

# Racism—The Cutting Edge of the Bourgeois Offensive

by the Line of March Editorial Board

An examination of U.S. monopoly capital's current offensive affirms one elementary maxim: the bourgeoisie knows how to count.

It can count dollars; and it can count noses.

In terms of dollars, the bourgeoisie knows that it cannot finance a massive program of militarization and still maintain the same level of expenditures for such things as welfare, education, health care, old-age pensions, and other social services it has heretofore conceded to the working class in order to obtain social peace. The bourgeoisie also knows that it cannot enhance its own profitability, indeed reverse a long term decline in the rate of profit, without cutting into both the direct and the social wage of the working class.

When it comes to counting noses, the bourgeoisie is well aware that it is a minority class in society, one that grows smaller every day. This sobering fact constantly shapes the manner in which the bourgeoisie conducts the class struggle. Recognizing its vulnerability, the bourgeoisie rarely tries to join battle with the entire working class at once or to the same degree. Rather, it mounts its assaults on the working class sector by sector, playing on the contradictions already operating within a stratified working class in an attempt to enlist certain sectors on behalf of its program.

To be sure, Ronald Reagan has enveloped this simple exercise in bourgeois calculation in a maze of rhetoric about "supply-side economics" and "getting big government off the people's backs." But behind such euphemisms rests a stark reality: *The U.S. bourgeoisie is presently attempting to impose a racialized social austerity program upon the U.S. working class. Its two-fold purpose is to finance the most extensive*

*peace-time military build-up in U.S. history and to give a swift economic boost to the faltering position of U.S. capital.*

To accomplish this, Reagan has devised an economic program composed of three interconnected parts:

- a massive *increase* in government expenditures, almost exclusively directed toward military spending;

- a massive tax break for business and the wealthy, one which will result in a significant decrease in government revenue;

- and, as the inevitable consequence of the above, a massive reduction in government expenditures in the areas of public welfare and social services.

This much is readily obvious. How it will be accomplished politically within the confines of a highly developed bourgeois democracy remains to be seen. How will a consensus be forged for such a blatantly anti-working class program in a country where the working class constitutes the vast majority of the population?

Nowhere is the political immaturity of the fragmented U.S. communist movement more evident than in our failure to sharply illuminate this burning political question of the class struggle today. Yet here too the answer should be quite obvious, and is even readily admitted by the bourgeoisie's own press. *The capitalist program of social austerity is orchestrated precisely to intensify the already severe racial stratification in U.S. society.* On that basis, the bourgeoisie calculates that its program can be made acceptable to a "white consensus" among the population sufficiently large to drive a deep political wedge into the working class movement, assuring the austerity program's successful implementation.

It is only by firmly grasping this crucial point that communists have the basis to lead a working class resistance capable of defeating the bourgeoisie's program. That this is indeed the key to such resistance becomes clear as we examine the racist character of the bourgeoisie's present offensive in more detail.

### I. The Racist Attack

Obviously, the Reagan austerity budget does not confine its cutbacks solely to minorities. All sectors of the working class are compelled, to one or another degree, to "tighten their belts." Yet the racist edge to the capitalist austerity program is there just the same, structured into it in two overlapping but distinct ways. First, the budget reductions are designed to impact hardest those programs benefitting the least stable, least protected strata of the working class—disproportionately made up of minorities—while programs whose benefits go largely to the more stable strata—overwhelmingly white—are protected from cuts. Second, minorities are attacked directly as minorities through spending cuts and

policy adjustments affecting programs which explicitly address racial discrimination in the U.S., such as affirmative action and desegregation regulations and enforcement. And as a grim reminder that this racist orchestration is not simply a statistical portrait, the bourgeoisie is consciously preparing its police and military apparatus for the spontaneous resistance which it expects to encounter in minority communities in response to this program.

Even such a bourgeois paragon of understatement as the *New York Times* has been forced to recognize the racial edge to the President's program. With the headline *Blacks Would Feel Extra Impact From Cuts Proposed By President*, the *Times* (June 2, 1981) documents in painstaking detail the exact mechanisms by which this "extra impact" is insured. We will cite some of the most relevant examples here.\*

*Food Stamps:* This program has been cut by 25%. One major reduction was effected by making ineligible all those whose income is over 130% of the official "poverty" level. The "poverty" level is defined as an annual income of \$4,275 for an individual, \$5,660 for a couple, and \$8,400 for a family of four. Thus, a couple with an annual income of \$7,400 or a family of four with an annual income of \$11,000 would no longer be eligible for food stamps. Approximately 35% of all food stamp recipients are Black. It is further estimated that of those made ineligible for food stamps by the new regulations, 25% are Black.

*Welfare:* The heart of what is usually called "welfare" is the federal program for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Blacks constitute 44% of those who receive aid under this program. It is therefore safe to hold that the great majority of welfare recipients are minorities. The budget for this program which provides direct aid to the most needy has been cut 11%. The major impact of these reductions will be felt by working mothers. For instance, a working mother with two children whose current earnings come to \$294 per month presently receives a total of \$410 in supplementary welfare income, mostly AFDC payments, achieving a monthly total disposable income of \$704. Under the new budget, this same mother would have a monthly total disposable income of \$533. A mother earning \$457 per month with a total disposable income of \$754 per month would be cut to \$555 a month. Non-working mothers will also be hit. Thus, a mother of dependent children with a present disposable income of \$542 a month will now receive only \$518 a month.

*Housing:* Not as publicized as most other budget items, cutbacks in

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\*The following examples demonstrate the impact of Reagan's major budget cuts only on Blacks and not on Latinos or other minority peoples. In all cases, therefore, the racialized impact of the reductions are actually much *more* substantial than the *New York Times* figures show.

expenditures for publicly assisted housing add up to the single biggest exercise in budget-slashing. With reductions of up to some \$54 billion over the next four years, cut-backs in this area register some 35%. These cuts will be felt in three ways. First, there is a sharp reduction in the number of new publicly subsidized housing units that will be built. Second, the level of services presently provided to public housing will be reduced. Finally, and most importantly, present tenants will be hit with a rent increase. At this time, tenants pay 25% of their income for rent. This will go up to 30%. Who does this program affect? Not only are more than one third of all present tenants in public housing Black, but those most desperately in need of new housing are also principally minorities. In addition, a large number of public housing employees—many of whom will be laid off and others who will not receive even cost-of-living pay raises—are also minority workers.

