

The logo for the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is rendered in a large, white, stylized font against a dark green background. The letters 'S', 'W', and 'P' are interconnected and have a modern, sans-serif appearance.

discussion bulletin

Published by the
SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

116 UNIVERSITY PLACE
NEW YORK 3, NEW YORK

Vol. 24, # 33

July 1963

Contents

	<u>Page</u>
1. Self-Determination -- And All That Sort of Jazz, by Frank Powers	1
2. Corrections on Vernon Articles in Vol. 24 #11 and # 30.	20

30¢

SELF-DETERMINATION

-- And All That Sort of Jazz

by Frank Powers

The pre-convention discussion of the Negro question has reached a climax with the publication of Vernon's article "Why White Radicals cannot Understand Black Nationalism." Through a forthright presentation of nationalist feelings in the Negro community and a demonstration of the incapacity of the radical movement to tap this deep well of radicalism, he has presented the party with a good picture of the dilemma we face in building the SWP in the most politically advanced and socialist-conscious section of the American people.

There are undoubtedly those in the leadership of the party who will see in this document a justification or verification of the line pursued by the party on the Negro Question. Vernon, in a sense, absolves the party of responsibility for its failure over the years to effectively recruit Negroes to the Party, maintain a Negro cadre and influence the radicals in the movement for equality, by his putting the responsibility on inherent features of the radical movement and of Negro consciousness.

The 1948 resolution stated "...the party must view the incorporation of Negroes into the Party and Negro work in party building as a test and touchstone of its general revolutionary strategy and tactics..." Today, some fifteen years later, the most glaring failure of the party is its inability to recruit and maintain a Negro cadre in a period of ascending struggles for equality. We have lost nearly all the rank and file militant Negroes recruited in the post-war years and have only a semblance of our former cadre.

It is pleasant to assume that we have made no important theoretical, strategical or tactical errors and that the responsibility for our failures lies with the Negro people. One can always find ample justification for the failures of a revolutionary party in the political backwardness of the working class. But even among the more politically backward and far less revolutionary white proletariat we have been able to maintain a cadre of some of the more advanced workers who came to the party in the course of their participation in the class struggle.

Would it not be more valid to assume, in the light of the party's continuous activity in the Negro struggle for over 20 years, that our problem is more than failing to subjectively understand black consciousness -- that we are, perhaps, ourselves responsible for the fact that in the consciousness of Negro militants we are lumped together with all other radical tendencies?

Would it not be wiser to reassess our own theory, strategy and tactics in the Negro struggle instead of proceeding on the assumption that the party has a correct analysis of the causes, the direction and the solution of the Negro question and has been eminently correct in its evaluation of the stages of development and the strategy and tactics corresponding to them?

The intent here is not to disparage articles on the subjective development of radical and racial consciousness among Negroes. Certainly if the party is to intervene in or lead the struggle for equality, we have to know what the thinking of the Negroes is and what the programs offered for solution are. But our intervention can be fruitless -- and has in fact been pretty much fruitless -- unless we approach these developments with a correct theory and a correct program.

This has not been the case.

DIFFERENCES ON THE NEGRO QUESTION

It is first of all necessary, particularly for the benefit of newer comrades, to dispense with the illusion permeating both the "Freedom Now" Resolution and the Vernon article that the party is unanimously agreed upon a theoretical and tactical approach to the Negro question.

I do not here allude solely to the differences between Comrades Breitman and Fraser, which are only the most overt expressions of this dispute. The last national Resolution on the Negro question was accepted in 1957 with fully one-third of the delegates abstaining or registering reservations on one or both of two fundamental points: the "troops slogan" and the "right of self-determination." In addition, dozens of amendments to the FC draft were presented and incorporated which changed in many ways the character of the Resolution. This is the only time, in my memory, that a FC draft has received such treatment without an organized factional opposition involved.

One year later, Dan Roberts, Editor of the Militant and a member of the FC, wrote in answer to Fraser's (Kirk's) criticism of the line on the Little Rock events, that there were three conflicting views on the question in the party cadre itself.

These positions he cited as follows: (1) a position, attributed to Swabeck and Saunders, that "sees the main impetus to a sharpening of the civil rights question in Northern big business finding the Southern system an obstacle to the free investment of their capital in the South"; (2) that of the Militant and the FC, that advances in the Negro struggle result from international pressures -- from "the black eye that the Jim Crow system gives US imperialism abroad and especially in the colonial world"; and (3) the position of Kirk, which maintains "that the present impetus for the Negro struggle

and the cause for civil rights gains come in the first place from the Negro masses own...rebellion against Jim Crow." (Comrade Saunders denied the position attributed to her.)

These differences were not incidental. The conflicting viewpoints within the party were a reflex of differences within the Negro movement itself. Little Rock marked a critical turning point in the development of mass action, the role of the pacifists and the role of the government, and thereby created a crisis in Negro leadership. These differences were doubly significant because they represented not only divergent conjunctural evaluations but differences in theoretical approach.

Those who question this disunity need only read the stenogram of the P.C. discussion of the Troops slogan to appreciate the differences in orientation and theory that exist within the party leadership itself. The unresolved theoretical differences have found principal expression in a series of discussions with Trotsky in Mexico; four Resolutions (including the '63 Draft); and a literary debate between Fraser and Breitman.

The first important documents consist of the discussions with Trotsky. Without any concrete knowledge of the Negro question and confronted with a cadre that had only limited contact with the Negro movement, he generally accepted the Stalinist conception of the Negro question as similar to the national question in Europe with which he was intimately familiar. While rejecting the categorical character of the Stalinist demand for separatism, Trotsky clearly considered separatism a revolutionary demand and endorsed the concept of the "Right of Self-Determination" -- which had been central for the Bolshevik Party on the national question in Russia -- as applicable to the Negro question in the United States. Trotsky's approach was incorporated in the 1939 resolution.

