



discussion bulletin

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A LETTER TO THE MILITANT ON DECERTIFICATION SUITS

by

George Breitman

(With the concurrence of Comrade Breitman it was decided that his letter to The Militant should be published in the Discussion Bulletin instead of the paper ---Editor).

William Bundy's article, "Meany and the NAACP" (Militant, Nov. 19), contains many correct and valuable points. It does a good job in showing how the discrimination against Negro and Puerto Rican members of a union like the International Ladies Garment Workers results in part from the class-collaboration policy of the Dubinsky bureaucracy, as well as from its racial prejudices. His conclusion -- that a militant, class-struggle opposition in the unions is needed to fight the Dubinskys and Meanys -- is absolutely right.

But I think it is an inadequate treatment of the NAACP's filing of suits to decertify unions guilty of flagrant and persistent racial discrimination.

Bundy's approach to these suits is, of course, different from that of the union bureaucrats, who falsely denounce the suits and NAACP labor secretary Herbert Hill as "anti-labor." (That's what they call anybody who criticizes or opposes them.) Correctly rejecting such slanders, Bundy takes the view that the NAACP-Hill policy, which he summarizes as "more government interference in unions and decertification," will "not solve anything for the workers involved." He says that "Hill's proposal -- government pressure on the union leaders -- won't work because both the government and the present union leaders are committed to class collaboration, to avoiding real struggles between unions and employers."

Bundy also notes that the recent Negro American Labor Council convention supported the NAACP's drive against job discrimination but did not endorse its suits for union decertification. He cites NALC president A. Philip Randolph's statement that "we must carry on our fight within the house of labor," and comments: "This is a formally correct position. But the reason the job must be done within the labor movement is that it can only be accomplished by class-struggle methods."

Now this is an extremely complicated question, and I don't claim to have the answers. But I am not satisfied with Bundy's treatment because it does not deal with the question of principle -- that is, are decertification suits permissible from the standpoint of class-conscious unionists or socialists? Instead, he rests his conclusion mainly on the point of effectiveness, saying the suits "won't work." But suppose you think they will or may "work," to a certain extent, as I do? In that case, consideration of the question of principle is unavoidable, and I see no reason for socialists trying to avoid it.

1. Let me start at the level where Bundy concentrates:

I view the NAACP decertification suits as a legitimate method of applying pressure on union leaders to discontinue some of their worst discriminatory practices. I would call them a form of Negro pressure utilizing government agencies, rather than "government pressure," as he terms it.

Decertification suits are not the answer to the Negro demand for equality; they are supplementary methods of pressure. They are not a substitute for class-struggle policies in the unions, nor are they necessarily in contradiction to such policies. They merely add another weapon.

Will they "work"? Not in the sense of solving the whole problem of plant and union discrimination, or even a major part of the problem. Nor will they change the basic attitudes of the conservative union bureaucrats. But they do embarrass the bureaucrats, put them on the defensive and strengthen the pressure on them. I think they will tend to force concessions from the bureaucrats and therefore, on the whole, will do more good than harm.

It would be wrong to create illusions about how much can be achieved by such suits. It would be wrong to create the impression that such suits are a substitute for militant mass action. But that doesn't mean they won't work at all.

2. The question of government interference and permissibility from the standpoint of principle:

Militant unionists, white and Negro, know that government interference is, in general, a dangerous thing. The government is an agency of the capitalist class, and the result of its

intervention in union affairs, at least 99 times out of 100, is to aid the employers or the union bureaucrats and to hamper or eliminate militancy. If militants are suspicious of and hostile to government intervention, it's because American labor experience and history have taught them this attitude, and not merely because Marxist theory asserts it.

But while opposition to government interference is and should be the general rule, it is necessary to examine each situation concretely, and to recognize the possibility of exceptions to the rule. Sometimes even union militants find it advisable or necessary to go to court to protect the interests of their union. So long as they do not create illusions about the role of the courts or lead the workers to rely on the government as a substitute for their own independent action and strength, I think certain exceptions are permissible.

I tend to think decertification suits fall within the exceptional category. Like any other resort to a capitalist court or government agency, they can prove dangerous to both the Negro and labor movements. But I don't think the risk is very great under present circumstances.

I don't see much danger, at present, that the capitalist government now in power will seriously seek to destroy the presently conservative-led unions on the ground that they practice racial discrimination. If someone can show me the serious existence of such a danger, I might revise my opinion. The more likely consequence of suits at the present time is that they will help force some concessions from the union bureaucrats to the Negro demand for equality. And that they may begin to shock rank-and-file unionists into awareness of the fact that labor runs the risk of losing Negro support, and thus contribute to the process of unfreezing and shaking up the internal life of the unions.

