and is a problem that must be kept in mind in the discussions as they develop today. Fourth, we think that to speak of a "dispersed nation" is a contradiction in terms. Parts of a nation dispersed outside its homeland to some other part of the territory under the rule of the same oppressor nation, is a national minority. This is not a mere question of precise terminology it is a question of historic tasks and perspectives. For a nation the right of self-determination means the right to separate and establish its own government on its own territory, to be free to organize its internal economy and to dispose of its relations with other nations according to its own best advantage. Obviously, these are perspectives not appropriate to a national minority. To characterize a people as a dispersed nation is by implication to make true self-determination as a nation impossible for them. It restricts the meaning of self-determination to the perspective of autonomy in secondary questions and that dependent upon the agreement of the oppressor nation or the ex-oppressor nation.

The study of the earliest colonial pre-history of the US is as meaningful for an understanding of our present condition as the re-examination of early childhood experiences may be for understanding of adult behavior. Let us therefore start at the beginning, early colonial Virginia, Maryland, and South Carolina.

The capitalist system of production was in force from the beginning in these colonies. The central problem of the plantation bourgeoisie was what form of labor was best for its needs. It could not work the land under a feudal system of hereditary bondage to the landlord's ground. That would not work because of the unlimited availability of free land on the frontier. Wage labor was not feasible because it would be so costly in relation to wages in England as to lower profits below the critical point for colonial development.

The method struck upon was unpaid labor for a fixed term, usually five to seven years. To get an adequate supply of labor was an enormous problem to the planters. After the English Revolution of 1640-1660 demand for labor expanded in England and limited the supply of English labor available to the colonies, the planters turned increasingly to African labor.

Up to the 1680's little distinction was made in the status of Blacks and English and other Europeans held in involuntary servitude. Contrary to common belief the status of the Blacks in the first seventy years of Virginia colony was not that of racial, lifelong, hereditary slavery, and the majority of the whites who came were not free. All bondmen stood somewhere 'midway between freedom and absolute subjection."[\[2\]](#) Their common lot led them to make common cause and to a qualitatively different relationship between Black and white labor than what it came to be later. Blacks and whites ran away together. Black and white servants intermarried. In 1661 Black and Irish servants joined in an insurrectionary plot in Bermuda.[\[3\]](#) In 1663 .in Virginia former soldiers of Cromwell's defeated New Model armies who had been transported to

servitude plotted an insurrection for the common freedom of Black, white and Indian servants.^[4] The leaders of Bacon's rebellion in 1676 enlisted Black and white bond-servants to bolster the faltering revolt. "Bacon's followers having deserted him he had proclaimed liberty to the servants and slaves which chiefly formed his army when he burnt Jamestown the Virginia colonial capital."^[5] Upon defeat of the rebellion, Capt. Thomas Grantham, acting on behalf of the Governor, was by a policy of conciliation able to arrange the surrender of a part of the rebel forces at a place called West Point. "Grantham then went over to the south bank of the York and marched a few miles to Colonel John West's brick house, which served as the chief garrison and magazine of the rebels. *There he found four hundred English and Negroes in arms.* These clamored that Grantham had betrayed them in causing the surrender of West Point ' and thereupon some were for shooting me, and others for cutting me to pieces.' Grantham had to talk fast, promising them all par don and freedom for the Negroes and English servants, considerably exceeding the powers granted him by Berkeley...Most of the men he persuaded to *disperse to their homes, but eighty Negroes and twenty English refused to deliver up their arms...*"^[6] Bacon's quarrel with Governor Berkeley was a contradiction within the bourgeoisie. Those nearer the frontier, such as Bacon, sought to advance themselves by an immediate war of extermination against the Indians, who numbered about four hundred in several tribes. The "establishment" had another, more gradual approach. The Black and white bond-servants exploited this contradiction within the ranks of their masters to strike for their freedom.

This was class struggle: the planters strove to lengthen the period of servitude and the servants did what they could to shorten it and to secure their rights. From the planters' standpoint the ideal servant would be one whose term of service would be for life. But the urban bourgeoisie in England had rallied the armed support of the lower classes there to win their revolution. It would have been impossible to secure that support and at the same time be sending shiploads of such to life-long slavery in the colonies. The most-ready source of labor was supplied by the African slave trade and so the main source of surplus value became the exploitation of Black labor. But what proved to be most important was not that the mainland planters turned to slave labor, but that in doing so the bourgeoisie drew the color line between freedom and slavery. The decision cast the mold in which has been stamped three centuries of American history.