By 1948 the party's conception of the Negro question was sharply altered. We had gone through almost a decade of experience in the Negro struggle and had recruited hundreds of militant Negroes into the Party. With an experienced, class conscious Negro cadre in the Party, we conducted an extensive and intensive study of both the conjunctural and historical aspects of the Negro struggle and came up with a new Resolution. The 1948 Resolution, while not openly rejecting "the right of self-determination" for Negroes, presented the Negro struggle as revolutionary and integrationist. Taking as its foundation the integral connection between the Negro struggle and the proletarian struggle for socialism, the new Resolution noted that the historical drive of the Negro people was to "break down the barriers that excluded Negroes from American society, showing few signs of national separation."

The resolution challenged the conception held by many socialists in the past that the independent Negro struggle had only an episodic character, and emphasized the revolutionary

character of this independent movement. Summarizing the Resolution in this respect, Comrade Johnson, in his report to the '48 Convention, stated:

"We say, number 1, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in present struggles, it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling, to one degree or another, and everything shows that at the present time it is traveling with great speed and vigor." (In case anybody has forgotten, the organic perspective along which it was traveling at that time was clearly integration.)

"We say, number 2, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights, and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party.

"We say, number 3, and this is most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism."

As if anticipating the concept that permeates the '63 Resolution -- that the revolutionary road of the independent Negro movement is separatist -- Johnson summarized the above points as follows: "In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent struggle for democratic rights."

To illustrate the unique relationship between the independent Negro struggle and the proletarian movement, the Resolution utilized a quotation from Lenin on the role of small nations. "The dialectics of history," Lenin had written, "is such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli which help the real power against imperialism to come on the scene, namely the Socialist Proletariat."

Yet, from the whole context of the Resolution, it seemed clear enough at the time that the quotation from Lenin was an analogy and did not mean that the Negro question was therefore a "national" question. The resolution nowhere referred to the Negroes as a "nation," and Comrade Johnson in his Convention report on the Resolution had a rather difficult time changing Lenin's quotation to suit the subject.

"The dialectic of history," said Comrade Johnson, seeking to bring out the essence of the quotation and that of the Resolution at the same time, "is such that small independent nations, small nationalities . . . , etc." The addition of the words "independent" and "small nationalities" does not seem to apply to the Negro question, so in restating the quotation, Comrade Johnson adds, "Let me repeat it, please. Small groups, nations, nationalities. . . etc."

Lenin, of course, was not talking about small groups but about "small nations." But in the dilemma that Johnson faced in justifying a "Leninist interpretation of the Negro question" could be seen the heart of the difficulty surrounding our theoretical understanding of the Negro question. No analysis of Negro history reveals the development of Negroes as a nation. Yet Negroes appear to act as a national in the sense in which the Leninist analogy is used. That is, they develop a valid independent movement of their own, they exhibit a certain subjective tendency toward "nationalism," and, in the larger cities, they take on some of the character of an "embryo nation within a nation."

To get around the dilemma, the Resolution referred to the "racial and national" aspects of the Negro struggle -- the development of "racial and national consciousness." At this stage of our development this combined term was inevitable. "We were faced," wrote Comrade Breitman, "with a problem of language, in part, and in its inadequacy in describing unique things."

What was involved, however, was not a terminological but an analytical difficulty. On the basis of the generalizations made in the '48 Resolution, the term "racial and national" was sufficient. Although imprecise, it differentiated the Negro question from the national question and represented a first important step in the development of a new theory. Two things were lacking for a more precise definition. First of all, there had been no consistent attempt to analyze the relationship between the Negro struggle and national struggles as social phenomena, and, secondly, the question of race relations as a particular form of exploitation had never been explored and analyzed by the Marxist movement.

Comrade Kirk addressed himself to the latter analysis, and subjected the question of race-relationship to an exhaustive study. This analysis required, essentially, a study of the relationship of races in the United States where it takes its pure form, for "it is only here that skin color alone, independent of cultural difference, geographical remoteness, or national identity forms the basis for discrimination and special exploitation." (Kirk).

The results of his analysis were presented in a series of lectures in Los Angeles in 1953 and in a Party bulletin in 1954. It is not my intent here to repeat his arguments, but his conclusions, simply stated, were: (1) That biological anthropology (the concept that different peoples have fundamental physical differences) has no scientific foundation and that "race is a social relationship and has only a social reality"; and (2) that racial relationships and national relationships were distinct types of special exploitation under capitalism. One can speak validly of colonial problems consisting of both racial and national exploitation. For Negroes in America, however, we can speak validly only of racial and class exploitation.

Although, initially, Comrade Kirk considered his contribution an expansion of the line of the '48 resolution, the opposition to his interpretations and evaluations

by nationalists within the party made it patently clear that although separatism was not explicitly considered in the '48 Resolution, it remained implicit. Consequently, in his Introduction to the Bulletin containing his lecture series, Kirk took sharper issue with those sections of our basic Resolution that were holdovers from the incomplete and inconclusive discussions with the Old Man.

Comrade Kirk cited references to "the Leninist conception of the Negro question," the phrase "embryo nation within a nation," and the use of the qualifying words "thus far" when describing the main thrust of the Negro struggle as being integrationist, as hangovers from a nationalist interpretation. He never took issue with the militant, revolutionary, integrationist line of the '48 Resolution, but from the reactions in the P. C. you'd have thought the heavens had fallen in. Comrade Breitman, in an answering article to Kirk's lectures and introduction, took sharp issue with him, denying his interpretation, claiming his quotations were wrested out of context and distorted, and denying their significance.

In short, rather than proceed with the excellent start in 1948, the P. C. reacted with a deaf ear or intemperate hostility to any attempt to improve our theoretical guide to action. Comrade Kirk's careful studies and his attempts to contribute to the party's understanding of the unique character of the Negro struggle were greeted as factional documents, resulting in an outburst at the '57 convention that transformed a vote on two conflicting resolutions on the Negro question into a "vote of confidence" on the party leadership.

