

LABOR PARTY AND

FREEDOM NOW PARTY

An Answer to the New York Times

By Tom Kerry

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On August 26, The New York Times declared its opposition to the recent call for an all-Negro Freedom Now Party. The Times was answered by Tom Kerry, a writer for the weekly socialist newspaper, The Militant. In a series of two articles, Kerry pointed out how both the Negro and labor movements will have to have political independence from the two capitalist parties in order to be effective. The Times editorial is reprinted on page 3, while Kerry's answer to it begins on page 5.

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Racism in Politics

Plans for organizing an all-Negro political party to run national and local candidates in the 1964 election represent a disservice to the Negro and to the cause of civil rights. The goal of the civil rights movement is an end to racial discrimination and the integration of the Negro into all spheres of American life on terms of full equality. An all-Negro political party is a move in the opposite direction. It would extend racism into politics, and thus play the same divisive, self-defeating role that the Black Muslims already play in the religious sphere. The result can only be the strengthening of the white racists, in the South and elsewhere, who urge whites to vote as whites against Negroes and their rights.

In defiance of logic, the would-be organizers of the Negro party argue that events in Africa have shown that "all-black political action" is the proved means by which Negroes can advance their interests. But the United States is not Africa. The Negroes are a small minority in the United States, not the overwhelming majority of the population they are in most African states. The labor movement in this country long

ago realized that a labor political party would be self-defeating because it would isolate union members politically from the majority of the population. The same consideration applies even more strongly to the idea of organizing an all-Negro party.

The venture implies a total misunderstanding of the nature of our political parties and the great flexibility of the American political system. The progress Negroes have made in this country in recent years has been possible precisely because Negro voters have worked through our major political parties as allies of whites of goodwill. The domination of the Southern political scene by racist whites persists largely because of the widespread denial of the franchise to Negroes, and that denial, happily, is beginning to end. When Negroes receive full voting rights in the South a political revolution can take place there, unless of course many Negroes follow the suicidal siren song of those who want voting based solely on the color of a man's skin.

Labor Party and Freedom Now Party

An Answer to the New York Times

By Tom Kerry

The rich and influential *New York Times* is opposed to the launching of a Freedom Now Party. It is against what it dubs: "Racism in Politics." It frowns upon any movement which threatens to upset the political status quo. It strongly urges a continuation of the practice of Negroes supporting candidates of the two major parties for public office. It would be strange if it were otherwise.

For the *Times* is generally recognized as the country's most diligent watchdog guarding the interests of the ruling capitalist class. It has a keen nose for sniffing out any danger that might undermine the "white power structure" which rests upon that unique American institution — the two-party system. It vows upon its editorial soul that its only interest in warning the Negroes against "racism in politics" is — of course, of course — its concern

over the welfare of the Negro people.

Distorts History

To this end, the *Times* does not hesitate to distort the history of Negro struggle, nor to offer a recipe calculated to give every conscious freedom fighter an acute case of political indigestion. The proposal for a Freedom Now Party, says a *Times* editorial of Aug. 26, "implies a total misunderstanding of the nature of our political parties and the great flexibility of the American political system. *The progress Negroes have made in this country in recent years has been possible precisely because Negro voters have worked through our major political parties as allies of whites of goodwill.*" (My emphasis.)

On the contrary, the movement for a Freedom Now Party is given its greatest impetus by a growing understanding "of the nature of

our political parties," which have served as the medium through which the Jim Crow system has been maintained and is being perpetuated. Responsibility for the betrayal of the aspirations of the Negro people for freedom and equality has been shared by both major parties for a whole historical period.

The reforms of the Reconstruction period following the Civil War were scuttled by a deal between the industrial and banking magnates of the North, operating through the Republican party, and the Southern Plantocracy, which seized upon the Democratic party as its instrument of oppression. In the period of American imperial expansion at the turn of the century, Republicans joined with Democrats in erecting the monstrous Jim Crow edifice which codified the pernicious doctrine of white supremacy.

