

YSA

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The Historical Setting

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YOUNG SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

YSA, BOX 471, COOPER STATION, N.Y. 3, N.Y.

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THE STRUGGLE FOR FULL EQUALITY: THE HISTORICAL SETTING

by Peter Camejo

Introduction

Since the YSA was founded in 1960 we have learned through our own experiences the importance of theory in order to act correctly. Our analysis of black nationalism, for instance, made it possible for us to collaborate with the revolutionary trend represented by Malcolm X. We did this while almost all other so-called socialists in the U.S. were busy criticizing us for our sell-out to "racism-in-reverse."

The Stalinists, social democrats and liberals in general are always ready to lecture us for not massing our forces South of the Mason Dixon line and for not doing "community work" in the Northern ghettos. But our decisions regarding these matters, as well as all others, are based upon a general understanding of the struggles taking place, their direction and tempo and always on our perspective of building a revolutionary socialist movement.

Liberals, who are idealists as opposed to materialists, in their outlook, try to explain the Negro Freedom Movement solely in subjective terms. As materialists we know that there is an interrelationship between the subjective and objective and that one must understand the objective context before one can correctly deal with the subjective factors.

With respect to the South where we have less direct information and where very contradictory phenomena occur it is especially important to have our feet on solid ground regarding the objective situation before discussing and evaluating the meaning of recent events.

I will begin by briefly surveying the major experiences which the Negro people have gone through as a people, the concrete material conditions which brought about the Southern form of racism, the changes that have taken place in the objective situation in the South, and the national changes in the relationship of forces between the ruling class and the oppressed Negro minority.

Historical Background

There are three major experiences the Negro people have had since slavery that have determined their present situation in the United States. They are: A. The Second American Revolution (1860-1877)- This period was marked by the end of chattel slavery, the drive toward economic integration (land reform), and the drive toward political

rights (suffrage, equality before the law, etc).

B. The reaction against gains made during the Second American Revolution (1877-1940)- The establishment of racism as an integral part of modern industrial American capitalism, the establishment of the specific Southern form of racism, and the confinement of the Negro people as a landless rural working class, a unique class status at that time, were the main features of this long period.

C. The urbanization and industrialization of the Negro people (1940-1965)- These 25 years witnessed the formation of huge ghettos centrally located in the major cities in both the North and South, the entry into industry of over one and a half million Negro workers, the establishment of the Negro people as a major supply of cheap labor for the cities and a resurgence in the struggle against racism.

These dates are rough in the sense that the actual events overlap each other. Defeats were dealt the Second American Revolution well before 1877 while certain gains were never lost after 1877. Similarly, urbanization and industrialization had been in progress since 1880. However, this process took a qualitative leap with the Second World War and has since engulfed the mass of the Negro people.

The development of the United States as an imperialist power and the rise of the colonial revolution on the international arena has been deeply interrelated with the Negro Struggle in this country.

The Establishment of Jim Crow

The word Jim Crow was originally used to describe the formal segregation established in the South and partially copied in the North after Reconstruction. The word described the new form that racial oppression took. Its use gradually became synonymous with racism.

This specific form of racism was the result of the conflict over the more general question of racism or equality. Every curtailment of civil rights, through Jim Crow legislation, strengthens racism in general while a blow against the Jim Crow form of racial oppression is a blow to racism in general. However, even if every formal aspect of Jim Crow were eliminated from the United States racism would not be eliminated. They are not identical.

Marx noticed that once the capitalist class becomes dominant over pre-capitalist ruling classes it may turn against its own bourgeois democratic forms and use many of the reactionary pre-capitalist forms of oppression. After the civil war, as the industrial bourgeoisie achieved

its domination, it sought to use the racist heritage left from chattel slavery.

The form that racism took was determined by the class struggle in the South. The specific forms that racism developed in the United States after the civil war were molded by the desperate need for a cheap labor supply to work the Southern plantations profitably.