*CETA:* The Reagan budget virtually wiped out the CETA (Comprehensive Employment Training Act) program which supplied jobs to unemployed teenagers. Funds for this program were slashed by over 90%. Roughly one-third of all CETA employees are Black. The counterpart to the scuttling of CETA is Reagan's proposal to modify minimum wage regulations. Described as providing an opportunity to find employment for jobless teenagers, the proposal is a telling example of how capital utilizes the unemployed industrial reserve as a labor pool accessible both for extra exploitation in its own right and as a depressant on the wage scales of the working class in general. The political point is that those who would principally be forced into sub-minimum employment would be minority youth.

*Unemployment Protection:* The Reagan budget reduces payments for extended unemployment insurance by 15.4%. Official Black unemployment is now counted at 15%; but if previous patterns continue (and there is no reason to believe they will not), any increase in joblessness will affect Blacks at a substantially higher rate than whites. This is due to seniority regulations which clearly favor whites who, as a group, enjoy substantially longer job continuity. As a result, the impact of this cut on Black workers will be much more than the 15% Black unemployment figure would seem to indicate.

Of course, the statistical details about these budget cuts cannot tell the whole story of their racist character. In general, Black and other minority families will feel each and every reduction much more sharply than their white counterparts in the same income brackets. The reality of racism in the U.S. is that it is an all-sided, pervasive system of oppression in which substantially different life destinies are determined along the color line, even within the same class. This means that minority peoples are much more vulnerable to reductions in social services than are whites. A minority family is less likely than a white family to have relatives able to help out in a crisis; an unemployed white is likely to go back to work

sooner than an unemployed minority worker. Consequently, the dollars and cents statistics about budget cuts are only the most quantifiable empirical indicators of the overwhelmingly racist thrust of these cuts; they spotlight the severity of the racist assault, but they do not and cannot fully capture its pervasiveness.

### The Reagan "Safety Net"

Though Reagan certainly wields a heavy budget-cutting axe, not all social programs have been targeted for funding cuts. On the contrary, the Reagan administration has let it be known that certain programs would be spared—what the President called the "social safety net." Now one would assume from their designation that these "safety net" programs would serve the poorest and most disadvantaged sectors of the population, and thus ameliorate the racist aspect of the Reagan cuts to a certain degree. A closer look, however, indicates that the precise opposite is the case. Far from easing the racist impact of the overall budget, Reagan's "safety net" underscores just how vicious the racist assault actually is.

Reagan's safety net basically consists of seven programs: Social Security retirement and survivors' benefits; Medicare; veterans' compensation and pensions; Supplemental Security Income; free school lunches; Head Start; and summer jobs for youths. A recent study by the Project on Food Assistance and Poverty, a research group funded by the Field Foundation, showed that of the 25 million Americans with income below the official poverty line, 60% receive nothing from any of these seven programs or at most a free meal for their children on school days. Equally telling is the fact that while the total expenditures for these programs is some \$220 billion, more than \$200 billion of this amount goes into three of them—Social Security, Medicare, and veterans' benefits.

Is a clear picture beginning to emerge? In these three programs, the percentage of minority beneficiaries is below the percentage of minorities in the population as a whole. Blacks number only 8.1% of Social Security retirement and survivor beneficiaries,\* 9.3% of Medicare recipients, and 10% of those receiving veterans' compensation and pensions. The point is that Reagan's much heralded "social safety net" does provide some relief in the assault on the working class but, significantly, this is a "safety net" mainly for the white sector of the class.

### More Explicit Use of the Color Line

There is no hard and fast wall separating attacks which are focused on the disproportionately minority, least stable sectors of the U.S. working

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\*The percentage of money actually paid to Blacks by Social Security is even smaller than the percentage of Black recipients. The average Black recipient of Social Security receives a smaller payment than the average white recipient.

class and attacks which focus more explicitly on minorities as minorities. This fact is essentially an indication of how thoroughly interpenetrated and interwoven race and class relations have become in the U.S. political economy today. At the same time, we can focus on certain attacks which more explicitly use the color line as their criteria to determine their targeted victims.

First, there is the Reagan administration's policy towards school desegregation. Government efforts to proceed with desegregation, either through busing or other means, are being scrapped across the board. Legislative and executive efforts are now underway to restrict Supreme Court and Justice Department jurisdiction in school desegregation cases. And beyond this, a new legal and financial tool for actually promoting segregation is taking shape in the form of Reagan's proposal for tax credits and voucher payments to parents who enroll their children in private schools. To the extent this program becomes operative, an increasing number of white families will receive, in effect, a federal subsidy to send their children to the school of "their choice," while the tax base for public education expenditures will be reduced. Meanwhile, minorities will be locked into an already deteriorating public school system, one whose decline will accelerate the more public schools become ghetto schools, and the political clout to maintain and upgrade them erodes further. The result will be an increasingly separate and unequal educational system in the U.S.

Second, the Reagan administration has been mounting an offensive against affirmative action and civil rights programs in general. The ideological offensive against "reverse discrimination" and in defense of "white rights" has paved the way for the effective gutting of affirmative action and enforcement of civil rights legislation. Blaring the slogans of "economy in government" and ending excess "government regulation," Reagan has hit the five federal agencies responsible for enforcing civil rights laws with massive budget cuts. Some 700 employees of these agencies are scheduled to be fired, forcing Civil Rights Commission Chairman Arthur Flemming to admit that "the revisions threaten a significant decrease in federal civil rights enforcement efforts that may have long term consequences for the ability of the nation to implement its constitutional commitment to equal opportunity."

Additionally, a number of changes in regulations now in the works would cut the heart from already weak affirmative action programs. For example, under present regulations, contractors with 50 or more employees who receive a government contract for \$50,000 or more are required to prepare and implement a written affirmative action plan as a condition for receiving the bid. This regulation, unlike most affirmative action programs, provided for explicit goals, timetables, check-up and enforcement; it was the heart of minority affirmative action gains in the 1960s and '70s. The new plan being developed by Reagan's Labor

Department would jack up the minimum number of employees to 100 and would be applicable only to contracts of \$1 million or more. In practice, this would reduce the number of companies subject to affirmative action regulations from 17,000 to 4,200.