The turn to Black labor became for the planter bourgeois: a special reason for the continued import of white servants— to keep the Blacks in subjection, who were as prone, if not more so, to run away and rebel as white labor. Thus, on December 10, 1691, the House of Commons approved a petition of "merchants, masters of ships, planters and others, trading to foreign plantations... setting forth that the plantation cannot be maintained without a considerable number of white servants, as well to keep the Blacks in subjection, as to bear arms in case of invasion."^[7] And "they were really more important" for the former than for the latter.^[8] Even though the principal reason for the continued importation of white servants was the need for their productive labor. "Protection against a Negro insurrection (writes Warren B. Smith p. 30) was secured in two ways: first by limitations and restrictions especially designed to prevent slaves from congregating: second, by providing a proportion of white men sufficient to defeat conspiracies or outbreaks. Bills (in the South Carolina Assembly)'for the better security of the inhabitants of this province against the insurrections and other wicked attempts of negroes and other slaves' alternate with those "for the better securing the Province from Negro insurrections and encouraging of poor (white) people by employing them in Plantations."^[9] Why was it that

non-slaveholding whites, especially servants still imported in large numbers as productive labor, assisted in upholding and maintaining the slave status of the Blacks? Why did they participate in the inconvenient and dangerous slave patrols?

The answer lies not in feelings of racial superiority – that these became dominant is true, but that they had not been enough is proven by the early years of united action. It was the bourgeoisie's deliberately contrived policy of differentiation between white and Black labor through the system of white skin privileges for white labor that allowed the bourgeoisie to use the poor whites as the instrument of social control over the Black workers.

With deliberateness, the planters wrote their policy into law. In 1682, Virginia law made color the mark of slavery and hence made freedom a privilege of a white skin. In 1705 the distinctions between white servants and Black slaves were fixed: Black slaves were to be held in life long hereditary slavery and whites for five years, with many rights and protections afforded to them by the law. One of the very first white skin privileges was the exemption of white-servant women from work in the fields and the requirement through taxes to force Black children to go to work at twelve, while white servant children were excused until they were fourteen.

The capitalist planters in this way made white supremacy the keystone of capitalist rule in this country where it has remained ever since and they fixed it in place with the mortar of race privileges for white-skinned labor, privileges which left white labor poor, exploited and increasingly powerless with respect to their rulers and exploiters.

Once the reason for the failure of the Black slave revolt is understood, the reason for the general failure of Proletarian challenge to bourgeois power in this country is also understood. "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded."[\[10\]](#) The man who said that wrote to Abraham Lincoln in January 1865. "The workingmen of Europe," said Karl Marx, "feel sure that as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American anti-slavery war will do for the working classes."[\[11\]](#)

Now more than a century later the Ascendance of the working class in the US seems less imminent today to us than it did to Marx then. The error Marx made in that prediction was not his fault, but ours. He understood the fatal paralyzing effect of the white-skin privileges on white workers who do not repudiate them, but we did not. "While the (white) workingmen, the true political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic, while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master, they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor, or to support their European brethren on their struggle for emancipation."[\[12\]](#) Instead of making common abolitionist cause with Black labor, as Marx knew, the organized white worker had fallen in behind the leadership of the industrial bourgeoisie who no more wanted abolition of Black slavery than did the slaveholders of the South. White labor turned its back on abolition and enlisted under the banner of a whites-only Free Soilism.

Now Marx hoped that "this barrier to proletarian solidarity had been swept off by the red sea of Civil War." But the bourgeoisie, now led by its industrial division, sealed in place again the

loosened keystone of power, with new mortar of white-skin privileges for white labor in land distribution, immigration, and industrial employment. Thus, it came about that the (white) National Labor Union which reached an affiliated membership of half a million or more after the war under the leadership of a stone white chauvinist William H. Sylvis, pretended interest in the Black worker, but adamantly opposed Black reconstruction of the South and the opening of the "whites only" trades to Black workers. Thus, was a second seal put on the cause of the US proletariat--and on its hopes for a labor party, the eight-hour day, a democratic land policy, and a fair immigration policy.

Many people on the Left consider the 1930's as a period of great triumphs of working-class struggle and generally regard it as a standard to be emulated today.

Others point to the aftermath, the decades of war, cold war reaction, brought up to date by Wallace and Nixon. They say that basically, the events of the thirties added up to a defeat for the proletariat because the bourgeoisie was able to use reforms to blunt and turn aside any serious threat to their power. "Roosevelt saved capitalism," they say.

