

## The SWP and the Black Liberation Struggle: Some Notes

by Steve B., April 2000

[NOTE--This is a quick survey so that comrades can have some background. It is not intended as a comprehensive summary or balance sheet.]

A concern with the question of Black liberation goes back to the earliest days of the Trotskyist movement in the United States. Leaders of the Communist League of America (the initial grouping created by left oppositionists expelled from the CP in 1928) initiated a series of discussions with Trotsky on this subject beginning with their very first meeting, in Prinkipo, Turkey, shortly after Trotsky's exile from the USSR. With Trotsky's assistance the movement in the US came to view "the Negro question" in the general context of Lenin's approach to the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. One specific issue had to do with the CP's insistence on calling for the creation of an independent nation in the "black belt" south. Trotsky and his U.S. comrades came to the conclusion that this should be a question for the Black population itself to decide, not something which a working-class revolutionary party ought to insist on as part of its own platform. (The transcribed text of these discussions is included in the pamphlet "Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination" published by Pathfinder Press.)

One central idea clearly distinguished the record of the CLA, and later the Workers Party and Socialist Workers Party (until its degeneration). Black people in the U.S. should not subordinate their struggle to any other social or political agenda. Thus when the CP, during World War II, was urging both the trade unions and the Black movement to "wait" until the war was over to press their demands (in order not to undermine the US military alliance with the USSR), the SWP vigorously defended and supported the March on Washington movement organized by A. Phillip Randolph, for example.

During the civil rights movement of the 1950s the SWP participated (modestly, due to its small size) in the predominant, non-violent wing of the struggle. But it also established a relationship with Robert Williams who, in Monroe, North Carolina, combined a local NAACP branch with a chapter of the National Rifle Association, actively arming the Black community for self defense against KKK violence. The Party helped to organize a defense committee against the inevitable government attack on Williams, and Williams later became a sponsor of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee which the SWP was instrumental in launching.

The party also developed a special relationship with Malcolm X during the early part of the 1960s. The *Militant* printed his speeches and reported on his organizing activities in a supportive way, unlike most groups on the socialist left. Malcolm was invited to speak at SWP forums. George Breitman, then one of the editors at the party's publishing house, worked to get Malcolm's ideas into book and pamphlet form so that they could be widely distributed. To this day, young people interested in Malcolm know the name of George Breitman, and know about the relationship the SWP, and *Militant* newspaper, established with Malcolm (though most do *not* know that the SWP which is around today is a different party from what it was then).

It was during this period of the early-mid 1960s that the SWP, again with Breitman's leadership, developed the theory of combined revolution in the United States as a special application of Lenin's approach to the national question and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. The coming American revolution, according to this concept, would be two revolutions taking place simultaneously: 1) a working class revolution for socialism, and 2) a Black revolution for national liberation. Though there would obviously be connections between them--due to the overwhelmingly

working class character of the Black community if for no other reason--each of these struggles would unfold according to its own dynamics, with its own forms of mass mobilization, its own set of demands and its own leadership. But neither could succeed alone. Each needed the other in order to overthrow their common enemy--the U.S. ruling class.

This theory guided the general approach of the party to developments in the Black struggle during the next decade or so. The party was generally supportive of Black nationalism as an ideology. A distinction was made between revolutionary nationalism, which was political and could help the movement to develop, and a purely cultural nationalism which could not. Manifestations of cultural identity were, of course, essential for the development of any political movement among Black people. But an effort to *substitute* cultural expression for a political movement was understood to be a diversion.

The party welcomed and defended the movement for community control of the schools in NYC in 1968, again distinguishing itself from most other groups on the left. Its relationship with the Black Panther Party, however, was much more contradictory. While seeing considerable potential in this formation--especially at the outset--the political weaknesses of the Panthers (a tendency toward extreme ultraleft rhetoric, a fetishization of armed struggle, and a tendency to wave Mao's "Little Red Book" as a substitute for real political discussion) created barriers to close collaboration. The SWP participated actively in defense campaigns around figures like Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and other Panther political prisoners, but never established much of a political relationship with the BPP.

Later, during the 1970s, the party attempted to make connections with and build support for the movement around school-busing as a means for desegregation, with mixed success.

Unlike the CP or various Maoist groups the SWP never recruited a large number of Black cadre. There was always a modest layer of comrades, and they played important roles in the party. Some extremely prominent Black activists--such as C.L.R. James--spent time as members of the organized Trotskyist movement. But the numbers never came close to the broader percentage of Blacks in the population as a whole. There was some complacency about this in the party, at least from the 1960s onward. In part that attitude probably flowed from the theory that the Black struggle was something which had to develop with its own dynamics, separate from (even if connected with) the working-class struggle. The party was theoretically in favor of building a multinational revolutionary organization. But until there was a simultaneous upsurge of both the workers' movement and the Black community which could lay the basis for overcoming the racial division that society itself imposes, it was generally considered unlikely that this could become a reality.

As the SWP degenerated its attitude towards all organizations and movements outside of itself became much more instrumentalist (how can we use this particular group or political development to advance our own sectarian agenda) rather than collaborative and supportive. This inevitably had a negative affect on the party's reputation and relationship with Black activists and movements.