Reagan's proposals concerning U.S. policy on immigrant workers also indicate the profoundly racist (and national chauvinist) character of the bourgeoisie's program. The core of Reagan's suggestions in this area is the "guest worker" program which would admit a certain number of foreign workers to the U.S. on a temporary basis. These workers would be "directed" to certain areas where labor was required, could work and pay taxes, but could not settle in the U.S. or bring family members here while working. They would be entitled to few if any social benefits. Meanwhile, those immigrants not officially in the program would face deportation, and employers would face severe penalties if they hire these undocumented workers. This program would provide a pool of cheap and highly controlled labor for U.S. industry and agriculture, while bringing severe hardship to many workers—almost all non-white—who are forced to emigrate to the U.S. largely because of the distortion of their native country's economy by imperialism.

Finally, we take note of one of the most pernicious measures adopted by the Reagan administration, the substantial cutback of direct aid to the nation's cities, substituting a program of block grants to the states instead. The impulse behind this move—as well as its effect—is thoroughly racist. It comes at a time when the long range population shifts have made the majority of the nation's largest cities the most concentrated areas of minority population. With the exception of a few large cities in the Sun Belt such as San Diego, Phoenix, San Jose, and San Antonio, most cities have shown a marked decrease in white population and a marked increase in minority population. In the past decade, minorities have become more numerous than whites in such cities as Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, Detroit, Baltimore, and New Orleans. New York, Cleveland, and St. Louis, among others, have become cities in which minorities now make up approximately half the residents. Philadelphia, Dallas, San Francisco, Memphis, Milwaukee, Boston, Denver, and Kansas City have all registered substantial drops in white population and substantial increases in minority population over the past decade.

Under the Reagan program, the state legislatures, which tend to be dominated by political representatives from the predominantly white rural areas and suburbs, will control the dispensation of federal aid money. The city governments, more subject to the political pressure of minorities, will have much less money at their disposal. It is already widely conceded that with this new arrangement cities (and therefore minorities) will receive substantially less funds than they presently do, even if the total amount of federal money allocated to the states remains

the same. In addition, as a recent report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights notes, state block grants would eliminate federal civil rights supervision over the expenditures. The new program would also eliminate the present requirement for "maintenance of effort" in ongoing programs targeted for the poor, a high proportion of whom are minorities. Once again, class and race intersect in a fashion which only highlights the racist edge to the present assault on the U.S. working class.

### Racist Violence and the Racist Social Austerity Program

The U.S. bourgeoisie understands very well that its program of racialized social austerity, while finding support among many whites, will provoke resistance in various forms from minorities. U.S. Attorney General William French Smith, for example, readily acknowledges that the truncated budget for social programs may result in a violent response among racial minorities. "The fact that a [racial] problem could develop here and there," Smith stated, "has been very seriously considered." The Justice Department's preparation for this possibility, he announced, is the establishment of an "early warning system" designed to detect potential ghetto outbursts and insurrections in an attempt to head them off before they occur. And it hardly requires much imagination to recognize that the recent legislation and court rulings designed to strengthen the hands of police, the increased appropriations for police departments around the country, the movement to restore capital punishment, and the general refurbishing of the court and prison system is directly related to the anticipated anger among the minority sector of the working class as the full measure of the current attack is felt.

The thinly veiled, racist rallying cry under which these repressive programs are set in motion is the protection of the populace against the rise of violent crime. The strength of this message in the context of U.S. racism means that large sections of the (white) population, including a substantial portion of the working class can be expected to wholeheartedly support the police build-up as being "in their own best interests" (that is, as "law-abiding white people").

Of course, there is a proportionately higher incidence of violent crime among minorities than among whites. In every capitalist society the incidence of crime among the least stable sectors of the working class is always proportionately higher than among the more protected, more stable sectors of the working class, never mind the petit bourgeoisie. What gets obscured, however, is the fact that the principal victims of crime are the minority communities themselves. Indeed, it is part of the racist folklore of the U.S. that a Black killing or robbing another Black is not even considered "news," but a "crime wave" is deemed in progress whenever a number of whites become the victims of crime.

It is precisely this increase in the state's preparations for a pitched battle against minorities, as well as the overall racist attack, that sets the

context in which the current upsurge of more blatant racist violence and racist ideology must be situated. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan, for example, is no isolated phenomenon. The Klan is—as it has been in earlier periods—the most concentrated expression of the day-to-day, less dramatic, prevailing racist politics of the U.S. Today, no impassable barrier separates the Klan from the New Right, the "Moral Majority," those sectors of the petit bourgeoisie and working class who rally behind the banners of "taxpayers' revolts" or the "right to life." The rise of the Klan may not be part of the "official" bourgeois plan for handling race relations in this period, but it flows from that plan just as surely as do cuts in food stamps or an end to school desegregation. And the violence of the Klan has the same result as the more "official" parts of the capitalist offensive—to ensure that the present assault on the U.S. working class takes a highly racialized form, concentrating the most brutal effects of the overall crisis of U.S. society on the minority sector of the U.S. working class.

## II. The "White Consensus"

A central and indispensable aspect of the present imperialist offensive is the bourgeoisie's attempt to build a mass base of support for it. The hard fact is that monopoly capital has registered some significant success in this task, capturing both the political momentum and "moral initiative" in the country. Of course, like the bourgeoisie's austerity program itself, this support is very unevenly distributed across the color line—only this time in reverse. While the impact of the Reagan budget cuts is concentrated among minority peoples in the U.S., the support for these cuts is almost exclusively found among whites. But that support exists; it is a material force (having played an important role in the "defection" of many Democratic members of Congress to vote for Reagan's tax and spending bills), and penetrates deeply into the working class itself.