Both views are in error, in our opinion, although the first is the more common and more serious error. There is nothing wrong with revolutionaries advancing demands for reforms, or in fighting for them or in winning the fights. What we must always do is to be sure that in accepting our hard-won concessions we use the fighting courage gained by that victory to attack with greater vigor the limits and conditions that the ruling class has set against further concessions.

The 1930's opened with a ringing call to struggle against white chauvinism. "The struggle for equal rights for Negroes (said the Communist Party resolution of 1930) must certainly take the form of common struggle by the white-and black workers...it is the duty of the white workers to break the walls of segregation and jim crowism which have been set up by the bourgeois slave-market mentality... They, the white workers, must boldly jump at the throat of the 100 per cent bandits who strike a Negro in the face. This struggle will be the test of real international solidarity of the white workers." Now an American working class party had taken up as its aim the principle that DuBois had set forth in 1913: "The Negro problem is the great test of the American Socialist."[\[13\]](#)

In the early thirties the Communist Party held to this resolve in its mass work in the South and in the North. But in; the name of anti-fascist unity it converted itself into an auxiliary of the New Deal and strengthened the tendency which did the same for the rapidly expanding industrial union movement. "It is quite obvious," said Eleanor Roosevelt of her husband, "that in his relationship with Congress he had to hold the Southern vote..."[\[14\]](#)

The Communist Party and the working-class movement didn't have to "hold the Southern vote;" that was Roosevelt's problem, not theirs. But they made it theirs, for to do otherwise would mean to risk the concessions offered by the New Deal— all of which were cast in the mold of white-skin privileges. "Beginning in 1936 there is little said about white, chauvinism in the official statements" of the Party (Squire, p.64) and, in the South, instead of being glad that black workers "were more easily organized than whites," the AFL and CIO organizers backed away, since, "to organize Negro workers first was to risk alienating the whites."[\[15\]](#)

The one great problem facing the workers in the 1930's was unemployment. The gap between the unemployment rate of Black and white in the North was 75% in 1930, 115% in 1937 and 133% in 1940. In the South where 80% of the Black people lived, the gap had increased from zero to about 15%^[16] Where "labor's greatest victories" were won, the white-skin privileges of white labor were increased the most. As Dr. E Franklin Frazier puts it: "The New Deal policy of protecting the (white) worker's right to organize and the Negro's right to employment were often in conflict."^[17] How that conflict was resolved is seen in the figures just given.

The accent on the white-skin privileges of white labor continued in the post war period. In 1940 the national Black unemployment rate was 20% higher than the white rate.^[18] By 1952 the national Black unemployment rate had become double that of the white rate and has averaged even higher in the years since.^[19]

The post war degeneration of the trade union and political aspects of the U.S. working class movement was not caused by the "betrayal of the New Deal" by Cold War Democrats; rather it was the inevitable consequence of the white chauvinist opportunism dominant in the days of "labor's" apparent greatest advances. White labor's chauvinist indifference to national oppression of Black labor in the United States in the depression-and-war period foreshadowed the general support given by the U.S. trade union movement to the efforts of U.S. imperialism to repress national liberation struggles in the Philippines, Korea, Malaya, Guatemala, Iraq, Bolivia, Venezuela, Indo-China, the Congo, Palestine, Columbia, Cuba and elsewhere.

This post war period of utter opportunist degeneracy of the "labor", movement, however, has been the era of glorious resurgence of the liberation struggles of the Black people in the United States, as well as of similar struggles of the Puerto Rican, Chicano, Indian and other oppressed non-white peoples in the state territory of the U.S. This dramatic and instructive contrast is a manifestation of the fact that World War n ushered in the period of the great national liberation struggles of the oppressed nations and peoples of the colonial and semi-colonial world, headed by the Chinese and Cuban revolutions.

This Black liberation struggle not only fought its own battles but resurrected the revolutionary movement among whites, particularly the youth—and what is most important-- resurrected it on the basis of racial solidarity as principle number one.

The ruling class under stood the seriousness of this situation. It reacted with a combination of concessions and repression. But the trouble with the repression was the damage to the image of "the leader of the free world". The trouble with the concessions was even more serious because they could not be continued without loosening the keystone of bourgeois power. For these concessions by their very nature had to chip away at the white-skin privileges of white labor in employment, housing education, etc.