This hostility had nothing to do with the P. C.'s adherence to the '48 Resolution. While Kirk's main thrust had been to reject what was implicit in the resolution, the P. C. felt little compunction in rejecting what was explicit. Breitman expressed surprise that Kirk, who had been the only outspoken opponent of the '48 Resolution, should appear at the '57 Convention as its defender. But by 1957, the integrationist line of the Resolution was generally ignored, and Kirk was reluctant to give up a theoretical outpost without a struggle.

During the years between 1948 and 1957 the labor movement had deserted the Negroes, labor's southern organization drive had collapsed and the integral connection between the Negro struggle and the proletarian struggle was nowhere in evidence. On the other hand, the independent Negro struggle had acquired a new momentum in the South with the Montgomery bus boycott under the leadership of King. Empirically adapting its theory to the new upsurge, and influenced by party nationalists who equate "independence" with "seperatism," the 1957 Resolution revived the concept of self-determination.

Forgetting about the integral connection between the proletariat and the Negro struggle, the P. C. discovered in time for their Draft Resolution that the "Negro struggle for equality is an integral part of the world revolutionary upsurge of the colonial and semi-colonial people." Although the Convention removed this revision, and Comrade Breitman, reporting for the P. C., brought the Resolution more into accord with the '48 Resolution, the concept of the Negro struggle as a reflex of the National struggles in Africa, Asia and South America remained the guiding line of the Militant clear through the Little Rock events of the following year.

The net result of the Draft and revisions of the '57 Resolution was a conjunctural Resolution that resolved none of the theoretical questions in dispute, and the party approached the turbulent events of the next six years from a theoretical no-mans-land. We were capable, by virtue of the revolutionary socialist character of our party, to aid

the struggle for civil rights where possible. But the party was thoroughly incapable of providing political guidance to the movement, affecting its programmatic and theoretical disputes, and winning Negro revolutionists to the party.

It was only too clear to our Negro comrades at the '61 convention that the SWP had no theoretical or strategical guide to its participation in the Negro struggle. Largely as a result of their insistent and correct demand that the party take up the Negro question immediately, a literary discussion of the Negro question was proposed.

This discussion opened inauspiciously enough with Comrade Breitman's article on New Trends in the Negro Struggle. It was an interesting and informative review of new trends, but begged the essential question. What the party needed most of all was not a picture of conjunctural trends -- as important as this may be -- but a theoretical and programmatic norm from which to judge them. With this kind of a beginning the literary discussion got nowhere.

Today the independent Negro movement is carrying out its most massive struggles of the century, embodying a brilliant set of tactics and a courageous people. This has resulted in a theoretical and programmatic ferment testing the quality of leadership. To meet this challenge, the P. C. returns--without thorough discussion to the 1939 Resolution as a theoretical guide, exhuming the corpse of our political immaturity and propping it up to lead the living struggle for equality.

The 1963 resolution represents an empirical adaptation of our theory to the Muslim movement. The "right of self-determination," omitted from the '48 Resolution revived in one paragraph in the '57 Resolution, is now to be the guiding line of the party.

The Right of Self Determination

Comrade Breitman in the past, and the P. C. in the current Resolution asserts quite correctly, that the status of Negroes in the United States is not the same as that of small nations or oppressed nations. Yet, the Right of Self Determination, which means simply the right to secede from the union, is a particular slogan and principle applying particularly to small nations. It does not logically follow that the right cannot apply to the Negro question, but if it does, this must be proven on the basis of altogether different sets of objective criteria than those presented by Lenin for small nations. This has not been done.

In his sole contribution to socialist thought, Stalin, in Marxism and the National Question, defined the nation as an "historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture." Of this definition, Trotsky wrote "This combined definition, compounding the psychological attributes of a nation with the geographic and economic conditions of its development, is not only correct theoretically but also practically fruitful, for then the solution to the problem of each nation's fate must perforce be sought along the lines of changing the material conditions of existence, beginning with territory."

Towards the movement for national independence that developed in these nations, the Bolsheviks projected the demand for the right of self determination. There was here no advocacy of secession as such, for the Marxist leaders recognized the advantages, even for small nations of proletarian and revolutionary internationalism over bourgeois nationalism. But a nationalist movement seeking independence could

strike crushing blows against Czarism in particular and against imperialism in general even when projected along bourgeois lines.

But the following salient features must be noted about this demand:

1) The concept was not based solely upon subjective desires but on very definite objective criteria "beginning with territory" and including economic unity. There is no historical justification for the assertion of our '57 Resolution that "Since minority peoples have the democratic right to exercise self-determination, socialists would be obligated to support such demands if they reflected the popular will."

"The right to secede" applies to actual national existence and not simple to desires." To the oppressed Jewish minority, who in addition to suffering discrimination, had both an historically developed language and culture of their own, the Bolsheviks never projected the idea of "Self Determination." The Fourth International remained adamantly opposed to the Zionist movement, even when the Jewish population suffered persecution second to none in history.

2) The movement for national independence, economic unity and political freedom was essentially bourgeois. The progressive feature of such a bourgeois movement for the proletariat and the people was determined by the fact that, within the nation, such a movement could overcome the economic backwardness and cultural stagnation. Its significance internationally resulted from the effect such movements would have on breaking up the power of imperialism.

But there was no concession here to national chauvanism. Lenin wrote: "If the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights against the oppressing one, we are always, in every case, and more resolutely than anyone else, in favor: for we are the staunchest and most consistent enemies of oppression... But if the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation stand for its own bourgeois nationalism we are opposed... we do not condone the strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nations." (emphasis Lenin's)

3) Self determination or secession was considered as a line of struggle against the Czarist or imperialist national state. The concept that an ethnic or cultural group would and should have the right to its own independent existence under a workers state is something else again. It would be in keeping with our democratic principles to say to a Negro separatist, "Join the proletariat in the overthrow of American capitalism and the Workers' government will insure you a state of your own." This is a thoroughly valid statement, though I doubt if it has had any effect upon Negroes with a separatist orientation in the many years comrades have used this argument. But the right to a separate existence under a Workers state has nothing to do with the "Right of Self-Determination." -- is indeed contrary to the meaning of self determination -- for it, in effect, denies the validity of an independent movement for a national state now.