Strangely enough, neither the accuracy of these facts nor their profound political significance seems apparent to much of the communist movement. Instead, we have been regaled with the most sentimental kind of analysis in which the communist movement tries to persuade itself that Ronald Reagan is only a "minority" president with no real support among the working class. "Reaganism" is portrayed as an undifferentiated across-the-board assault on every sector of the working class which will inevitably provoke a unified response from workers. In fact, an aroused working class in its millions is already girding up to stop the present attack by monopoly capital.

Is this kind of left wing, pollyannish analysis accurate? It definitely is not, and no amount of what Lenin appropriately called "official optimism" can make it so. Even the more perceptive bourgeois observers

are more in touch with reality than communists who insist on examining the world through such rose-colored glasses, as the following comment from columnists Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover shows: "The budget cuts he [Reagan] has made, which fall hardest on low-income Americans and Blacks especially, have been swallowed in large part because there is hope among middle income Americans that, coupled with Reagan's tax cut, they will make life easier—for them." (*S.F. Chronicle*, July 7, 1981).

So let us be blunt. The "official optimism" of many on the left is nothing but the concrete expression of that most pernicious tendency to tail behind the spontaneous politics of the working class and "hope for the best," leaving communists with no role but to utter pious platitudes about working class unity and the power of the working class in a time of mounting crisis.

How is it possible that communists, supposedly the most consistent materialists in the working class movement, can fall victim to such idealist fantasies? To a large degree, it is because of the communist movement's failure to grasp correctly the meaning and basis of the Marxist concept of false consciousness. Without doubt, workers who support the Reagan program are prisoners of a form of false (bourgeois) consciousness: they inaccurately assess their true class interests.

But communists must ask how does such false consciousness come into being. How does it retain its hold on the working class? Why is its influence growing in this period of capitalist crisis? To understand this we must examine more closely the support that is being forged for Reagan's program. In essence, this support is taking the form of a "white consensus" across class lines, a consensus which is built on a conspicuous "patriotic" and racist foundation.

### Patriotism

Patriotism means a U.S. working class which thinks and acts in terms of "our" oil in the Middle East, "our" hostages in Iran, "our" investments in Africa and Latin America, and "our" pro-American regime in El Salvador. Patriotism means a U.S. working class which sees the Soviet Union, Cuba, Vietnam and other socialist countries as "our" enemies, threatening "our" lifelines and "our" freedoms. Patriotism means a U.S. working class that supports the need for a vast military budget along with restrictions on the democratic rights of free speech, freedom of the press, the right to travel, etc. all in the name of "national security."

As well, patriotism (more accurately, national chauvinism) in the U.S. has a distinctly racist aspect. The connotation of the "American" nationality has a clear racial character to it—"American" translates into white European—while the nations dominated by U.S. imperialism are principally in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Consequently U.S. patriotism is thoroughly racist.

Because of this, patriotism in the U.S. is inherently national chauvinist and can only be a form of bourgeois false consciousness. So long as the U.S. working class is held hostage to patriotism, it can never make a thoroughgoing break with "its own" bourgeoisie and mature into a revolutionary force.

Despite its essential nature as false consciousness, national chauvinism has been the cornerstone upon which opportunism within the workers' movement in the imperialist countries has maintained its influence since the turn of the twentieth century at least. Its stubborn persistence up to today cannot be explained simply as the result of sophisticated bourgeois propaganda, though such propaganda obviously is part of the reason. Like other forms of false consciousness, national chauvinism has a deeply rooted material basis. Lenin's words in this regard, written in 1916, are even more timely and appropriate to the U.S. working class today:

"The receipt of high monopoly profits by the capitalists in one of the numerous branches of industry, in one of the numerous countries, etc., makes it economically possible for them to bribe certain sections of the workers, and for a time, a fairly considerable minority of them, and win them to the side of the bourgeoisie of a given industry or a given nation against all the others."<sup>1</sup>

U.S. monopoly capitalism today has created an overall level of development of productive forces internal to the U.S. such that the entire population, including the working class, has a "protected" standard of living relative to the nations which U.S. capital exploits and oppresses. Obviously, these benefits are extended unevenly, resulting in a relatively protected upper stratum of the working class and a much less stable, unprotected lower stratum.

The point, however, is that the more protected stratum of the class in the U.S.—as in all other imperialist countries—reflects its material position ideologically and politically as a recognizably opportunist current in the workers' movement. As well, this political orientation can and does infect even the lower strata of the working class. This opportunist thinking views the relatively stable and protected position of certain U.S. workers as a reflection of "national greatness" and "national birthright" rather than a reflection of the position of the U.S. in the international exploitation of the proletariat in the era of imperialism. This produces an objectively social-imperialist current in the workers' movement, one which postures as representing the interests of the working class while actually supporting imperialism against the most oppressed workers within the U.S. and around the world.

In the U.S., such a social-imperialist trend is a key part of the emerging white consensus, and is presently trying to flex its political muscle. Its leadership, the true "labor lieutenants of capital" in the country, are

highly conscious even if all of their supporters are not. Thus, it should be no surprise that Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO, is part of the ruling triumvirate (representing capital, labor, and government) which presides over the foremost war-mongering organization in the country, The Committee on the Present Danger. And it follows that when the AFL-CIO mounts a protest against the Reagan administration's attacks on the working class, it forcefully sends out word that this protest will concentrate strictly on "domestic" matters and will not challenge increased military expenditures or the revived policy of interventionism throughout the world. Even this "protest" gives only lip service to the issues that affect the least stable sectors of the working class. Here is the entirely predictable result of a "patriotic" stance by the U.S. working class.

As Lenin noted, the existence of such a backward trend in the U.S. is inevitable; a clear and correct line on the part of communists will not and cannot prevent its development, precisely because it has a deep material base, and is not simply a result of bourgeois trickery and lies. However, a clear line on the part of communists is the initial basis to *confront* this trend head-on, to polarize the workers' movement on the key question of imperialism. Without such a polarization, the spontaneous workers' movement in all imperialist countries, and certainly the U.S., will continue to be dominated by opportunism and national chauvinism. With no firm left pole, substantial sectors of the class will not break away from this form of class collaboration.