The bourgeoisie found a way to choke off the concessions and reverse the trend without the National Guard. But this could only be done by an overt appeal to white racism on the part of the white workers. This was the function of the Wallace movement and its eventual effective merger with Nixonism. Whether it was changing the color of the corpses in Vietnam (as Bunker said of

Vietnamization) or "defense" of the white neighborhood, this appeal was specifically aimed at the white youth and the white worker on the basis of their racially privileged situation.

What is essential to understand, especially now, is that Nixon's "southern strategy" is basically FDR's "Southern vote" brought up to date and applied in a tactically different situation. This fact is of key importance because the wheel is bound to turn again.

The thirty-year boom is running down. The bankruptcy of the U.S. dollar reveals that for all the talk of an oil shortage, the world market is overfilled with commodities. The capitalists are trying to get by with a program of austerity, keeping the white workers employed while cutting down on their standard of living. But there are limits to this process. The payments on the house and car and school taxes must be made. And the spreading of work by cutting out overtime can go only so far, given the state of technological development prevailing. A deterioration of the conditions of the white workers' lives and some degree of radicalization of them is sure to come.

Whether this impending crisis and resulting radicalization of the masses produces a mass proletarian class-conscious movement suited to its historic tasks, will depend first of all on how well the vanguard elements take to heart the lessons of the thirties and of previous crises. It is our great advantage as compared with preceding generations of revolutionaries in this country that we live in the epoch of world-wide national liberation revolt. Thus, situated in history we can better understand the lesson stated by C.L.R. James, in *Negroes and American Democracy* (1956):

"Every white worker, whether he knows it or not, is being challenged by every Negro to take the steps which will enable the working peoples to fulfill their historic destiny of building a society free of domination of one class or of one race over another."

Opponents of our line make two main but contradictory arguments. On the one hand they say that this will split the working class by alienating the white workers. On the other hand, at the same time denounce racism as the number one enemy of the working class.

We believe that it is impossible to hold both of these positions at once. The reason is that in every struggle against racism the moment of truth must come.

It is all right to fight for a greater share of jobs for Blacks, but can that be done when white workers are being laid off?

It is all right to organize a plant on the basis of a strong stand against job discrimination against Black workers, but when the organizers go after the white workers will they refuse to soft-pedal that issue?

It is all right to be for better housing and schools for Blacks but when the mortgage-ridden, speeded-up, moonlighting white worker is being talked to will the organizer ask him to stand out for an open community—property values be damned?

Unless we can answer yes to such critical questions which sooner or later must come down, then we are not really fighting racism, but once again taking the bourgeois road of "the Southern vote" and the "Southern strategy." In Shaw's words, "the direction of least resistance rather than line of greatest advantage." ("Man and Superman," Act III)

Socialist revolution is not possible where the majority of the workers do not want it and workers who want white-skin privileges do not want socialism. God knows, our experience at repudiation is all too limited, but like a non-swimmer in deep water we have to begin to move and learn to swim by saving our lives.

A proletarian party not based on this principle cannot grow, survive and win in this country.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The Communist" Feb. 1931.[\[return to text\]](#)
2. James Curtis Ballagh, *A History of Slavery in Virginia* (John's Hopkins Press 1902 Johnson Reprint Corp.1968) p.31[\[return to text\]](#)
3. W. N. Sainsbury, *Calendar of State Papers, America & West Indies: 1661-1668*, Colonial Papers, Vol. 19 No. 47, (London 1880) William Frith Williams, *An Historical Account of the Bermudas* (London 1848) pp.41-42. Edward D. Neill, *Virginia Carolorum* (Albany 1869) p. 296n.[\[return to text\]](#)
4. *op. cit.* pp. 295-296. Henning, William W. (digest of) *Virginia, The Statistics at Large of*, 11 vols. (Richmond 1799-1814) Vol. II. *Virginia Magazine of, History and Biography* Vol. 15 (July 1907-1908) pp. 38-43[\[return to text\]](#)
5. Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel*[\[return to text\]](#)
6. *op. cit.* p.88[\[return to text\]](#)
7. *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliament Respecting North America*, Ed. Leo Francis Stock (Washington DC 1924) 5 vols. Vol II p.46[\[return to text\]](#)
8. *White Servitude in Colonial South Carolina*, (University of South Carolina Press (Columbia) 1961) p. 30. Warren B. Smith.[\[return to text\]](#)
9. *ibid.* parenthesis added.[\[return to text\]](#)
10. Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. I,(New York: Modern Library) Ch. X, Sect. 7, p. 329.[\[return to text\]](#)
11. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Civil War in the United States*, (New York: International Publishers, 1937) p.281.[\[return to text\]](#)
12. *ibid.*[\[return to text\]](#)