At any rate, the attitude of militant unionists and socialists toward decertification should be based on a specific analysis of the probable consequences, rather than on any automatic general rule.

3. The relations between the labor and Negro movements:

For different reasons A. Philip Randolph and Bundy both say, "We must carry on our fight within the house of labor." Of course, because it is such a decisive arena. But that doesn't mean it is the only arena, or that the struggle for Negro equality in the labor movement must or should be restricted only to internal union activity. It doesn't mean that Negroes can't also use existing laws and court rulings or demand new ones to aid their fight, or to make the practices of the biased officials more difficult.

Another crucial point is this: Not everybody is "within" the house of labor. Most Negroes are not. Most Negro workers also are not. Yet discrimination in the plants and unions affects all Negroes, and hurts hardest the Negro workers who are not in the unions. What are we going to tell them?

Yes, we tell them, and correctly, that they can and should support class-struggle opposition forces inside the unions. Yes, we should and do tell them that they should conduct militant, anti-capitalist mass struggles outside the unions, both independently and in collaboration with anti-capitalist whites.

But meanwhile, through no fault of theirs, opposition forces in the unions are exceedingly weak, if they exist at all, and the labor movement is quiescent or worse. Are we, under such circumstances, supposed to tell Negroes that they should WAIT until the labor and radical movements are revitalized? That they shouldn't seize every available weapon, including new laws and court rulings, to attack discrimination wherever they can and to make life as miserable as possible for all who perpetuate it?

If we were so stupid or blind as to tell them that, or even imply such a position, they wouldn't listen to us. And they would be right.

We cannot work out a proper policy unless we bear in mind that the working class struggle and the Negro struggle, although they have many common features, and face a common enemy, and cannot defeat that enemy and solve their problems unless they collaborate, are not the same struggle.

The Socialist Workers Party, in its 1948 convention resolution, stated this point very clearly when it stressed that "the Negro struggle is not identical with the proletarian movement toward socialism. It exists as a distinct movement of an oppressed minority within the country, possessing its own historical origins, special characteristics, forms of development and methods of action." (My emphasis)

These special methods of action are the result of the special characteristics and disabilities imposed upon the Negro people, and they are acquiring clearer form as the Negro struggle deepens and expands. It would be a ruinous mistake to apply the same yardstick to these methods of action that we use for the union movement. In self-interest, militant unionists and socialists should take a friendly, positive and cooperative attitude toward these special Negro methods of action which, in the final analysis, are aimed against the enemies of labor too.

I am not certain, but I incline to think the decertification suits come under this heading. I don't say we should advocate them, but I do think that at the very least we should defend them and explain them sympathetically. If there are dangers in decertification suits, we must take the lead in placing the responsibility on the union bureaucrats who have forced the NAACP to take such steps. If the labor movement faces the much bigger and realer danger of losing the support and solidarity of Negroes, we must show that the blame belongs not on the NAACP or other Negro organizations but on the Meanys and Reuthers who, 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, are still instructing Negroes to go slow and be patient.

Detroit, Michigan
November 29, 1962

THOUGHTS ON THE NEGRO STRUGGLE

by

Nat. West

There is no doubt that the Negro masses favor "integration" principally because it provides the most favorable grounds for victory over super-exploitation and oppression. As a minority and moreover one that is not concentrated in any single geographical area they cannot alone overcome the superior power of an undivided majority. The main effectiveness of the struggle for integration is to divide the enemy, neutralize many and win some and isolate the hard core opposition to Negro rights. This approach has been successful to the extent that there has probably never been a more "popular" cause in this country.

The effectiveness of this concept is also the source of its weakness. Even with the best of intentions the fear of alienating one or another of its "allies" tends to restrict the freedom of action of the movement itself. This is particularly so in periods of relative capitalist stability when the working class is not on the front pages of history. Past alliances between petty-bourgeois Negro leaders and liberal whites have not been to the best advantage of the cause despite heroic efforts by the Negro masses themselves. Generally the liberal whites act as a brake. Particularly when the struggle comes close to affecting their own material interests. Moods of misgivings when the struggle sharpens in the South turn to panic when it comes closer home to the white liberals in the North.

Nationalist trends are the fruit of the weakness of the integrationist strategy under the condition of the abstention of the workers. Nationalists articulate the growing conviction that the big hue and cry over Southern injustice is for the purpose of drawing attention away from the "equally unjust North". This mood represents a correction and, of course, as is often the case, an over-correction to the methods of the middle-class leadership of the integration struggle. It is at the same time the posing of an alternative form through which to realize the goal of freedom!