Until the advent of the New Deal in the 1930's, Negro voters in their great majority — those who could vote — supported the Republican party under the carefully fostered myth that it was the party of Abraham Lincoln, author of the Emancipation Proclamation

Upheaval of 1930s

With the labor upheaval of the 1930s, following the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the rise of the CIO, there was a massive switch by Negro voters to the Democratic party. The social-reform measures of the New Deal, coupled with the fact that organization of industrial unions in the mass-production industries compelled the admission into the unions of large numbers of Negro workers, cemented the Labor-Negro-Democratic Party alliance, which persists to this day.

From the Roosevelt sweep of 1936 to the election of Kennedy in 1960, Negro voters in their great majority have supported the Labor-Democratic Party coalition. As the *Times* editorial puts it, "Negro voters have worked through our major political parties as allies of whites of good will." To what end?

This grotesque political monstrosity has served to bolster the racist Dixiecrat power in the solid Democratic South and elevate to key positions in Congress the most rabid spokesmen of white supremacy. To attribute the "progress the Negroes have made in this country in recent years" to the policy of supporting Republicans and Democrats is due, either to abysmal ignorance or deliberate deception.

What progress the Negroes have made in recent years is due primarily to the fact that they are no longer willing to rely upon the "whites of goodwill" in the major parties but have taken the struggle for freedom into the streets. Reliance upon "whites of goodwill," that is, white liberals, has led only to frustration and despair. These are the don't-rush-go-slow boys who counsel patience after 100 years of betrayals and broken promises, of barbarous indignities heaped upon searing humiliation, of economic, political and social discrimination that is an affront to the human race.

Born of Revolt

What the *Times* cannot understand is that the movement for a Freedom Now Party is born of revolt against further subordinating the Negro struggle for Freedom Now to the time schedule fixed by the "whites of goodwill" who presumably are outraged that the Negroes insist upon taking

their destiny into their own hands.

The *Times* also chooses to misunderstand the meaning of the emphasis placed by the sponsors of the Freedom Now Party — William Worthy, Conrad Lynn and Pernella Wattley — upon “All-Black Political Action” and an “All-Black Slate.” Their statements and records make clear that white allies will not be spurned and rejected. Not at all! They will be welcome, providing they act as *allies* and do not presume to *lead* and *control*.

That is a role to which the white

liberals and labor leaders are unaccustomed and from which they recoil in mock horror. Too long has Negro subjection to white liberal and labor leadership led to frustration. Negroes want no more of it. They are in revolt against it. They are determined that there shall be no further repetition of it.

If, to paraphrase Patrick Henry, the Freedom Now Party constitutes treason to the so-called “whites of goodwill” who have hitherto insisted upon retaining political leadership of the Negro freedom struggles, let them make the most of it.

THE MILITANT September 9, 1963

II

As spokesman and defender of the capitalist two-party system, the *New York Times* of August 26, casts a jaundiced editorial eye upon the proposal for the organization of a Freedom Now Party. Such a party, it avers, would isolate the Negro minority from their “allies,” the “whites of goodwill” who in their great majority are to be found in one or another of the two major parties.

To bolster this argument the *Times* points to the labor movement as an example of the kind of political wisdom the Negroes should emulate in their fight for freedom and jobs. “The labor movement in this country,” it says, “long ago realized that a labor political party would be self-defeating because it would isolate union members politically from the majority of the population.” It adds: “The same consideration applies even more strong-

ly to the idea of organizing an all-Negro party.”

So, for the good of both “minorities,” the *Times* counsels a continuation of the policy of relying upon the Democratic and Republican “whites of goodwill” to look after their welfare. The political pundits on the *Times* editorial staff could not have chosen a worse example.

Labor's Decline

It is universally acknowledged that never, since the rise of the CIO in the 1930s, has the political influence and prestige of the union officialdom been at a lower point than in the year 1963. Never, in American labor history, has the political policy of a union leadership proven so bankrupt. This view is not unique with this writer. It is shared by a variety of commentators and students including the former labor special-

ist and now member of the *Times* editorial board, A. H. Raskin.