4) The right of self determination, like the national problem itself, was always subordinate to the international and class character of socialist doctrine; the national struggle was considered subsidiary to the class struggle and a manifestation of it.

The central consideration, therefore, in working out a program was whether the national struggle for independence advanced the class struggle against capitalism and the fight for socialism. In addition to cracking the stronghold of the capitalist state,

the right of self-determination acted as a unifying force between the proletariat of the exploiting nation and the peasantry and working class of the exploited nation. The demand attacked the chauvanism of the former and raised their international consciousness. It was particularly designed to expose the imperialist state and the reformists, and present the proletarian movement as the only real ally of the colonial national struggle.

Trotsky, considering the Negro question, obviously assumed, or was given the impression, that the Negro struggle for equality corresponded to the above features of European nationalism. "Beginning with territory," he generally accepted the concept of a black belt as a center or potential center of Negro nationalism. He referred to the Negro as "very backward," thereby assuming both their rural backwardness and lack of participation in the political life of the nation, concluding that they had yet to make a decision on the path toward their own emancipation. He thought that seperatism was a concept endorsed by the proletarian and agrarian sections of the Negro population as against the assimilationist tendencies of the middle class and the talented tenth. He assumed that the demand for the Right of Self-Determination, when raised among white workers, would have a radicalizing effect upon their political and class consciousness.

Upon this foundation -- the objective conditions and subjective historical conditions -- he proposed the Right of Self-Determination, not on the basis of general democratic principle.

Is it really necessary at this late date to prove how invalid these assumptions were?

While the southern structure, based upon the enforced peonage of the Negroes and a white middle class "which derived special privileges from the degradation of labor in general and the Negro in particular" (Kirk), many similarities with colonial structures of national oppression, the differences were more decisive.

Unlike the indigenous nationalities in small nations, the Negro population has never been a majority of the southern population -- today the ratio of Negroes to white is about 1--4 --and we have always considered the black belt as a rather arbitrary territorial designation. While in 1939 there was some speculation that the stagnation of capitalist economy would carry with it the entrenchment of sharecropping and the return of Negroes to the South, the tendency has been in an opposite direction and it is doubtful that even the arbitrary black belt still exists. At any rate the black belt has never been a center of either economic unity or cultural development of Negroes, and the current developments in the South, in keeping with the entire historical role of the Negro people, indicate that it has never been a center for separatist sentiments.

The concept of Negro economic and political backwardness has long been exploded. The Negro population is in its majority today urban and proletarian and, in general, more politically advanced than the white workers and acutely aware of international revolutionary movements and the imperialist role of the government. In 1948 we already recongized that "In the lives of the great masses of the Negroes and even in the petty-bourgeois Negro press there is a mounting tendency to reject not only in words but in action, the shiboleths of American democracy and thereby, through conclusions from their own experience, to approach the truths of Marxism."

So far as the path to equality was concerned, by 1948 we had already, by virtue of a deeper historical and objective understanding of the Negro question, pretty well decided on the path. I was not as capable as Comrade Kirk in reading between the lines of the document and noting that the 1948 resolution did indeed keep open the door for separatism. Like most of the comrades at the 1948 Convention, I supported Johnson's summary of 300 years of Negro history that the Negro struggle has deep historic roots in the past of America and an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling.

The notion that separatism represents a proletarian concept as against the middle-class orientation toward integration, belongs also in the archives of history -- the proletarian and lumpen-proletarian membership of the Muslims notwithstanding. The only sections of the Negro community that derive any benefits from segregation, or at least are able to live with it, are precisely the middle classes. However strong may be the subjective desires of sections of the proletariat, ghettoized and pauperized in a decaying white bourgeois society, separatism represents a Utopian and defeatist orientation towards a bourgeois national state.

While denying that separatism is Utopian, the '63 Resolution does recognize that the major weakness of the Muslims is the fact that they "lack a program of action enabling them to participate in and influence partial, immediate, and transitional struggles of the Negro masses." This is, to say the least, a decisive weakness, but I would suggest they have a few other weaknesses.

The Muslims accept the racist doctrine of capitalist society. They are utterly regressive on the concept of the role of women in society. They are contemptuous of the American Negro and his role in the history of the United States. They make up their own private myths as a substitute for history. They are fanatically religious and anti-Semitic. Finally, and most important, they are antagonistic to the fundamental line of the Negro struggle for integration and ~~oppose the unification~~ of the Negro struggle and working class struggle which alone can insure victory.

These are not accidental features. The unrealism of separatism makes the Muslim Mystique very real. From unrealizable dreams comes the reality of lunacy.

The major road block to an advancing Negro struggle is its isolation from the labor movement and the white working class. What hinders its further development is the quiescence of the trade unionists, and the demoralization and political helplessness of unorganized and super-exploited workers. What it suffers from is the lack of a radical program that can unite black and white in the struggle against segregation.

The effect of separatism is to minimize the significance of this isolation. Comrade Johnson in his report on the Negro Resolution, in 1948, stated:

"The actual concrete facts... show us... that the Negro movement logically and historically and concretely is headed for the proletariat. That is the road it has always taken in the past, the road to the revolutionary forces. Today the proletariat is that force... It must go there. There is nowhere else to go.

"And further... if it doesn't go there, the difficulties that the Negroes... (will suffer)... will be ten, one hundred, ten thousand times as great as in the past. The independent Negro movement, which is boiling and moving, must find its way to the proletariat. If the proletariat is not able to support it, the repression of past times... will be infinitely more terrible today."

In short, the only separate existence the Negro people are likely to achieve in this capitalist society will be in an American Buchenwald.

The campaign for a separate national state acts as a brake on the participation of the Negro working masses in the class struggle in the United States, separates them from the proletariat, gives them autonomous goals to strive for, and creates illusions as to the possibility of improving their lot within the framework of decaying capitalism.