Yet there remain pragmatists on the left who insist that socialists should "take back" the issue of patriotism from the bourgeoisie, and advance a workers' program in the name of patriotism. Some forces (particularly within U.S. social democracy, but also in certain more "left" sects) even go so far as to argue that failure in patriotism is one of the principal weaknesses of the U.S. left! Others, such as the CPUSA, are not prepared to be quite so "creative" in their formulations; vacillating in the face of the sheer force of national chauvinism in the U.S. working class, they are hesitant to openly challenge patriotism in the workers' movement.

Such views inevitably promote reformist illusions which keep the U.S. working class tied to its capitalist masters. *For in a developed bourgeois state—particularly in the most powerful imperialist state in the world—the "national" interest can only be the interest of monopoly capital. Patriotism will inevitably be reactionary, and conciliation of it a form of opportunism.* Any worker waving the American flag still remains a prisoner of false, bourgeois consciousness.

## Racism

If national chauvinism is the principal basis for promoting divisions between the U.S. working class and the rest of the international

proletariat, then racism is certainly the principal basis to divide the U.S. working class against itself. This racial division is even more aggravated at the present time when declining U.S. imperialism can no longer cushion broad sectors of its home proletariat as in its previous days of glory.

Yet if the U.S. left vacillates in confronting head-on the hold of national chauvinism on the U.S. working class, it turns tail and runs in the other direction when it comes to confronting racism in the workers' movement. The main problem is the left's unwillingness to face squarely the material basis of racism. Instead, a good portion of the communist movement tries to ignore this problem. To the terrible misfortune of the U.S. and international proletariat, the conventional wisdom in the U.S. communist movement is that racism's influence within the working class amounts to a problem of backward ideas. Allegedly, these ideas are mainly the result of the bourgeoisie's clever use of propaganda in promoting racist ideology to divide the working class. Therefore, if only the communists can get to the workers and explain to them how a racially-divided working class only benefits the bourgeoisie, the working class can be united against racism.

Now, there is no doubt that racist ideas in the U.S. working class do represent, at bottom, a form of false consciousness: racism is not in the interest of the U.S. working class as a class, whatever certain workers think. And it is also true that the bourgeoisie takes every opportunity to promote racist ideology in order to forestall and weaken any effective working class resistance to its rule. However—and this is no minor clarification—it is simply impossible to explain the grip which racist ideas have held on such a large portion of the U.S. working class for more than 300 years solely on the basis of backward ideas or skillful bourgeois propaganda. One would think that any communist movement claiming to base itself on materialism would immediately recognize the shallowness and profound inadequacy of such an analysis. Instead of searching in the heads of white workers or in the arch conspiracies of the capitalists for the key to the influence of racism, communists must look to the real, material relations of society to find the answer.

And here we come to the heart of the matter. Racism in the U.S. is far more than backward ideology, a capitalist conspiracy to divide the workers, or even a consistent set of economic statistics where minorities are quantitatively worse off than whites, although racism does entail all of these things. Rather, *racism in the U.S. is a pervasive and all-sided system of social relations deeply rooted in the objective, material functioning of U.S. society.* Racism is framed by basic class relations and orchestrated by the twists and turns of the class struggle—but it is also a distinct social antagonism which polarizes the whole of U.S. society along a white/non-white axis. Although it does not supersede class, racism profoundly determines which opportunities and options are

available within the limits of one's class position.\* It is precisely because racial antagonism has such a deeply rooted material basis that racism reproduces itself generation after generation without requiring a conscious conspiracy on the part of the bourgeoisie to promote it. And though their understanding is hardly a scientific one, most people in the U.S. understand at least this much about it from the time they are children: it is better to be white than non-white in the U.S.

Surely this elementary, common sense judgement cannot be disputed. The facts are too well known. The median income of Blacks in the U.S. is 57% that of whites.\*\* Official unemployment among Blacks is double that of whites; actual unemployment among Blacks, which would include those who have been jobless so long that they are considered to be no longer on the labor market, is much higher. The percentage of Blacks completing high school is lower than that of whites, as is the percentage of those going on to higher education. The percentage of minority peoples living in substandard housing is much higher. Blacks make up 44% of all welfare recipients. Life expectancy for Blacks is 10 years less than that for whites.

In a certain sense, the most glaring distinctions are to be found outside the ranks of the laboring classes. There are no Blacks at all to be found in the uppermost reaches of finance capital in the U.S., nor in the top ranks of industrial capital. A handful of Black entrepreneurs can be identified in the lower echelons of the bourgeoisie and a more sizeable number among the petty entrepreneurs, but even here the majority are consigned to the most marginal and precarious areas of investment.

Within the working class itself the gap between white and Black is much narrower. Here, too, the extent of that gap is in direct proportion to the stratification within the class, with Blacks being concentrated in the most depressed sectors of the working class. On the lowest rung of the ladder the actual distinctions between white and Black may have more to do with illusions and expectations than with anything substantial, but these too can function as a material force. Nor can we ignore the fact that even where the economic gap is slight or non-existent, the general social conditions confronting Blacks and whites—treatment before the law, rate of literacy, social custom—are still much more oppressive for Blacks. This latter point flows inevitably from the fact that racism, though it has its roots historically in the development of the capitalist

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\*See *Toward A Communist Analysis of Black Oppression and Black Liberation, Part II* in this issue of *Line of March* for a more detailed theoretical analysis of the essential nature and dynamics of racism in the U.S.

\*\*We must illustrate this with statistics from Black/white relations; there would be no qualitative difference if statistics were available for white/non-white comparisons more generally.

economy of the U.S. has developed a life of its own as an all-sided social relation which can not be simply reduced to economic inequality.

These facts speak volumes about life in the U.S. To speak of racism—even in the working class—as principally an ideological phenomenon completely ignores the real social practice of racism. And to believe, as apparently some communists do, that the working masses, both Black and white, are themselves unaware of the concrete inequality that is part and parcel of racism is to be completely oblivious to social reality.

So let us be quite blunt about the matter. Do whites benefit from racism? Yes, they do. Monopoly capital, which is all white, benefits from the enormous strengthening of the whole system of exploitation. At the other end of the class scale, white workers enjoy a measure of protection, on the basis of race, from the rudest shocks of the system. It is precisely this material benefit, and not just the illusions of false consciousness, which provides the material basis for the perpetuation of racism in the working class and the forging of a “white united front” with capital. In the most profound sense, therefore, racism in the working class is opportunism, for it places the short term interests of one section of the class against the interests of the class as a whole.