Writing in the July issue of the liberal magazine, *Commentary*, Raskin highlights the issues and problems confronting the union movement today: automation unemployment, growth of the labor force, color discrimination, political action. All of these problems extend far beyond the limits imposed by the policy of pure-and-simple trade unionism as practiced by the labor leaders today.

After documenting an expanding list of such problems with which the current policy of the labor leaders is unable to cope, Raskin adds: "All of the above problems — the demise of the strike; increased mechanization of bargaining; increased bureaucratization of the work process itself; automation and unemployment — will require for even their proximate solution a degree of political commitment American labor has never shown. They demand that politics become a principal business of unions, not a haphazard adjunct of their narrowly economic purposes."

Although Raskin doesn't say so, for politics to become a "principal business of unions" would require a decisive break with the current policy of political subordination of the labor movement to the Democratic Party. It would require that the unions take the initiative in organizing their own party, running their own candidates on a program that would represent the interests of the working people — who, despite the tendentious political arithmetic of the *N.Y. Times*, represent along with their natural allies, an overwhelming majority of the American people.

But, as Raskin points out, the

politics of the union leaders "lack conviction and direction." "Their programs for securing the public weal," he adds; "are as lackluster, and offered as perfunctorily, as those that the administration keeps shoveling into the Congressional hoppers: looking forward to all the right things, but with no real expectation that anyone will pay attention."

"Stock Refrain"

Summing up the essence of the political policy of the top labor brass, Raskin comments: "Labor's stock refrain is that it is for everything the President wants in order to stimulate the economy, only that the President's bills don't go far enough."

The organized labor movement in this country numbers some 18 million members. Numerically, it is the largest union movement in the capitalist world. *Potentially*, it is the most powerful political force in the nation. Yet, through an unfortunate quirk of historical irony, there stands at the head of this massive army a general staff afflicted with hardening of the political arteries. That is the fatal flaw.

Toward any manifestation of militant opposition in the ranks they react like ferocious tigers; toward those they consider their superiors, they fawn like drooling lickspittles. Consider this revealing scene drawn by Raskin of the leaders of American labor on one of their ritualistic visits to the White House:

"When union leaders come to the White House," he observes, "they are docile guests. I asked one labor participant in a recent presidential luncheon whether any of the unionists had told Mr. Kennedy he was not doing enough

about the unemployed. 'Oh, we didn't tell him,' was the bland reply. 'He told us. He said the real problem in America was not balancing the fiscal budget but balancing the human budget.' [*Sounds like a Reutherism, doesn't it?* — T.K.]

White House Tour

"And," Raskin concludes, "with that problem tidily wrapped up, everybody went on a personally guided tour of the White House upstairs. They all left confirmed in their opinion that the United States had a great President."

That Kennedy even deigns to invite them to visit the White House is considered a great honor. A pat on the head, a meaningless generality that passes as the last word in political wisdom, a guided tour of the White House "upstairs," and they go padding out the door supremely satisfied that they have fully discharged their responsibilities to the working people of America.

Is it any wonder that people who are sympathetic to the needs and aspirations of the workers are becoming more and more discouraged and pessimistic about the future of the union movement? In a recent pamphlet, published by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, staff director Paul Jacobs of the Center's Study of the Trade Union, concludes that "unions must move on from the simple economic level" upon which they have been operating.

"In Israel, in the Scandinavian countries, in England, and in many other foreign lands," he adds, "unions are an integral part of the political system, not onlookers as they are in America where the simplistic AFL tradition of

rewarding friends and punishing enemies is still dominant. The tragedy of American unions is that they who did so much to create the old collective bargaining system are taking so minor and unimportant a role in developing a new one. It may mean their death."

The directors of the Center go even further in a more recent study, recording a conversation between ten unidentified leaders of the UAW and Paul Jacobs and W. H. Ferry, vice president of the Center and former director of public relations for the CIO Political Action Committee. They declare: "At the Center, studies have concluded that, far from growing stronger, the trade unions are consistently declining in power and support and that, in fact, we may be witnessing the beginning of the end of the trade-union movement."