The idea that the right of self determination when presented by white workers could act as a lever for overcoming white chauvanism and unifying white and Negro workers is, of course, sheer nonsense. So far as the majority of white chauvanist, proletarian Americans are concerned, nothing would please them more than for the Negroes to "get the hell out of the country." It would be difficult to find a better concept than separatism to appeal to the chauvanism of white workers and permanently alienate the Negro population from the white working class.

Comrade Vernon is quite correct when he considers assimilation into the status quo as both undesirable and unthinkable. But there is no possibility, except for individuals in the middle class, to assimilate into the status quo. Integration implies a radical change in the social structure of the United States and particularly in the class consciousness of American workers. There should be little doubt that the American working class, white and Negro, will never accomplish anything until they have gotten rid of the virus of national and racial chauvanism, which has its roots in segregation.

In short, while the Party Resolution in 1948, the continued studies of comrades in Negro history, and our participation in the Negro struggle have pretty much destroyed the foundations for the concept of the "Right of Self-Determination," the party clings to this principle and expounds it at every manifestation of national consciousness that develops in the struggle for equality.

Why?

Foundations of the Concept of Self-Determination

Since there have been no new arguments presented for the Nationalist interpretation of the Negro question, the sole justification for the continuation of this concept appears to lie in a legacy from Trotsky which we are loath to discard. At the root of the problem is our ideological heritage from the Third International, and an ideological conservatism that hesitates to venture onto new soil.

In post-war years we ventured upon a valid new theoretical study of the Negro question which resulted in the '48 Resolution. Nevertheless, while rejecting the ultimatism of the Stalinist conception of black belt separatism, the party leadership shied away from the "ultimatism" of its own theoretical conclusions and the break it implied with our ideological heritage. The result was the reference to "The Leninist (nationalist) conception of the Negro question," which left the door open for an escape back to orthodoxy.

Had Johnson and our Negro cadre remained in the party, and the northern Negro movement returned to its vitality of the mid-forties, it is likely that the "Leninist conception of the Negro question", "the right of self-determination" and the discussions with the old man would be remembered today as youthful stages in the development of our theory. This was not to be the case.

The Negroe struggle developed in isolation from a labor movement in rapid retreat. The independent Negro struggle developed in the South, urged on by local and national conditions, but also inspired by successful colonial revolutions abroad. The party, isolated from the living southern movement for integration, and without its large Negro cadre, beat a hasty retreat from the developing analysis of the unique character of the Negro struggle.

The hostility to Comrade Kirk's contributions, followed by the misnamed '57 Resolution -- "The Class Struggle Road to Negro Equality" -- were only transitions to a full escape to orthodoxy. The '57 Resolution, so valiantly defended by the P. C., was a dead letter almost by the time it got off the press and seems to be thoroughly forgotten today.

In 1963 we are back to Trotsky in 1933, and back on our Leninist and -- if you will pardon the expression -- Stalinist foundations. With a vengeance. Once more the separatist and nationalist tendencies are viewed as the real revolutionary tendencies in the Negro movement. The very real movement for integration plays second fiddle to the mystical Muslims.

Clearly, when Comrade Johnson broke with the party, he smashed the '48 Resolution in the process. Comrade Breitman appeared to try to hold the pieces together in 1957, but today this one unique and important contribution of the SWP to political theory is virtually lost completely.

Empiricism and Reformism

The Right of Self Determination seems to have the peculiar quality of being able to hold together the most diverse concepts of the Negro question and the most diverse programs for its solution.

By its indecisiveness, it holds together the adherents of the old socialist and trade unionist concept that the Negro struggle is merely a part of the working class struggle and will be resolved by the white workers, and those who adhere to a separatist concept. Each concept comes to the fore at the right time. It also unites the concept of bourgeois reformist solution of the Negro question and a socialist solution. It makes room in the party for the Negro militant and white workers with traces of chauvanism. For this reason, comrades with the most divergent evaluations of the Negro question always unite when the "Right" is questioned, or the party's position on conjunctural developments is criticized from a revolutionary integrationist standpoint.

This peculiarly undialectical unity of opposites was revealed in the discussion on the troops slogan when Comrade Dobbs and Comrade Lavan supported the demand from clearly contradictory approaches.

The stenogram of the P. C. discussion on the "Troops slogan" revealed that several comrades supported the demand on the grounds that the government could not accede to it, and it would, therefore, expose their hypocrisy on the Negro question. Comrade Dobbs contended that the demand for federal troops would emphasize the "failure of the federal government to act to enforce its own laws against terroristic acts and to enforce the democratic rights of the Negro people."

But for whose benefit were we conducting an exposure? The 1948 Resolution noted that the "Negroes more than any other social grouping in the country...have repudiated the fetishism of American democracy as the quintessence of freedom and

equality of rights and opportunities..." This estimate was essentially correct. The mass of the Negro people, and particularly the Negro radicals to whom we should have been oriented, had no ingrained illusions about the role of the Federal government at that time. Even in the NAACP, the Till case had pretty much destroyed what illusions were lying around. As a consequence, the demand for federal troops, while it was effective to a certain extent in dispelling illusions among white workers and liberals, resounded with a dull thud in the Negro community and particularly among the Negroes in the South.

The reaction, or lack of it, was to be expected. The demand never grew out of the militancy of the Negro people themselves. It arose in the wake of the demoralization and disgust that followed the Till demonstrations. The legal program of the NAACP collapsed and the sole program remaining was a call to God to intervene -- nobody had any confidence in the government. A left wing, still clinging to the legalism of the NAACP, but trying to push it as far as possible, raised the demand for troops. The result, at that time, was a further exposure of the federal government -- if one was needed. But, basically, it was a cry of desperation; not a call for action.