If the land reform demanded by the Negro people, of forty acres per head in each family had been won, it could have taken only one ninth of the slaves ex-owners' land, leaving almost 90% with no one to work it. There was even enough public land within the South, not to speak of the West, to carry out such a reform without touching the slave-owners land. Also, the crops involved were very vulnerable to strikes, since they have short periods of critical work necessary to keep the whole crop from being lost. The primitiveness of Southern agriculture made it profitable only under a qualitatively cheaper labor cost than existed in the North. All attempts to introduce white Northern workers, Chinese workers or white Southern workers failed.

The industrial capitalists joined hands, either through direct ownership or indirect control, with the Southern land owners to smash reconstruction, not only to provide the cheap labor supply, but to weaken the non-capitalist classes' opposition to their rule. Racism as a weapon has been used by the ruling class to divide the workers movement, break strikes, and justify its imperialist policies. In the South it became the key to providing a cheap labor supply.

In order to succeed, Jim Crow had to curtail: 1. The Negroes right to own land; 2. The right to move about freely and change employers; 3. The right to equal treatment under the law; 4. The political right to hold office, vote, organize parties or unions, etc.

Three important factors entered into the relationship of forces which made it possible for the ruling class to defeat Reconstruction and drive the Negro people into the status of a landless rural proletariat without the rights usually acquired by an industrial proletariat. First, the industrial working class was still a minority, unorganized, and removed from the South by hundreds of miles. Second, the Negro people were spread out across a vast area, with all the handicaps left by slavery making it difficult to organize and defend their interests. Third, the capitalist class had support from the huge property-owning class, especially small farm owners whose race and class prejudices were whipped up against the Negro people by the capitalist press and political parties.

To summarize: Racism is a product of capitalism although it is in contradiction to the bourgeois revolution.

The specific form racism took in the United States after the Civil War was the result of economic needs of the capitalist class and the class relationship of forces.

World War II and After

In December, 1939, the New International, the forerunner of the International Socialist Review, carried a special article about the Negro people. This article stated that: "The bulk of the Negroes in the United States live in the South....The proportion of Negroes in the Black Belt has remained constant since before the Civil War, comprising about 50% of the Negro population.... Despite the great northward migration of the Southern Negro, about three-fourths of the Negro people, rural and urban, still live in areas directly influenced by the plantation system.... More than half the Negroes are still rural; most of these are farm operators.... To grasp the fundamentals of Negro life today we must examine the plantation system that shapes and overshadows it."

After 1940 the South began to change rapidly. Economically the "chief features", writes J.H. O'Dell in the Fall, 1963, Freedomways: "...of this (new) phase are widespread use of machines in Southern agriculture, eliminating mules and manual labor; the rise of the dairy industry, cattle raising and poultry farming, all of which have combined to reduce cotton's importance as a cash crop; and such new industries as aluminum, the petro-chemicals, aircraft and clothing manufacturers have been added to the older industries, thereby radically increasing the South's total manufacturing output.

"Contrary to popular belief, by 1960, the South ceased to be an agricultural sub-region. What we have today is a developed urban-industrial economy in the South which, in the main features of economic life compares favorably with the United States as a whole."

The shortage of labor in the basic industries in the North and West during World War II removed barriers to Negro migration to the North and the result was a massive migration which has continued, at varying pace, up to and including 1965.

The following figures indicate the migration out of the old South:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Percentage of Negro Population Living in the South</u>
1860	92%
1910	89%
1930	78%
1940	77%
1965	50%

The depression stopped the migration

There was also a large migration within the South from the deep South to the border states which is not indicated in

the above figures.

Within the entire South a migration took place from the countryside into the cities. The dynamics of this can be seen not only in the figures relating to the population but in the economic changes.

At the end of World War II 99% of the cotton was picked by hand. By 1965 90% was picked by machines. The uneven development of changes within the South is indicated by the fact that Mississippi still had 73% of its cotton picked by hand in 1958 but by 1965 it had only 19% picked by hand.