To predict the early demise and burial of so lively a corpse is somewhat premature. Changes are today taking place which will have a profound effect upon the consciousness of all sections of American society and — more specifically — upon the American workers. The greatest of these being the Freedom Now revolt of the Negro people, comparable in its social impact to the CIO movement of the 1930s.

Future of Mankind

If the future of the union movement depended solely upon initiative of the fossilized union tops, the prophets of doom would have a good case. But it would be a bad mistake to write off the American working class. Once before, in the prolonged boom of the 1920s, liberals and many radicals viewed the prospect of top-

pling the open-shop empires of the industrial monopolists as hopeless. But when the American workers began to move in the early 1930s they moved massively.

The movement for industrial organization rolled over the palsied union timeservers who sought to restrict and contain it within the framework of the AFL craft union structure. It evoked a split in the AFL tops in response to the radical upsurge from below to establish, for the first time on American soil, a genuine trade-union movement encompassing the decisive section of the workers in the mass production industries.

It is true that the situation today is much different. The extension of union organization to include a few more hundreds of thousands or even several million workers would make no qualitative difference. Experience has demonstrated that numbers alone don't count for very much. The fact of the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955 did not stem the decline of union influence nor did it solve any of the fundamental problems of the American workers. In fact the process was accelerated.

Problems Are Political

All of the important problems confronting the working people today are essentially political. They cannot be solved through the medium of collective bargaining between individual unions and the employers. Even here, in what is presumed to be the essential function of the unions, we find the government constantly intervening to impose one or another form of compulsory arbitration. This is especially true since the election of the Kennedy administration.

More and more the top union leaders are adapting themselves to the surrender of union independence on the economic field. Combine this with the political policy of subordinating the labor movement to the Democratic Party and the workers are disarmed in the face of increasing onslaughts by the employers and their political representatives in Washington and the various states. The end result is that the unions are more and more beginning to resemble the job trusts of the pre-CIO days.

It is small wonder then that the millions of youth who enter the labor market each year become easy prey to the anti-union propaganda of the employers and the kept press. And less wonder that the Negro people, who in their vast majority are workers, begin to view the unions as obstacles and barriers to their struggle to break down job discrimination in industry.

Need Radical Change

The unions cannot survive as defenders of the status quo. To the Negroes, the youth, the growing army of unemployed, the status quo becomes intolerable. They will respond only to a program of radical change. To be considered seriously, such a program must be given organizational form through a new political party. For labor such a party must be independent of the two major capitalist parties and based on the organized trade-union movement.

At various times in the past, especially at times of acute conflict with the political representatives of big business in Washington, the union brass has warned that continued anti-labor legislation, imposing more onerous restrictions and repressions on the

unions, could lead to the formation of a labor party. Some have gone further and, when pressed, avowed they were for a labor party, but — “now is not the time.”

If the labor leaders feel they can afford to wait for a more propitious time, the militant freedom fighters are convinced that the Negroes can't. As against the filibustering “now-is-not-the-time” view they advance the slogan: For a Freedom NOW Party.

They recognize the essentially political nature of the struggle for freedom and jobs. Their initiative can serve to crystallize sentiment among the trade-union ranks and lower rungs of the union leadership to emulate their action. The realization of a Freedom Now Party would shatter the monstrous Labor-Negro-Democratic coalition and compel the union leaders to move in the direction of labor's independent political action or risk the fate of the mossbacks who ruled the AFL in the pre-CIO days.

Such a development could clear

the ground for a *genuine alliance* between equal partners in a political movement for the emancipation of the Negro people from the Jim Crow system and the white workers from the system of capitalist wage slavery. That is the perspective. The white workers owe the militant Negro freedom fighters an eternal debt of gratitude for their initiative in directing a body blow at the pernicious political policy which has led the union movement into a dead end.

The lesson to be learned from all this is not the one the *N.Y. Times* tries to teach — that the Negroes should follow in the wake of the labor leaders to avoid “isolation,” but the contrary: Unless the Freedom Now movement breaks with the coalition policy of subordination to the boss-controlled Democratic and Republican parties, it will inevitably go down the same road of political perdition that threatens to engulf the union movement in a quagmire of frustration and despair.

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