And this opportunism is coming to the fore in the U.S. today in particularly sharp fashion, despite the fantasies of some on the left that it is disappearing in direct proportion to Ronald Reagan's attacks on the working class. True, there is some opposition to certain Reagan cuts (or threats of cuts) from even the most protected and politically backward strata of the working class. As today's watchwords become “sacrifice,” “reduced options,” and “belt tightening” for the good of the country, every sector of the working class is grumbling and protesting a bit. However, not all strata of the class are asked to tighten their belts to the same notch, and the Reagan austerity program, as previously noted, hits hardest at those sectors which can least afford it.

Consequently, we observe two contradictory dynamics within the U.S. working class. On the one hand, the severity of the overall assault has created a stronger basis for class unity against the common enemy. On the other hand, it has also increased and exacerbated the deeply rooted tensions and stratifications within the working class itself. At this time the spontaneous response of the working class is mainly along the lines of its stratifications, and the bulk of white workers today are at best quietly looking the other way as minorities bear the brunt of the Reagan cuts. This clearly is opportunism. But the real point is that even if the bourgeois offensive hit harder at the upper strata of the class and gave rise to a more united spontaneous resistance movement, this movement would remain unstable as long as it did not become self-consciously anti-racist. No “alliance” pragmatically forged on the basis of the “mutual self-interest” of Blacks and whites (*as whites*) can effectively defend the interest of the U.S. working class. So long as white workers identify

mainly on a racial basis rather than a class basis—even if at times they see the need for a white-Black “alliance”—these workers are adopting an essentially opportunist stand toward the working class struggle.

Undoubtedly bourgeois propaganda and manipulation plays an important role in fostering such opportunism in the working class movement. To illustrate this, we shall undertake a brief examination of one of the more conscious and skillful episodes of such manipulation by the Reagan regime—the Great Social Security Hoax. This example reveals just how conscious the ideological work of the bourgeoisie actually is; but at the same time it illustrates even more clearly how the *objective* inequality within the working class provides the very conditions under which this work can be effective.

### The Great Social Security Hoax

A superficial reading of the headlines last spring could have given the impression that the Reagan administration had launched a major, all-out assault against the Social Security system. But there is more here than meets the eye. When Reagan originally proposed his social austerity budget to Congress, Social Security cuts were not included. Congress, in turn, responded with a glee that bordered on the obscene. (Who can forget those photographs of congressmen hugging each other after the final vote count that cut off billions of dollars in food stamps, jobs, housing, and aid to welfare mothers?)

Later, however, Reagan—apparently in defiance of all the tactics of bourgeois politics—put forward proposals for adjustments and reductions in the Social Security program. Within a week, the Republican-controlled Senate, *by a vote of 96-0*, had passed a “sense of Congress” resolution rejecting the main elements of the administration proposal. Immediately a number of political commentators began speaking of “a major political blunder” by Reagan.

Now all this was very strange indeed. Reagan is hardly a political novice. His artful maneuvers in getting elected and then getting his budget passed—making deals with just enough Democrats in the House to get their support—proved that he does his political homework carefully. And to date he has had little difficulty in keeping the members of his own party in line, which is hardly surprising, since a goodly number owe their election to him, and all are dependent on him for political favors.

How, then, can we explain that *unanimous* vote rejecting Reagan’s Social Security proposal? Were the Republican senators in open revolt against the President? Not very likely; indeed, all the evidence points the other way. Did Reagan simply miscalculate and did the Senate vote take him by surprise? Again, not very likely. No President receives such a unanimous rebuff *completely* unawares.

But there is a logical explanation. The Reagan proposal was not seriously intended in the first place.

Joseph C. Harsh, veteran political commentator for the *Christian Science Monitor*, displaying a sense of politics from which U.S. Marxists have much to learn, immediately grasped this crucial point. He wrote:

“Social Security has long been accepted among politicians as the first sacred cow of the Republic. You could touch almost anything else, but not Social Security. Why? Because present and future recipients of Social Security checks are the great middle class of America. They are the prudent people who get and hold jobs and plan for their retirement years. And they vote.

“There are nearly 36 million people getting Social Security checks now. And almost everyone in the great middle class who is still working looks forward to getting them when his or her working years are over. In terms of the American work ethic these are the worthiest people in the country. They are also the last ones to expect Ronald Reagan to whittle down their benefits. After all, they marched by the millions behind his banner during last year’s political campaign... The result cannot have surprised the Reagan White House. Hence the deed which triggered the reaction must have been deliberate, not the result of political ignorance or ineptitude.” (May 21, 1981)

And what was the point behind this deliberate maneuver? To place before the beneficiaries of the Social Security system the specter of an edifice “tottering on the edge of bankruptcy” (to use Reagan’s own words.) Is the Social Security system nearly bankrupt? Absolutely not. Only the technicalities of the bourgeois state’s bookkeeping make it appear that Social Security payments are inevitably tied to the fund of employer and employee contributions that is in fact running low. The real factor determining whether the state will find the money to make these payments is the political strength of the working class.

But by placing the specter of a near-bankrupt system before those who receive (or hope to receive) Social Security payments, Reagan has paved the way for large sectors of the masses to accept—still better, advocate—other cuts to “save Social Security.” And this is precisely the result achieved. Those whom Joseph Harsh called “the prudent people,” the “worthiest people in the country,” were granted an opportunity by the bourgeoisie to feel that they had flexed their political muscle. It seemed that they “stood up for what is right” because the biggest cut proposals were withdrawn; massive cuts in Social Security were not made. At the same time, other cuts were then seen as “required” in order to protect Social Security; but, after all, now these cuts are for the good of those who “hold jobs and plan for their retirement years.”