Until King picked up the demand as his own -- as a justification for and defense of pacifism -- it never appeared in conjunction with the mass actions of the Negro people. Even at the height of the struggle in Little Rock, the demand for troops was not raised. This was not at all a result of the political backwardness of the Negro people. On the contrary, they lacked that reliance on the government that was required to seriously present the demand for troops. Even Louis Armstrong and the editors of the Negro press did not ask the government for troops, they asked it to "go to hell."

Under such circumstances, the demand for troops could not overcome illusions. It could only serve to restore illusions, and the government has used troops pretty much for that purpose.

The comrades who supported the troops demand, due to an underestimation of the level of Negro consciousness and the flexibility of the government, either underestimated the social impact of the independent Negro movement in isolation from the proletariat or had a bad case of myopia. But others supported it from what must be considered a reformist standpoint. It was in the editorial staff of the Militant that the most serious illusions existed.

Comrade Lavan supported the Troops slogan from the standpoint that it was valid whether the government did or did not send troops. He did not consider the sending of troops improbable; he envisioned them as practically initiating a new Reconstruction.'

Not forgetting this inspired prediction, the Militant was to write in 1958 when the Troops appeared in Little Rock: "At each crucial stage in the fight for the enforcement of the rights they now possess on paper, the Negro people will be in a position to demand federal intervention when they need it." (As the heroic Hotspur answered the claim of the dreamer Glendower that he could "call spirits from the deep" -- "But, will they come when you do call for them?")

The various positions in the P. C. were resolved by their joint acceptance of a slogan raised by a vocal, desperate wing of the reformist NAACP. They were also resolved by the uniform objection to the more correct position of Kirk, who attacked the troops slogan from an appreciation of the power of the Southern civil rights struggle and a recognition of the revolutionary character of the struggle for civil rights.

"Concretely," wrote Comrade Kirk to the P. C., "it is highly probable that Federal troops will be sent to the South some time during the coming period whether we ask for them or not. The social antagonisms are too great to be indefinitely contained by the traditional terroristic police regime, and sooner or later the troops will be called. Any analysis should begin with this probability..."

"...the most probable condition under which the Federal government will send troops to the south will be that the Negroes hold the initiative in the struggle. As long as the white supremacists have the initiative and the lid of repression is clamped on tightly, the social equilibrium is not upset by lynching or other terroristic actions. When the Negroes take the initiative it is a 'race riot' and the public security is threatened and an excellent reason is given to the government to intervene..."

"When the Negroes hold the initiative it will be the function of the Federal army to restore law and order on the basis of the existing social system..."

Is it really necessary, after Birmingham and Little Rock to prove how much more in keeping with the course of development Kirk's outlook was than that of the P. C. or the Militant? When we should have been warning the Negro militants of the dangers involved in the intervention of Federal Troops, we were, as a matter of policy, looking forward to it. By constantly implying that the government would not send troops, we gave, in effect, the government a clean bill of health when they did.

Blind to the power of the Southern Negro movement and the absolute necessity of the imperialist government to control it, the Militant took recourse in a nationalist interpretation of the Negro question during the Little Rock events. Looking at the world through the wrong end of a spy glass, they saw the colonial revolution, through the instrumentality of the U. S. government and its troops, instituting a new Reconstruction in the south!

The sending of troops to Little Rock was no more an attempt to placate a world public opinion than it was an attempt to overcome Jim Crow. It was clearly designed to strengthen the waning confidence in the capitalist state and win back the Negro lieutenants of capitalism without making any real concessions to the Negro people. The troops forced the admission of the students to Central High, but at the same time, they re-established the prestige, of legalism in the civil rights struggle, brought about a reversal of the position of Armstrong and others who had refused to be spokesmen for American imperialism abroad, checked for a time the Southern offensive, and brought about the condition where the partial integration in Little Rock and throughout the South took a step backward. While the troops entered in response to Negro pressure, their arrival coincided with a general agreement between the government and southern reaction to protect the Jim Crow system.

Happily, by the time Birmingham came around, the situation was so clear that even the Militant was partially aware of why troops were sent. The Southern Reconstruction under the protection of government troops was dropped, for the time being, (and without, of course, any reconsideration of the "troops" slogan) into the ash can.

The adoption of the troops slogan was only the most flagrant example of how a trade unionist under-estimation of the independent Negro struggle, a reformist approach to the Negro question and a nationalist interpretation can unite in what turns out to be nothing more than an empirical adaptation to some current moods in the Negro struggle. Guided by a theory that has no foundation in the Negro struggle, the party has switched easily from ^{one} orientation to another: first, to the NAACP as the source of any new radical Negro movement -- (the CIO, remember, grew out of the AFL); then to an uncritical support of King's pacifist movement

(as a reflection of the colonial revolution); then to the radical integrationism of Williams (you've got to be right sometimes); and now to the separatist ideology of the Muslims (to our everlasting discredit).

The result has been a marked tailendism in which our theory and prognosis have consistently lagged behind the course of events. This was not a result of inability to know the facts, but the refusal to appreciate the power of a revolutionary integrationist orientation. Both Johnson and Kirk had pointed out that both on the economic and political level, the system of segregation is an essential part of the American system of exploitation. The '48 Resolution stated clearly that the "interest of capitalism demand the maintenance and perpetuation of the southern system." And further, "to contend bourgeois democracy is capable of regenerating and reforming the south for the benefit of the Negro is to whitewash and embellish the present promoters and beneficiaries of Negro persecution. Only the proletarian revolution can free the Negroes, cleanse this social sewer and reorganize the economy."

The Right of Self Determination, on the other hand, is a sort of grab bag, which supplies the theoretical foundation for our support to and participation in all struggles for equality, without intervening in or criticizing the leadership or program of these struggles. In short, it provides the party with political flexibility while relieving it of political responsibility.

Non-Interference

Perhaps the biggest justification for the theory of the Right of Self Determination is the idea that we cannot dictate to the Negro people their course of struggle. This concept is a reaction against the repugnant approach of the Stalinists who insisted on a separatist future for the Negro people.

