

Whereas:

Forum on Working Class Politics

**FASCISM, BLACK WORKERS AND
UNIONS**
by Arne Swabeck

Ian's letter to Dick, published in the previous issue, seems to visualize a perspective of fascism triumphant in the United States, stealthily, under cover of the darkness of night, so to speak. One looks in vain for any role of the working class in this perspective. Actually none is indicated, except for the "small minority" in the labor unions who, as Ian seems to think, "are in the vanguard of the trend by which the U.S. is being moved toward fascism by stages," and "on the backs of the black population."

Foresight is for Marxists an indispensable prerequisite; but this foresight must be based upon a rational estimate of conditions and possibilities of the class struggle. Insofar as fascism is concerned, as the saying goes: it can happen here. At the present political conjuncture, however, it is not exactly "waiting in the wings" for an opportunity "to rule openly."

Bourgeois parliamentary democracy still serves admirably as a means of undisputed rule by the dominant oligarchy. Once again this has been singularly well demonstrated by the Watergate scandal. In all exposures of the putrid vapors thrown up by a decaying capitalist society, main efforts were directed toward preserving the exalted status of the presidency. Agnew has been replaced by Ford; and regardless of Nixon's fitness to remain in office, preservation of the public features of bourgeois

parliamentary democracy, the presidency, Congress and the two-party system prevailed.

By and large, the American workers are still held captives of bourgeois democratic illusions. The key to their release from this captivity and development of their political consciousness as a class, is the intervention of a revolutionary party. Unfortunately, such a party does not now exist, not even a labor party movement. Conversely, the bourgeoisie sees now no threat to its continued rule from the working class.

Whether the SWP and the Trotskyist movement holds to the idea that "fascism will not triumph in the U.S. until the workers' organizations have been physically destroyed" may not be very important, but the lessons of history are. And lessons, both forceful and clear, which leave no room for dispute or doubt, have come especially from Italy and Germany.

In no instance did fascism come to power, except after serious working class defeats and the lamentable inability of working class parties to cope with the incalculable consequences created by the turbulent crises in these countries.

In Italy, the end of the First World War saw the beginning of great working class struggles. These continued in an upward trend, and brought by 1920 the seizure and occupation of factories and industries by the workers. At the decisive moment social democracy took fright; it retreated and temporized with the rapidly advancing fascist enemy. The workers were left without leadership; their heroic struggles defeated, and Mussolini led his fascist hordes to the seizure of power.

Similar events were repeated in Germany, and on a larger and more terrible scale of dimensions. While different in form, their essential content remained the same.

The aftermath of the First World War and the Bolshevik revolution brought stormy proletarian upheavals in Germany. These continued almost un-

interruptedly during the 1920s. There were times, like in 1923, when everything was poised on the razor edge of a knife. The proletarians who looked hopefully to the Communist Party for leadership were deeply disappointed. At the decisive moment the party proved unable to make the bold turn toward struggle for power. It surrendered every advantage to the class enemy.

Although leadership of the Communist Party was repeatedly changed through Stalin's manipulation for control of the international movement, results were equally disastrous. The working class suffered further defeats, while the fascist menace grew apace.

Social democracy had originally started its historic journey under the banner of Marxism. As it grew and became prosperous, it betrayed the revolution in the name of reform. Finally, during the Weimar Republic, it stooped to the lowest level of perfidy. Its whole policy consisted in making society safe for the bourgeoisie at the cost of sacrificing reforms.

These developments, briefly described, prepared the conditions necessary for the triumph of fascism.

For its triumph, however, fascism needs a mass basis and an active mass movement. That was the case in Italy and Germany. It holds true for the United States as well. Fascism does not burst forth full-blown from former hiding places in the deep fissures of the bourgeois social and political structure.

In Germany the backbone of the fascist movement was made up of the petty-bourgeoisie. The multitude of small artisans and little tradesmen had been pauperized and demoralized in their futile competition with the rapid concentration of monopoly capitalist concerns. Those who transferred to lower level functions within these concerns fared no better. They were all bled white by the raging

inflation during the Weimar Republic. Seeing no hope for the future in the working class parties, they swung over to extreme reaction, pulling behind them unemployed and demoralized sectors of the proletariat.

The 1930 parliamentary elections revealed the real relation of class forces. While suffering some losses, social democracy still held the allegiance of the working class majority. The Communist Party polled around 4,600,000 votes as against 3,300,000 in 1928, or a net gain of 1,300,000 votes. But this victory paled completely when compared to the leap of fascism from around 800,000 to 6,400,000 votes. During the same period Hitler's uniformed storm troopers had grown from one hundred thousand to four hundred thousand.