Negroes in the South who still work in agriculture are primarily concentrated in the tobacco belt in the East coast states. There are one million Negroes (counting entire family) working on tobacco farms and half a million on cotton. However the tobacco industry which is the last strong hold of the sharecropper system is now being mechanized.

Already the percentage of Negroes working in agriculture (about 7.5%) is smaller than the percentage of whites. In the South white owner-renter farms are replacing sharecroppers. The owner-renter systems require a minimal amount of capital. The effect has been to replace black farmers with white farmers.

Only a fraction of the Negro people who came to the cities from rural agricultural life entered basic industries. This is especially true of the South. The overwhelming majority have become the cheap labor supply of the cities doing the dirtiest work for the least pay. They make up a large part of capitalism's industrial reserve army.

In 1940 there was less unemployment among Negroes in the Cotton States of the South than among whites. Today, throughout the country, Negroes suffer approximately twice the rate of unemployment of whites.

The absolute standard of living of the Negro people has risen; but their relative standard of living as compared to whites, in the last 15 years has dropped slightly, bringing it to about 52% of the white living standard. Inflation has cut out the lions share of any income gains made by Negroes. In Atlanta, for instance, Negro per capita income during the 1950's rose 23.8% while the price of consumer goods rose 22.8%, making a 1% increase in real wages over a ten year period of prosperity.

According to the government sponsored Conference on Economic Progress, 43% of all non-white families fall in the lowest "poverty" category and over 50% of single non-whites fall into this category. In the South, the median

income for Negroes varies from the low of \$22.47 a week in Mississippi to the high of \$49.43 in Kentucky.

One of the most dramatic ways to indicate the conditions which the average Negro family lives under is to imagine that all white workers had their take home pay reduced 48%.

Fifty six percent of all Negro children at one time or another receive state aid. Even in Northern cities like New York, 49% of Negroes fall into the CEP category of poverty.

Because of the high prosperity in the nation at this time some Negroes have escaped from extreme poverty. For example in New York City 30% of the Negro families have an income of over \$ 6,000 a year. This is due partially to the fact that many of these families have two incomes and a recession leading to increased unemployment is likely to hit them very hard.

Relationship of Forces

With the rise of the CIO and the Second World War, the relationship of forces became more favorable for the Negro people. The Negro people had been on the defensive from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 until the rise of the CIO in 1935. Most Americans "find it hard to appreciate how profoundly the rise of the CIO affected race relations. It brought about the 20th century's first major progressive shakeup and a reversal in these relations. Until then, discrimination and segregation had been growing worse and harsher in every area, including the old AFL unions, which had always turned their backs on the Negroes. The CIO, by its very existence, served as a shield behind which the Negro community as a whole was able to consolidate its forces, develop new and more independent demands, and lay the groundwork for the struggles of today and tomorrow." (Socialists Workers Party 1963 Freedom Now Resolution)

The relationship of forces has continued to improve in spite of the conservatization of the CIO because of both objective and subjective factors. The migration into concentrated ghettos in the centers of almost all of the major cities has magnified the collective social weight of the Negro people. But most important has been the development of a protest movement within the United States, and the development of revolutionary struggles in the colonial world.

Since the end of World War II, the United States has become the undisputed policeman of world capitalism and the chief reactionary force against the colonial revolution. This role has forced the American ruling class to keep a more sensitive ear attuned to protests against racial oppression within the United States. The victory of the

Chinese Revolution and the ensuing Korean War were critical in bringing about tokenism towards Southern Jim Crow.

To summarize: After 1940 important social changes placing the Negro people in a qualitatively different position have taken place. The economic foundation of the South is no longer an agricultural society based on cheap agricultural labor. The Negro people have become largely proletarian and concentrated in the urban centers. The class relationship of forces that produced Jim Crow no longer exist. Not only is the working class not an overwhelming majority in the country but internationally the American ruling class faces a rising colonial rebellion weakening its internal position against the Negro people.