There is, however, one important difference between the Stalinist approach and ours. The Stalinist program was not geared to a revolutionary perspective; our is -- or should be. There is a world of difference between insisting upon an integrationist line of struggle that can result in victory for equality and socialism, and a separatist line which can only result in the defeat of the movement for equality and a setback in the struggle for socialism.

Important as this argument has appeared in the past, it is not the basis but the result of a wrong theory. So long as the party is not clear on its perspectives, it is just as well that it not dictate to others.

But there is absolutely no principle involved. We have never felt any compunction about criticizing the trade union leadership or proposing a line of struggle. We have, of course, recognized that it was not always feasible to intervene tactically where we had no influence; but this is just plain good sense. We do not at this stage determine the line of struggle of the working class and we govern ourselves accordingly.

Similarly with the Negro struggle. We are not the determinants of the line of struggle. But the party does have a responsibility, not only to support, the fight for integration, but, more important, to provide political guidance to the militant and more class conscious Negroes in the struggle. This we can accomplish by a correct evaluation of the line of struggle and the road to victory. It is primarily in this way we can hope to build a party cadre.

Given a correct orientation, opportunities for such intervention are many. In his article on "New Trends," Comrade Breitman noted that "A good opportunity to... expose the inconsistencies and flaws in the passive resistance policy was provided by

the Freedom Riders. There King and CORE warned the riders not to defend themselves against violence and urged the Negro community not to defend the riders when they were assaulted -- at the same time that they were appealing to the government to stop and prevent the attacks.

"We support and engage in all struggles against the Jim Crow system, including those led by the passive resisters. Simultaneously we criticize their leaders for restricting the struggle and subordinating it to the narrow middle-class dogma; for obstructing the defense of Negroes violently attacked by white supremacists; and for failing to connect immediate battles with broader struggle to take power away from the ruling class that is responsible for the perpetuation of Jim Crow."

This is perfectly correct. But, although Breitman is considered the party's leading spokesman, these ideas never appeared in the Militant's uncritical eulogies of the Freedom Riders. At any rate, they come a little late to affect the more advanced Negro militants who were coming to these conclusions many years before but could find no political guide in the party's literature.

Even before the '57 convention, Comrade Blake was pointing out the ideological ferment in the Negro community between supporters of "pacifism" and "fight back." These articles were rejected by the Militant. Even in the wake of the Little Rock events, where the conflict between Ghandism and a fighting Negro community broke out in full force, the editor of the Militant saw no need to "attack Ghandism for its role in the Negro struggle."

There have been some rather excellent evaluations of tendencies and trends presented for the party over the last years, but unfortunately Negro militants do not have access to our internal bulletins.

Today we have more than ample opportunity to point out the contradiction between the reformist policy of the Negro leadership and the revolutionary character of their demands for integration. We should be noting the contradiction between the verbal militancy of the Muslims, and their separatist program which demoralizes and disorients the radicals. Instead, just as it was enthralled by the NAACP and King in the past, the P. C. is enthralled by the militancy of the Black Muslims and finds them "the most dynamic force in the Northern Negro community."

The other justification for non-interference is that "the Negro has not made up his mind yet." For years, while the southern movement was engaged in more and more concerted struggles for integration, Comrade Breitman insisted: "We have not heard from the South yet." Now that the southern movement has spoken in unmistakable clarity -- again -- the 1963 Resolution discovers that "the Negroes concentrated in the big ghettos of the North and South have yet to be heard from."

I suggest that the deafness is more ideological than physical. The "Freedom Now" resolution notes that "in 1939... the mass of the Negroes had not yet expressed themselves definitely" on the question of integration or separatism. In 1948 "It was clear that the vast majority of the Negroes were integrationist..." Today "more Negroes than ever before are actively engaged in assaulting the Jim Crow barriers." But the P. C. just will not hear what they do not want to hear and concludes that "we still must await their definitive decision."

The question of whether the "mass of the Negro people have ... taken a stand on these questions" is of decisive tactical importance, but from the standpoint of our theory and orientation it is a matter of secondary importance. The white worker has

The reformist leadership is oriented toward the state, the business community and the labor bureaucracy, while the Muslims are oriented to no one but themselves.

This is not to disparage the current developing Negro leadership, many of whom are already far ahead of the party, not only on tactical questions, but also in their appreciation of the theoretical and political issues involved in the struggle for equality. But the Marxist Party was created to lead and not to tail-end the revolutionary movement. The fundamental responsibility for presenting a program and building a revolutionary leadership in the Negro struggle lies with us.

It is, of course, true that we are outside the Negro struggle looking in and that we are in composition a white party. But as a revolutionary Marxist Party we are in essence of the Negro people, we are historically the only representative of the socialist goal of the Negro struggle.

We are also, in case nobody noticed lately, outside the struggle of white workers today. And if we face the facts of life, more isolated from the white working class than we are from Negro, for while the opposition of the state and the labor bureaucracy to the socialist movement has a deep response among white workers, the opposition of the Negro leadership has no penetrating influence in the consciousness of Negro workers. Any Militant salesman or S.W.P. political campaigner knows that. What hinders us in going to the Negro movement is our political tail-endism, the lack of a clear and advanced program, and an organized opposition against us, directed in the main by the Muslims, but willingly participated in by all reformist tendencies.

The fact is that the S.W.P. looks upon itself as a white party and the concept of non-interference merely gives expression to this self-image. By refusing to intervene politically in the Negro struggle, we create a white wall to a Negro cadre. The 1963 resolution calls upon Negro Marxists, Negro socialists and the colonial revolution to imbue the Negro struggle with militant, anti-capitalist, socialist content. The participation of our Negro comrades in the Civil Rights movement is important and effective, but the fundamental responsibility for intervening in the Negro struggle lies with the Socialist Workers Party in the United States of America and not with the colonial revolution and not our Negro comrades exclusively.

We will never build a party until we have convinced both black and white that Socialism has no color!

Conclusion

What is it that we can provide to the Negro movement for equality at this time? More specifically, what is it that the militants leading the struggle can gain from the party?