The concept of equality through separation has its advantages as well as disadvantages. Separation, the liberal's alarm notwithstanding, is not equivalent to segregation. Segregation is imposed and enforced by a dominant group upon a subordinated group. Separation may be a voluntary act by a minority

enforced by itself and transgressed at will. It arises from the needs of an oppressed minority with distinctive customs, language or physical appearance which set them apart as targets in a hostile environment to be shunned, persecuted, ridiculed and exploited. It is an act of self-preservation that tends to disappear when and if the hostility that engendered it disappears.

Clearly, no one can propose separation but the oppressed group itself. Friends may only support their right to separation should they so desire.

The question of the advantages and disadvantages of separation is worth discussion despite the questionable opportunity of choice. Separation possesses the virtue of concentrating a dispersed minority, allowing their resistance to oppression to be more effective. Acts of oppression against Negroes more often result in lynching in dispersed rural areas than in the concentrated urban ones. As a matter of fact open terrorism is far more difficult in the ghetto than elsewhere. The bigger the ghetto the more effective the resistance, even in the South. A concentration of even a small minority under favorable conditions can generate enough steam to gain significant concessions.

The main motivation of the turn towards equality through separation is to subtract the appearance of any desire by Negroes for social intercourse as the aim of the struggle from the basic aim of justice and equality. It is an answer to pious pretexts of white chauvinism. Principally the device of denying Negro rights on the pretext of a right to choose one's associates.

The concentration into ghettos effected by the segregationist masters has the adversity of facilitating the picking of the inhabitants' pockets and increasing the misery begun with the super-exploitation on the job. Artificial shortages, particularly in housing and in de facto separate but unequal education, are some of the worst by-products of the ghetto. Any virtues that may be seen in ghettoization are strictly from the point of view of aiding in the struggle against the status quo and not out of any innate virtues of the ghettos.

"Classic" nationalism seeks to retain the advantages that accrue from concentration while eliminating the causes of ghetto injustice. They see the solution through the transference of economic power from the hands of the whites to those of the blacks. With control over the ghetto economy they envision first-rate all-black schools, employment for black workers, construction of adequate housing, etc.

The utopian character of the program for achieving separate economy was dramatically revealed in the time of Marcus Garvey. Particularly the adventure of the Black Star shipping corporation. Modern business enterprises such as shipping require extremely large amounts of capital to hope to compete in this highly competitive industry. The hopelessly insufficient capital raised by Garvey was by itself enough to doom the venture to failure. But a conspiracy of capitalists, governments and swindlers put extra embellishments on the grave dug for the "first Black steamship company".

The argument by nationalists that there is enough potential capital in the purchasing power of the black masses to lay the foundations of a separate economy would have viability only in the environment of a friendly (i.e., socialist) government. Even young nations in the colonial world cannot achieve a successful growth of the economy on capitalist terms. Can American Negroes build a separate economy on a collective basis within the capitalist state? The lesson of the failure of the many socialist colonies in more favorable periods in history and under more favorable conditions void this possibility too.

There is an element of the collective approach in the one projected by the Muslims. They encourage the development of black capitalists but also make a collective economic endeavor through their institutions. They buy and build office buildings and small commercial enterprises. They run their own "parochial" schools. They employ Negro members of their movement. They have had and continue to have modest success. Their militancy, their "military" organization probably has its major significance as an implied threat to retaliate should a conspiracy of the kind that helped to destroy the Black Star line and many of the socialist colonies be launched against them. Our attitude to attempts to build a separate economy must be realistic, but stated only if our opinion is solicited. However we would be duty bound to intercede to whatever extent we are capable of against any attempt of the bourgeoisie to sabotage the democratic right of the Negro to attempt to create a black economy.

At the same time we must be alert to the dangers implicit in a movement based upon aspirations for a separate economy. This road to liberation has a critical weakness. It does not lend itself to a day by day struggle for a set of transitional demands, except if the anti-integration core of nationalism is compromised. In the concrete struggle it cannot counterpose less than the ultimate to a transitional demand of integrationists, or project the innocuous slogan "buy black". The effect being in either case

a reactionary diversion. For example, a group of Negroes in a union may demand justice in hiring and firing procedures. What position can a nationalist take? If he supports the action he compromises his orthodoxy, if he counterposes a "get your own factory" line he is strikebreaking. I think that should nationalism continue to grow significantly, it will do so at the expense of nationalist essentials. I don't think nationalism can grow further without fighting for the immediate needs of the masses. And should it do so it will tend to incorporate integrationist demands, stripping them of any illusions to a desire for social assimilation. Of course, a labor upsurge and intervention into the Negro struggle would tend to cut across and divert any such developments into more or less integrationist lines.