About that time Trotsky wrote: "The contradictions within German capitalism have at present reached such a state of tension that an explosion is inevitable. The adaptability of social democracy has reached that limit beyond which lies self-annihilation. The mistakes of the Stalinist bureaucracy have reached that limit beyond which lies catastrophe. Such is the threefold formula that characterizes the situation in Germany."

A couple of years later fascism was triumphant in Germany. Neither the "normal" police nor military resources sufficed to hold society in a state of equilibrium. The hour of fascism had arrived. What happened under its savage and brutal rule is well-known and need not be recounted here.

In the absence of mass political working class parties, the German experience needs refinement, of course, to be applied directly to this country. In no case, however, will such refinement include the idea of "the U.S. being taken toward fascism by stages." Social democracy operated under the illusion that socialism could be introduced by stages. Fascism triumphant marks a decisive historical turning point. It permits no compromise or

halfway measures. With fascism it is all or nothing. Nor should Nixon's efforts to invest the executive branch of government with greater power be interpreted as tantamount to fascism.

To be sure, both parliamentary democracy, with Nixon at the head, and fascism are bourgeois in character. But here the similarity ends. From the point of view of the American workers, the difference is enormous. It involves the life or death of their organizations. Confusion on this point can lead to utter failure to recognize the meaning of a real and serious fascist movement. Worse yet, any view that tends to equate bourgeois parliamentary rule with fascism is dangerously mistaken; and it concerns a question on which we cannot afford mistakes. Success of fascism in the United States would depend on the complex interplay of concrete social, economic and class interests. Among these, the existence and function of labor unions, and the struggle for black liberation take on crucial importance.

If and when a seriously threatening fascist movement arises, both the existing unions and the black liberation movement will be singled out as primary targets in a life and death struggle.

Ian's perspective leaves the impression that white workers are destined to remain permanently racists and unregenerated, bitter antagonists of the black people. Are there reasonable grounds for such an assumption? Surely the ghetto is a trap; and Ian is correct in opposing the ill-advised demand for community control. This demand may well serve as an effective means by which to advance the careers, the fortunes and influence of the black elite, not the black proletarians who inhabit the ghetto. It turns them away from the class solution to their problem. And there is no other solution.

Indubitably, this is what Mao Tse-tung had in mind when on two occasions, speaking on behalf of a powerful nation, he pledged unqualified support to the black liberation struggle. Not only support but a basic analysis of this crucial question was

contained in Mao's second statement of April 16, 1968, in which he said:

"Racial discrimination in the United States is a product of the colonialist and imperialist system. The contradiction between the black masses in the United States and U.S. ruling circles is a class contradiction. Only by overthrowing the reactionary rule of the U.S. monopoly capitalist class and destroying the colonialist and imperialist system can the black people in the United States win complete emancipation. The black masses and the masses of the white working people in the United States share common interests and have common objectives to struggle for ... The struggle of the black people in the United States is bound to merge with the American workers' movement, and this will eventually end the criminal rule of the U.S. monopoly class."

Turning to the question of the role, character, function and actual condition of the American trade union movement, the errors in Ian's perspective become increasingly evident. His figures on union organization in relation to the total labor force merely confirm the often advanced contention that statistics is the most exact science based on the most inexact data.

It is simply not true that "the U.S. is an open shop country." Workers employed in mass-production industries -- the decisive section of the proletariat -- are organized in actively functioning unions. These include such strategic and socially operated industries as steel, coal mining, oil and chemical, auto, rubber, electrical manufacture, packing houses and communication. Organized are workers in airplane building, ship building, machine tool building, transportation on land and seas, as well as long-shore and construction.

What Mao said about the struggle of the black people in the U.S. being bound to merge with the American workers' movement had already been con-

firmed on an elementary level in the massive CIO organization drive of the 1930s.

During the prosperity boom of the '20s, a great exodus of impoverished and humiliated black plantation hands and sharecroppers came from the rural South to work in the industries of the North. Side by side with them came hundreds of thousands of prejudiced southerners, carrying along their Ku Klux Klan sympathies. On the speed-up exploitation of the assembly line they were all proletarianized. They learned bitter lessons of starvation on the bread lines of the Great Depression. And, not unexpectedly, they accepted a common cause. They fought as a united force -- black and white workers -- in the volcanic eruption of furious clashes and sit-down strikes. Unitedly they built the CIO unions. Unitedly they found a new sense of inspiring purpose and power.

Today there are more than a couple of million black workers in these unions. Always subject to the twin scourge of double exploitation on the job and racial discrimination in social relations, they have become the most cohesive, militant and dynamic force of the whole movement. The very nature of the struggle against the conditions they face everywhere, has thrust them into a vanguard position. Being the most abused, they have become the most rebellious against capitalist exploitation. Black proletarians do not seek privileges at the cost of degrading other workers; they cannot arise out of their subjection except on the road to proletarian revolution.