What Harsh did not mention explicitly—although it is clearly between the lines—is the interweaving of the politics of Social Security with the

politics of race in this country. Because what distinguishes Social Security from the social programs whose budgets were slashed by Reagan is that the actual benefits of this program are tilted in the direction of whites. Social Security does not benefit the permanently unemployed and has little benefit for the consistently underemployed. Social Security benefits—again through the supposedly objective standard of capitalist bookkeeping—are tied to the wages actually earned by the steadily employed sector of the working class; the higher the earned income, the higher the rate. Invariably minorities benefit least from this program. In fact, it was precisely the one aspect of Social Security which is of particular aid to minorities—the “minimum benefit” program—that was cut. Under this program anyone who works in Social Security-covered employment for a total of 10 years is entitled to receive a payment of \$122 per month at age 65 regardless of how much they have paid into the system. This aspect of Social Security is of considerable importance to the many low-wage minority workers with a high incidence of unemployment throughout their lifetimes. Focusing a cut here has an inescapable racist result.

The overall point here is that the Great Social Security Hoax was a highly conscious maneuver on the part of the bourgeoisie to scare “white, middle America” into believing that some of its benefits are in danger because of the shortage of money in government, directing them to accept other cuts to save Social Security. Clever thinking by the bourgeoisie. But made possible only because of the profound racial stratification within the U.S. working class which provides the material basis for the view that these “other cuts” are not every bit as much attacks on the working class as cuts in Social Security.

These are the ways that the bourgeoisie maneuvers to turn the passive acceptance of racism on the part of most whites in the U.S. into a material, political force. The legitimate struggle of the predominantly white sector of the class to protect its gains is manipulated in racist America into a force against the working class as a whole. Unless this white sectoral interest is qualitatively broken up—which requires in the first place that communists grasp the fact of its existence and its material base—no revolutionary working class movement can be built in the U.S.

### III. The Left Hides its Head in the Sand

As one piece of Reagan’s economic legislation after another successfully wends its way through Congress, and while telephone calls and letters come into Congress calling for support for the President, the main political representatives of the U.S. bourgeoisie can hardly conceal their glee. In the process, they are quite frank about what is going on. Speaking after the victory of Reagan’s tax cut bill, Bob Michel, House Republican leader, declared, “These [the tax and budget bills] are two whopping

pieces of legislation in terms of what they mean for the country. Part of the Great Society program has been repealed and because we have indexed the tax cuts to inflation and thus made them permanent, these social programs can’t be reinstated except deliberately” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, July 30, 1981). And Michel clearly does not expect any “deliberate” congressional effort to reinstate social programs to succeed, or probably even to be attempted, precisely because he sees no strong working class movement on the scene committed to fighting for them. In this calculation, the white ideological consensus within the U.S. plays a central role.

Communists must be as materialist and clear sighted as the political representatives of the bourgeoisie, particularly when reality is opposite of what we would wish. A profound attack on the U.S. and international proletariat is taking place before our eyes, and it is gaining support from a significant stratum of the U.S. working class in the form of a white ideological consensus based on patriotism and racism. The grip of this false consciousness on the class is due only in part to the conscious ideological work of the bourgeoisie; more deeply, it is the result of its strong material basis in U.S. society. In particular, it is persistent and influential because of the material privileges the white sector of the U.S. working class has over the non-white sector.

Unfortunately, the prejudices of our movement are such that it is not deemed proper to speak of such things even among communists, and even less within the working class as a whole. To do so usually results in a charge that one is advocating the “white skin privilege” line. The implication is that pinning this label on one’s position is the equivalent of refuting it.

Yet this cavalier dismissal is most often simply an indication of the desire of communists to hide their heads in the sand, ostrich-like in the face of the reality of racism. To clear up this opportunist confusion, it is necessary to examine more precisely what is incorrect—and what is *correct*—about the “white skin privilege” line.

The main problem of the “white skin privilege” line is that it removes racism from its class context. This line incorrectly describes racism as a relation in which all minority people, regardless of class, suffer from racism equally, and all white people equally benefit. It views this system as so all-pervasive that only minority people (and again all minority people equally) have the basis to play a revolutionary role in society. In this framework, the anti-racist struggle does not involve uniting the working class on a class basis against racism but convincing (undifferentiated) white people to “support” the liberation struggle of (undifferentiated) minority people. Because of these qualitative errors the “white skin privilege” line must be rejected by Marxist-Leninists.

At the same time, we should not overlook the absolutely correct

insight which the "white skin privilege" line advances. There is a system of racial privilege in this country; and precisely because racism polarizes around the dialectic of white supremacy/minority oppression, *whites as whites do have privileges in society over minorities*. These privileges are thoroughly circumscribed and framed by the overall relations of class in the U.S. One's position as a member of the working class ultimately provides the material basis for a minority or white worker to play a revolutionary role. However, this overall class framework does not negate the existence of the system of white supremacy and white privilege which originated with it, historically acquired a life of its own, and now intersects with it throughout the class spectrum.

The "white skin privilege" line, though it has no substantial class moorings, grasps this essential truth. It faces reality and sees in it the overwhelming evidence of white racial privilege, the fact that whites are better off than minorities in America. To evade this reality by raising the bogeyman of the "white skin privilege" line simply will not do; it is to close one's eyes to reality simply because an ultimately incorrect line also identified that aspect of reality. (Some argue that there is no white skin privilege because white workers under capitalism are worse off than they would be under socialism, or even under a capitalism where racism did not exist or had been largely overcome through struggle. Therefore, how can whites be privileged? This misses the entire point. Of course, as workers all workers would be better off under socialism, or even under capitalism, if the working class were stronger and more unified. But this does not change for one moment the fact that racism exists in U.S. life today, and that whites as whites are materially better off than minorities because of it. Virtually everyone in society is aware of this every single day—to try to ignore it by posing another comparison [between real life under capitalism today and life in other circumstances] is the height of opportunism.)

### Facing or Evading Reality

It is precisely this stark material reality of white privilege that must be faced squarely by communists as we strive to play our vanguard role of forging the U.S. working class into a united, revolutionary political force. The communists are uniquely situated by reason of their overall class perspective and grasp of historical development to lead the class in overcoming the political and ideological consequences of the profound racial divisions within the class. But all efforts toward this end are doomed to futility unless they are based on a materialist assessment of the present disunity of the class.

In this context, the refusal of many in the communist movement to face the reality of white racial privilege appears almost inexplicable. And yet there is an explanation for the backwardness of the communist movement in this respect.

