

## Letter to Editor

New York

To the Militant Editor:

Ever since I read your coverage of the Atlanta RYM conference (the article was rampant with mistakes and distortions), I've been wondering why you always put quotation marks around the term "white-skin privilege." So I decided to find out what Trotsky thought about the matter and came across this:

"We must say to the conscious elements of the Negroes that they are convoked by the historic development to become a vanguard of the working class. What serves as a brake on the higher strata? It is the privileges, the comforts that hinder them from becoming revolutionists. It does not exist for Negroes." (Emphasis added — C. D.) Leon Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*, p. 43.

It seems to me that if we thought that certain privileges and comforts were hindering white working men and women from becoming revolutionists, then we ought to develop a program for whites to do something about it, in addition to supporting the right of self-determination for black Americans. It would certainly seem foolish of us to indicate to black Americans that whites do not enjoy certain privileges in relation to them.

Carl Davidson

## In reply

Dear Carl,

I'm sorry about the delay in publishing and responding to your letter. Problems of space and time were responsible for this.

I'm sorry too that you didn't indicate in what way you thought our report on the Atlanta RYM convention was "rampant with mistakes and distortions." As you know, we were barred from covering the convention and this made for difficulties. There were two factual errors which our reporter called to our attention (see letters page), and we were glad to correct them.

To get to your central point. The reason we put quotation marks around the words "white-skin privilege" is because RYM's use of the term is so completely ambiguous as to render it almost meaningless.

We did not put the words in quotes as a means of denying that white workers enjoy certain privileges which are denied to Blacks. The fact that capitalism has granted white workers certain very real privileges which it denies Blacks is a fundamental reality of American society. What is needed is to analyze that reality and develop a meaningful strategy for coping with it. Thus far, RYM has done neither. RYM has not spelled out just what it considers these privileges to be or how the workers will be persuaded to "renounce" them, much less what the actual content of such renunciation would be.

### Do-gooder approach

To the extent that I can deduce RYM's position from various statements, I think it smacks strongly of a do-good, social worker approach to combatting racism. It echoes the liberal theme that the problem is lodged in the hearts and minds of men, not in the social system.

In saying this I am not suggesting that you share such a view. After receiving your letter I went back to the debate you had with Greg Calvert on this question in the *Guardian* of last Nov. 15. I think you had the better of the argument in refuting Calvert's notion that white workers enjoy not privilege but only the "illusion" of privi-

lege. At the same time I think the political conclusion you arrived at is incorrect. I will return to this.

But first of all, what does it mean to speak of renouncing privilege? This class society is based upon and permeated with a multitude of socially damaging privileges. Corrupting privileges are used to help keep white workers pitted against Black; Blacks against other oppressed minorities; union workers against unorganized; skilled against unskilled; young against old; men against women; etc., etc. Some of these privileges are in fact illusory. Others are very real.

Clearly, privilege plays its biggest role in terms of white vs. Black. Whites enjoy access to homes, schools, hospitals, recreation facilities, and jobs from which Blacks are barred. For Black people, forced to do the hardest, dirtiest work at the lowest pay and being "last hired, first fired," the job issue is particularly vital.

### Distorted view

But the RYM approach tends to twist the nature of the privilege enjoyed by whites. It bolsters the false notion that white workers are privileged not only in relation to Blacks, but that they are privileged in the absolute sense.

Nothing could be further from the truth. White workers are getting more than Blacks. But they aren't getting more than they need, deserve or could have. The fact that white workers living under the exploitation, alienation and socially debilitating conditions of American capitalism can be regarded as privileged only underscores the extent to which Blacks are oppressed and exploited.

Further, I think, the RYM approach serves more to alienate than win white workers. It inadvertently lends credence to the reactionary, lying propaganda that Black people are trying to solve their problems at the expense of whites and that white workers are justified in feeling threatened by Blacks.

But to repeat, in saying this I am not suggesting that white revolutionaries must be anywhere else than in the forefront of the fight against racism in the white community. It simply means that the job won't be done by abstract moral preaching, or relying on the emergence of a mass movement for the renunciation of privilege.

White revolutionaries can and must educate the maximum number of white workers on the nature of racism as a tool of capitalism in keeping white and Black oppressed. They must help make white workers understand that every blow struck by Blacks against the system redounds to the benefit of all who seek a better life.

Such an educational process in the white community is essential. But it is not a substitute for the most educational process of all—the self-action of the Black people for their emancipation. In short-run terms the Black struggle may lead some white workers to feel threatened. And, indeed, in some cases their particular privileges may be.

### How to win friends

But as white workers come to see the need for fighting the system—as their conditions of life will inevitably drive them to—they will come to respect and even follow the lead of those already in the forefront of the fight against that system. (Consider how deeply white student radicals and the various Third World movements have been affected by the example of the Black struggle and how it has affected their struggles. They didn't begin as "natural" allies of the Blacks.)

I stress this point because I'm convinced that the key to Black-white unity in struggle rests not so much with the attitude of whites as with the strength of Blacks. Capitalism will in fact be abolished by an alliance of white and Black. But that alliance will be forged on the basis of the Blacks developing their own independent power, as they are now trying to do.

Experience has taught Black people that the road to liberation lies in their capacity to struggle for what is due them—not in waiting for whites to renounce their privileges.

This does not go counter to the need for revolutionary Black-white unity and alliance within the struggle. To the contrary, it is the indispensable prerequisite



# How will whites overcome 'skin privilege'?

for it. As Malcolm explained, before there can be Black-white unity there must first be Black unity. This is the only insurance that such an alliance will not be one more deal where one partner in the alliance is more equal than the other.

Education and propaganda are key tasks for those in the revolutionary vanguard. But such activity is effective only if it is not scholastically conceived. Profound, mass changes in consciousness are achieved only when education and propaganda are carried on in the context of a living struggle. Vanguard ideas win broad acceptance to the extent that masses of people have the opportunity to consider them not in the abstract but can relate them to struggles in which they are actively engaged.

### Calvert debate

I make this particular point because, as I indicated earlier, I think you arrived at an incorrect conclusion in the *Guardian* debate with Greg Calvert. In that article, you concluded: "... until

the mass of white working people—and white radicals as well—begin understanding how the selfish advantages and prerogatives based on their whiteness constitute an albatross around their neck and the root of their present oppression, the possibilities of a socialist revolution may remain elusive."

I think this is wrong on several counts. In a sense, it is a variation of the argument that Blacks have to wait, that they can't wage an effective fight until white workers are also in motion. To me that is the meaning of saying there can be no meaningful revolutionary perspective until whites *first* renounce their privileges.

That isn't how struggle develops in real life: Rather than the shedding of their privileges being a precondition for the struggle, it is far more likely that the shedding process will take part in the course of and as a result of the struggle.

### Powerful stimulus

And, as I've indicated, I think the Black struggle itself will prove a powerful stimulus to getting white workers into actions, as it already has with students and Third World minorities.

We will see in this country the emergence of powerful Black and Brown political movements independent of and in opposition to the capitalist parties. This, in turn, will give great impetus to developing independent political action by white labor.

And key to this entire process is the work of Marxists, Black, Brown and white in building a multi-national revolutionary socialist party capable of coordinating, unifying and leading the struggle against the system.

Politically conscious whites will not permit the conservatizing effects of privilege to impede their participation in the revolutionary process. And they must never adapt in any way to the racist prejudices of their fellow whites. But to be meaningful, their antiracist efforts, I am convinced, must be concretized in building a mass party of socialist revolution.

Fraternally,  
Harry Ring