There is no question of the positive nature of separate organization. It encourages self-reliance and independence of action. It removes much of the brake on the scope and boldness of its program. Independent political action, so far shunned by all sections of the liberation movement, flows logically and naturally from the concept of separation. Organization independence need not stand in the way of cooperation with white allies. Even with the view that all whites are enemies, it should easily prove possible to reach an understanding with "an enemy of my enemy" (Malcolm X the Muslim minister made a speech at a symposium in New York in which he was asked a question from the audience to the effect: would Muslims accept aid from whites organized in defense of Muslim rights? His answer was: "...an enemy of my enemy is a friend.").

In my opinion the growth of nationalist tendencies is negative in that it is the reflection of Negro reaction to the abstention of the labor movement. It is positive in that it represents the aspirations for a struggle against the directly economic forms of Jim Crow in the North. It is a repudiation of any reluctance to extend the struggle to the North, against the Northern "supporter" who has an interest in perpetuating the system of inequality. I think also, that the reactionary or utopian aspects of nationalism are accepted by many of its friends tongue-in-cheek to a great extent, and will at most play an episodic role. It is not much of a leap from the conclusion that since the landlord, banker, and the boss are white, therefore whiteness is evil to the conclusion that since they are capitalists, therefore this is the evil.

The growth of nationalism occurs closely enough in time to the upsurge in the South to cause us to examine the coincidence. The explanation I would suggest only begins with the common recognition that the exploding colonial revolution set both manifestations into motion -- nationalist moods in the North, and the integrationist upsurge in the South. Both phenomena being based upon the feeling of no longer being alone, that the colonial world is watching sympathetically. The divergent response to the new stimulus derives from the different paths followed and the different experiences North and South. The South did not have an important experience of struggle for rights since the great defeats and rearguard battles following reconstruction. The failure at the end of the last century of the white Populists to stand up under pressure for their Negro allies resulted in the separatist mood symbolized by the spread of the philosophy of separatism of Booker T. Washington. As the post-reconstruction defeat spread to the North in the early part of the twentieth century accompanied by lynchings and the general decline of Negro rights, the failure again of whites to come through in the pinch resulted again in the wave of nationalism expressed in the rise of the Garvey movement. In the thirties, the upsurge of the workers in the North was enough to move the Northern Negro into action, but the severeness of the post-reconstruction defeat in the South foiled the efforts of union penetration and at the same time smothered the spark that a labor upsurge in the South would have applied to the Southern Negro movement.

The colonial revolution then, has been enough of a stimulus for the, by this time, recuperated South, but not enough for the North. The memory of the labor bureaucrats' betrayal is more than too fresh, the betrayal continues and intensifies. The response in the direction of nationalism is a marking of time for the Northern Negro. A better way to put it perhaps is: the impulse from the Afro-Asian revolution was not enough to propel the Northern Negro movement forward but it did set it spinning on its axis.

It is going to take a lot to get the black dweller in Northern ghettos to move because of the nature of Jim Crow there. He knows that more than classic Jim Crow is involved. He knows that it will take a mighty force dwarfing that exerted in the South to even get off the ground for the kind of fight necessary in the North. He feels the class nature of the Northern oppression. He hesitates to move without the whole class. He is far from confident that a move by him would trigger the class into action on his side. If anything he fears, rather, the hostile intervention of the class. There is substance to this fear, certainly in the form of tendencies of the bureaucracy.

There is yet another factor: the possible demoralizing effects that the meagre results of the heroic Southern actions bring. Especially since the aims of the Negro in the South are largely a reality in the North. The dubious advantage of the Northern way must certainly make Southern struggles appear in a Northerner's eyes to be like the proverbial mountain laboring to bring forth a mouse! This must certainly balance off some of the enthusiastic optimism generated at the sight of the gallant effort of the Southern freedom fighter.

On the other hand there are powerful forces acting upon the Northern Negro impelling him inexorably against the status quo. The "race riots" of the forties are warnings that a movement in the North can develop with lightning speed and power. The tendency of all the leaders in the struggle to steer clear of the ghettos and its problems is witness to two important factors: first that the setting into motion of the struggle there is tantamount to challenging the bourgeois status quo, and second, that no leadership could hold it back once it got moving.

Furthermore the Northern Negro today has far more connections leading into the unions than ever before. He would be forced to pull from all angles on the unions to come into the fight on his side. It is not excluded that this process would provide the impulse for the coming labor upsurge. Particularly since the factors causing an explosion in the Negro community would likely be acting upon the working class as a whole, igniting the driest section first.

An extraordinary effort will have to be made to link ourselves up more tightly to the Negro community. Breitman's articles in the paper are a good beginning. Perhaps a full-blown open discussion would be feasible. This might grease the way for the entrance of non-party Negroes into the discussion. It won't hurt to stir up the civil rights movement a little more, even if our press at the moment is still a pretty small stirrer.