Struggle for Freedom

The Negro people, like all oppressed people, have continuously fought against their oppression. After 1937, the usual attempts to pressure reforms out of the ruling class found new avenues. It found the capitalists in a difficult situation and the Negro people in a more favorable position to protest. Since 1940 the struggle has gone through several stages. Briefly they are the following: 1940-1948 The NAACP legal efforts, activity in the North especially in trade unions, and some activism of a small scale in the South, characterized this period. The tendency of the ruling class was to resist any changes.

1948-1955 With the rise of the colonial revolution in Asia the capitalist class as a whole began to place more emphasis on strengthening its position internationally. The ruling class began to make token concessions regarding some aspects of Jim Crow when pressured and exposed. In the famous 1954 Supreme Court ruling on school desegregation even Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, entered a plea against segregation.

Although Truman in 1947 ordered the Army to integrate, it was the Korean War that finally made it a necessity. Units with only Negroes could not be expected to be dependable in a war against the colonial revolution.

1955-1960 The first mass actions began. This caused a reaction in the ruling class, because many of their verbal and token concessions were aimed at preventing the development of mass activism.

With the Montgomery Bus Boycott the Southern legislatures and congressman began mobilizing organized opposition to any change. Five Southern states passed 42 new segregation laws. White Citizen Councils were set up and a slight revival of the Ku Klux Klan occurred. Tokenism was supposed to prevent mass protests and when it failed to do so, the ruling class became divided in its approach, wavering between repression and concession. Both approaches,

concession and repression, are geared to achieve the same result-oppression.

During this period two Marches on Washington took place (1958 - 10,000 and 1959 - 26,000), and the first civil rights law since Reconstruction was passed in 1957. The law was the first of the so-called voting rights bills.

1960-1965 Activism spread to every corner of the country with the sit-ins. Black Nationalism began to make important inroads in the ghettos, especially in the North. Even the slightest sign of a motion among Negroes rejecting American society strengthened the position of the movement for reforms considerably.

The colonial revolution has continued to deepen. The events in Vietnam, Cuba and the Congo indicate the ever expanding aspect of the colonial revolution. With the beginning of large scale commitments of U.S. troops in Asia and Latin America, the need for stability at home has increased. With the aid of the longest period of prosperity in U.S. history, the ruling class when pressured, has geared its efforts to containing the Negro people by token concessions.

Mass actions in the South such as Birmingham and Selma have resulted in additional civil rights bills. Since 1960 three have been passed - the 1960, 1964, and 1965 bills. All are directed against Jim Crow. Mass actions in Harlem, Watts, etc. have resulted in brutal repression and a lot of generalized promises. The government has also initiated a series of "poverty programs" geared to contain the protests of the ghettos. Crucial to the efforts of the capitalist class both in the North and South is the continuation of coalition politics in the Democratic Party. Every "poverty program" or "concession" is used to further political containment within the Democratic machine.

Limits of Reformism

Prior to 1940 socialists generally believed that under capitalism the South could never abolish Jim Crow and acquire the less formal racism of the North. Today this analysis must be modified. Any specific aspect of the South's racism which is different from the North can change. Segregation ordinances are being removed all over the South. Jim Crow movies, busses, hotels, restaurants, schools, museums, curfews, police forces, etc. are being integrated to one degree or another in state after state in the South.

The results of the struggle for the franchise is a good example. In 1940 2% of the Negroes in the South could vote, by 1948 12% had won the right to vote, and by 1952 the figure was 20%. This qualita-

tive leap was limited primarily to the growing urban centers in the South and the border states. In the cities, it is a great deal more difficult to prevent Negro registration through the usual methods of intimidation.