It is entirely true that the bureaucratic union leaders collaborate with the bourgeois state, while attempting to check and curb worker militancy and action. That is a universal phenomenon. Generally speaking all are labor lieutenants of capitalism. In Britain they prefer to be the handmaiden of the Labor Party in power; but they follow through with the Tory government as well. The CP leaders of unions in France and Italy collaborate in their fashion with

the bourgeois state powers. But this does not make the unions "structurally a part of the apparatus of the state power," as Ian seems to think. Nor is this the yardstick by which Marxists measure the essential characteristics of the trade union movement.

Trade unions have been built up over many decades, often through sanguinary and savage battles. Their rise and existence represents a giant leap forward for the working class. Unions are the elementary, yet primary defensive organizations of the workers. Even more, they form the connecting link between the masses and the proletarian vanguard. In fact, the development of the working class did not and could not, anywhere in the world, even begin by any other road than that of trade unions. Conversely, in no case would the workers -- black or white -- give up this once acquired and absolutely essential bulwark without a fierce struggle.

We may rest assured that black workers would be in the vanguard of such a struggle as well. They have no reason at all to view their unions as "an aristocracy with a system of privileges and a way of life to protect."

Lenin heaped scorching sarcasm upon the light-mindedness of the ultra-leftists who, during his time, dismissed the trade unions as reactionary and hopeless. They rejected any activity within the unions. Unfortunately, Ian appears to have forgotten this lesson, for his idea that "fascism needs an alliance with the unions in order to come to power on the backs of the black population" contains a fatal flaw.

In the first place, fascism makes no alliances, least of all with the unions. Secondly, when in an actual social crisis the dominant bourgeoisie resorts to the agency of fascism to maintain its prerogatives of exploitation, it demands a thorough job. It wants to have done with strikes and all independent working-class action. To this end, all working-class organizations would be totally annihilated. In this country that would mean particularly, and above all, the

trade union movement. All its past achievements, including democratic rights attained, would be wholly, completely and ruthlessly uprooted. No possibility would be left for renewed independent working class crystallization. And fascism does a thorough job.

These are the lessons demonstrated by theoretical analysis as well as historical experience. They permit neither dispute nor doubt.

Not fascism but working class radicalization is the more likely perspective for the United States. Such a development is in fact belated. Since the tremendous upsurge that followed in the aftermath of the Great Depression, working class radicalization has been held back by wars and the "prosperity" induced by heavy armaments production. Prosperity, however illusory, breeds conservatism.

Nevertheless, the conservatism and political backwardness of the American workers is only a relative phenomenon. Past history has clearly demonstrated their highly and well-developed combative characteristics. Strikes have been conducted here more militantly, forcefully and resolutely than in most other countries. The working class as a whole has not been demoralized by defeats or setbacks. It is comparatively free from infection with the debilitating poison of social democratic reformism or the Kremlin type of revisionism. The militant and revolutionary potential of this powerful working class remains undiminished, unimpaired and unchallenged.

The tempo of advance or retardation of the class struggle and ability of independent thought and action by the working class interlinks with the nation's social, economic and political developments. In this latter area changes of a decisive nature are taking place. What do they portend?

Recent world financial crises brought two dollar devaluations within a period of fourteen months. Nearly 70 years of uninterrupted U.S. foreign trade surpluses have turned into successive heavy trade

deficits, leading to international trade war. Inflation is running rampant, side by side with declining real wages, and a high rate of unemployment. Another economic recession is clearly indicated. These problems have been superimposed on the home front eruption and massive demonstrations against the predatory American imperialist war in Indochina. Combined, they form an explosive mixture of contradictory elements.

What the Watergate scandal exposed was merely the foaming, stinking saliva of bourgeois corruption that had been thrown to the surface. Underneath it remains the more deep-seated contradictions that are as old as the capitalist system itself, and are, in fact, generated by it. These contradictions -- internal and external -- do not operate separately. On the contrary, they interact continuously, reinforcing each other, and preparing the ground for more serious crises to come.

Aside from the Great Depression, the contradictory elements of American capitalism have never been as pronounced and acute as they are now. And these are the conditions out of which working class radicalization develops.

In the great leap forward of the 1930s, the working class radicalization, powerful as it was, did not advance beyond its preliminary stage. It was confined to union organization and union consciousness. It stopped short of the necessary political development. This is not to be repeated. Facing contradictions that are insoluble under capitalism, the working class will resurrect the profoundly progressive qualities then displayed and again advance with hurricane speed and power.

More than anything else this lends emphasis to the need for the creation of a revolutionary party.

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