In part this phenomenon is due to the effect of racism on the communist movement itself, for the failure to "notice" these real divisions in the working class clearly speaks to a racial blindness. But this is not yet precise enough, and left at such a level of abstraction, such an explanation merely lends itself to moralistic posturing.

What is more to the point, in a certain sense, is that *all of the ideological backwardness in the communist movement expresses itself in its most concentrated form around the question of racism*.

Every tendency to worship the spontaneous motion of the workers' movement, to see the "pure" worker as the fount of revolutionary wisdom, to equate economic condition with political consciousness, rebels at the thought that a major section of the U.S. working class may actually have a material base for its backward ideology.

Similarly, the endemic pragmatism of our movement rebels at this thought since it suggests that *the task of forging working class unity will require a confrontation with significant sections of the class around the question of racism*.

In fact, to suggest that the white section of the class may, in any measure, benefit from racism, we are told, is to consign that section permanently to the bourgeoisie.

Such are the narrow and mechanistic prejudices which make it difficult for many in the communist movement to face the actual conditions of racism in the workers' movement. For how much easier it is to vow a struggle against racism when all that is required is to demonstrate to white workers that their present favored position in the internal hierarchy of the working class will not at all be disturbed by the actual struggle against racism.

Clearly the white construction workers in New York who attacked a group of Blacks and Latinos who were picketing at a construction site to protest discrimination in hiring practices in the industry were convinced that the success of the protest would mean the loss of jobs for some of them. And who can deny the fact that such a perception is accurate?

By contrast, the "official optimists" in the communist movement today deny that the struggle against racism will hurt anyone but the capitalists. To make sure that this is the case, they so circumscribe the struggle against racism with hedges that the essence of the struggle is liquidated. The clearest example of this tendency was the line that tied support for superseniority for minorities to full employment, thus liquidating the struggle for affirmative action just as effectively as any supporter of Alan Bakke or Brian Weber.

Such maneuvering and weaseling on the part of the communist movement signifies nothing so much as the fact that both its politics and its understanding of class struggle remain plagued by the legacy of revisionism and economism. But even on a practical level, such a strategy is clearly wanting.

Reformists of every stripe have been trying to convince white workers for decades that they will derive some immediate and palpable benefit from the struggle against racism; that wages will go up for everyone and conditions will be improved for all. The workers remain unconvinced. This should not come as a surprise to anyone, for even though there is a measure of truth in the argument (although not nearly as much as some of its proponents believe), the very posing of the debate in terms of immediate and sectoral self-interest is self-defeating. After all, if quantity is all that is at stake, a bird in the hand is still worth two in the bush. Any worker can readily figure out that with a shift in unemployment patterns, for instance, some workers presently employed will be jobless.

This entire approach reeks of that insatiable passion for "palpable results" by which pragmatists hope to ingratiate themselves with the class as a whole. And yet, though it poses as the most supremely realistic approach to the question of racism, this pragmatism actually is the most concentrated expression of shrinking from racism's bitter and profoundly material reality.

#### IV. The Fight Against Racism Today

The fundamental dialectic of revolutionary class politics is that unity is never achieved by basing oneself on the lowest level of consciousness or concessions to backwardness. On the contrary, the class is only truly unified in a revolutionary sense of the term when it is polarized around the principal *political* questions facing it.

What does it mean to polarize the working class around the question of racism? It means to lay out the most advanced line possible on the question of racism and *on that basis* unite all those who can be united around it. This is the only way in which it is possible to identify the truly advanced elements in the class and thereby lay the foundations for making revolutionary politics a material force in the working class movement.

True, significant numbers of the class will not be united in this fashion, largely among those with a relative position of privilege in the class and racial hierarchy. But to wish for unity among everyone is to pursue a hopeless fantasy and to postpone indefinitely the tasks of revolution. Lenin's profound comment that "there never has been, and never can be, a class struggle in which *part* of the advanced class does not remain on the side of the reactionary forces"<sup>2</sup> must be a timely reminder to U.S. communists in this regard. To imagine for a moment that every white worker in the U.S. will side with the anti-racist, anti-capitalist struggle of his or her class (if only the communists find a proper approach to working with them) inevitably guts the struggle against racism. Of course, many whites in the working class will be won over—even among the most

privileged strata there will be individuals and groups who will be won to the understanding that their interest as workers far exceeds their interest as whites. However, we must be frank—the material basis of racism means no one should be shocked or dismayed by the many who will not be won over to such a view.

The point, however, is that *not one* white worker will be won to a thoroughgoing anti-racist perspective if communists rest their case on the promise of some immediate economic return from the struggle against racism. Such an approach is to conciliate racism, not to fight it, to evade reality, and not to face it.

Nowhere is this reality more stark than in the present period. U.S. monopoly capital is mounting an all-out assault on the international proletariat. Its cutting edge internationally is rising preparations for war;\* within the U.S., it is a racially-differentiated attack where the brunt of the social-austerity program is concentrated among minorities while for whites the blow is cushioned. A massive effort is underway to forge a cross-class white ideological consensus to support this attack, and to a certain degree, this is yielding the bourgeoisie some success.

This is the undeniable motion of U.S. politics today, and the working class movement, especially its communist detachment, must face this reality squarely. In particular, it must face the extent to which opportunism on the question of racism has penetrated the working class. This opportunism is objective and, as we have demonstrated, has a material base. It will never be transformed into a firm anti-racist consciousness spontaneously. To lead in that transformation must be the purpose and content of communist politics. The communists must educate the working class to the politics which serve its class interest—not the interest of a racially-defined privileged sector of the class. This is the basis for arguing that the strategic task before the working class movement today is the forging of a United Front Against War and Racism as the concrete expression of the actual class interests of the proletariat in the U.S. today.

#### Reference Notes:

- 1 V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism—The Highest Stage of Capitalism, Collected Works (LCW)* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960) Vol. 22, p.301.
- 2 *How the Bourgeoisie Utilizes Renegades, LCW*, Vol. 30, p.33.

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\*See, *The U.S. Prepares for War—Against Whom?* in *Line of March*, Vol. 2, No.1.; also, *A Communist Proposal for a United Front Against War and Racism* in *Line of March*, Vol. 1, No. 5.