Certainly we cannot provide the movement with mass leadership or even tactical guidance today, except in isolated circumstances. We have not the forces to do so, even where we can break through the color barrier.

We can supply publicity, and some measure of aid in our personal participation. We can also work at overcoming the prejudices of white workers, particularly among militants in the plants.

All of this is extremely limited, however, by our own weakness in numbers and influence — a fact which most Negroes are well aware of.

What we have to supply, we have not supplied since 1950, and this is the source of our isolation from the most advanced Negro politicals who look upon S.W.P. membership as a detriment to their work in the Negro struggle.

What we have to supply is, first of all, our revolutionary socialist perspective. But this will not matter too much as long as we continue to be -- what Rev. Cleague obviously considered Breitman to be in the symposium printed in the ISR -- a sort of SLP in the Negro struggle. We have to move from the general perspective of socialism and anti-capitalism to a clear exposition of the viable line of struggle in the Negro community, the presentation of a program that corresponds with that development, a correct analysis of the objective and subjective developments in the struggle for equality, and a correct estimate of the various trends and tendencies in the Negro movement -- clearly delineating their class basis, their political perspectives and their future.

This is, of course, impossible, so long as we hold to the either-or-proposition of the Right of Self Determination, so long as we evaluate the trends in the Negro struggle solely on the basis of militancy and not on the basis of program, and so long as we hold that "our best friends are Negro" whether it is the Urban League or the Black Muslims.

There is no denying the fact that our appearance as a "white party" is an obstacle in gaining a hearing from the Negro militants rising to political consciousness on the basis of a vague "nationalism." But we cannot "jump out of our skins" as long as we keep acting like a white party and almost uncritically support every tendency that develops in the Negro struggle and consider it wrong in principle to intervene in the conflicts over theory and program. In a word, so long as we act very much as all white liberals act in the Negro struggle -- only a little more militant and sincere.

We will be able to overcome the antipathy to our skin color when we begin to act as partisans in the Negro struggle and recognize the fact that "some of our opponents are Negro." In 1948, in citing the integral connection between the emancipation of the working class and the liberation of the Negro people from capitalist de-generation, the party stated, "The only road to freedom for the workers, and to equality for the Negroes, is through their common struggle for the abolition of capitalism." We are not on the freedom train because we are do-gooders and we have no exit stop because our central and major concern is the emancipation of the proletariat and all of society from the oppression of capitalism -- a perspective which is impossible without the participation and leadership of Negroes. But nobody in the Negro movement will take us seriously until we take ourselves seriously -- until we begin to wage a political struggle against those tendencies in the Negro movement that obstruct this perspective.

In 1948 we stated: "The Party wages unceasing struggle against the Negro petty-bourgeois leadership, the same type of struggle that it carries on against the union bureaucracy. It strives for an unambiguous militant program based upon the needs and readiness for struggle of the broad masses. It seeks to replace the vacillating, reformist petty-bourgeois leadership with a militant leadership fighting on the principles of the class struggle and in closest alliance with organized labor and the Marxist revolutionists."

Yet except for a short period following the '48 resolution, when we carried a series of critical articles in the F.I., we have almost blindly supported every tendency in the Negro movement. Even as the Muslims bar the door to our admission into the Negro community, we look upon them as friends.

Instead of an unambiguous militant program we project day dreams: the concept of a New Reconstruction under the aegis of federal troops; the dream of a revolutionary separatism; the current fantasy of a broad, independent, classless Negro Party.

The foundation of this latter perspective is a schematism that rivals the aerie prognosis of a New Reconstruction. First, you see, there will be this national Negro Party, which due to the unique character of the Negro struggle in the United States, will be different even from national parties in Africa and Asia and have no class character whatsoever. Then -- we don't know when -- there will be a Labor Party, which somehow -- we don't know how -- will link itself up with this classless black party. Finally, there is the SWP which will join the other two in a revolutionary anti-capitalist movement because it is convoked by history to do so.

To such dreamy formalism does the Nationalist interpretation of the Negro question lead the Party! Is it any wonder that now when the Negro movement is in sharp ideological ferment -- in spite of the united front in the Freedom Now movement -- and where what is needed is precisely a political program, we are looked upon as outsiders? Comrade Vernon asks the Party to keep its nose out of the Negro struggle except to provide a little publicity and help here and there. This is precisely what we have been doing, and if the last ten years are any criterion, it may be all we can do.

It would, of course, be foolhardy to alter the character of our political intervention as long as the Party remains confused in its political perspectives. Everything points to the fact that we are far more capable, and far more likely, to learn from the Negro movement than to teach it anything. Our non-intervention in the political struggle in the Negro community will not help the struggle particularly, and it certainly will not help us to recruit a cadre; but at least we will not expose our errors. In the long run, as the revolutionary integrationism of the Negro movement asserts itself so clearly that we will even be able to hear it at 116 University Place, we'll be on the barricades. We never yet have failed to recognize a revolution once it occurred.

But a revolutionary party is created to lead and not tail-end a revolution. It is therefore an elementary responsibility for the party, that it review its theory and conjunctural evaluations and program in the light of the class struggle -- to test it, correct it, and sharpen it. It is an elementary responsibility that we intervene in the Negro struggle with an "unambiguous militant program."

July 1963

CORRECTIONS

1. Vol. 24, No. 11, "Why White Radicals are Incapable of Understanding Black Nationalism," by R. Vernon. See page 34, next to last paragraph, last sentence, which reads: "On the other hand, 'repatriation' of individuals or small groups of Negroes who can be absorbed by a given African country, especially if these individuals have valuable skills, if possible." should read: "is possible."

2. Vol. 24, No. 30, "Looking Beyond the Freedom Now Draft Resolution," by R. Vernon. See page 9, third paragraph. Sentence reading: "It will be fortunate if comrades 'get off the train' at this point, and invoke a sacred litany of 'trade unions good, capitalist government bad' against the unruly Negroes who refuse to listen to 'Marxist' reason.", should read "It will be unfortunate ..."