During the 1950's the percentage of registered Negro voters continued to rise, but the pace was slowed by the reaction of the middle fifties. In many areas registration dropped during the late 1950's. However, with the 1960's, and mass actions on a widespread basis, the figure has risen to 50%. Since the figure has reached this height, President Johnson has tried to claim credit by attributing the increase to the latest of the civil rights bills.

Many socialist and civil rights activists have pointed out that in counties with black majorities, Negro franchise could be a direct challenge to the racist power structure. Because of this fact some have felt that the ruling class would have to draw the line when it comes to these counties. We must keep in mind that the results of winning the franchise depend on the contests within which the franchise is won. The right of franchise is a threat to capitalist oppression only in the long run, but not necessarily in any specific situation. Although formal registration of Negro majorities has taken place in counties such as Loundes County in Alabama, it is yet unclear what this will mean. This does not mean that we should underestimate the importance and potential power of the right of franchise, but we should not think a challenge of the capitalist power structure to be identical to the right of franchise itself.

It would simply be factually incorrect today for anyone to say that Negroes will not regain the right to vote in the South under capitalism. It would be almost as foolish to think that any specific aspect of Jim Crow is impossible to change under capitalism.

Anne Braden in a recent issue of the Monthly Review states: "About a year ago it (Southern Movement) came to the end of an era, for one phase of the battle-the struggle for desegregation of public accommodations was essentially won." But she also quickly notes: "...to the surprise of some...life in the South has not really changed very much... 'The South is getting more like the North every day, and that's not good,' said one civil rights worker. He meant that segregation by law is passing, but segregation in fact is increasing."

To super-exploit the Negro it is no longer necessary to have "laws" on the books. Unemployment, no free land, and a racist hiring policy are sufficient to guarantee the continuation of the Negro people as a cheap labor supply in the cities.

The most important role that Southern Jim Crow plays today for the ruling class is not directly economic. Jim Crow is a bulwark of reaction against the upsurge of the Negro people and a support of racism in general.

We can draw two basic conclusions about Southern Jim Crow: 1. Any favorable changes that occur must be won by struggle and will not be freely given. 2. "At the very most, the capitalist goal is to establish throughout the country relations between the races like those that now exist in the North -- where formal segregation is not sanctioned or is even prohibited by law, but where the rankest segregation and inequality exist in practice." (SWP 1963 Freedom Now Resolution)

The recognition that certain forms of racism can be eliminated poses the more general question of the elimination of racism itself. Under imperialism, the final stage of capitalism, and specifically American capitalism, we can lay down three basic factors that prevent the elimination of racism:

1. Racism is essential to justify to the white workers in the advanced industrial countries the subjugation of the colonial countries. Racism has deeply permeated the manner in which imperialism rules in the colonial areas themselves. A drive to end racism at home can only result in opposition to imperialism.

2. The need for both social stability and cheap labor necessitates an industrial reserve army even at the highest points of prosperity, makes racism essential. Only through a racist mentality among white workers is the indignation by all workers against the standard of living of Negro workers in America prevented. Class solidarity is limited by racial prejudice.

By its very nature the drive to end racism must challenge many of the basic aspects of property relations under capitalism. The capitalist "right" to hire and fire, to pay the lowest wages he can, to charge the highest possible rent, to keep welfare and unemployment payments at a minimum, etc., are all challenged in the demand for equal treatment. Such a challenge can only tend to put into motion large sectors of whites who suffer one aspect or another of the same problems Negroes face.

The Ruling Class

The capitalist class is attempting to "assimilate" the Negro people into American society to contain any radical development at the same time it is fostering racism for both domestic and international needs. This contradictory position must not lead us to make the error

liberals and reformists do, that of believing that the ruling class has changed its mind about racism. On the other hand we should not believe that the ruling class will never concede one inch and that nothing can be done until the socialist revolution. We must explain that concessions can be won and are being won; but that none have been given without struggle and no number of them can eliminate the racism and poverty faced by the Negro people.