

Where We Came From To Get Where We're Going by David F.

The following hastily drafted notes are intended to assist both with historical background and present-day orientation on anti-racist work and recruitment. Steve B. is preparing notes reflecting the SWP experience, hence most of the historical material here follows reflects the "slant" of the International Socialists' perspective. (Most of the founding members of Solidarity in 1986 came from currents that had been through some part of the IS or SWP experience.)

I stress also that this is "informal," i.e. not footnoted or precisely documented. Some highly relevant presentations were also given at the Solidarity Midwest Women's Retreat. I am in the process of checking to see which of these are, or could be put, in writing. This history is worth summarizing, in my view, because it helps situate our organization and to show that the problems we confront are not new ones.

## I. BACKGROUND.

A. It is obviously impossible to treat the history of the U.S. left and anti-racism without reference to the Communist Party. Fortunately Against the Current is just now in the process of publishing a very important two-part review essay by Alan Wald covering four new books on this subject. (The first installment appeared in ATC 84, the second will be in #86, available at the beginning of May.) Comrades should by all means read Alan's review and if possible Mark Solomon's *The Cry Was Unity*, a history of the CP and Black Liberation between 1917 and 1936, as well as other sources that Alan cites.

The central and irreplaceable contribution of the early CP was to supersede the politics of the old Debsian left wing of the Socialist Party on the issue of race, which held that racism was an evil of the capitalist system that should be fought unconditionally, but that the socialist movement "had no special program" to offer to the Black population apart from the general struggle for socialism. (Meanwhile the SP right wing included various racists, anti-Chinese, pro-war nationalist and other types.)

Heavily influenced by Lenin's writings on the National Question and the early Communist International, as well as its alliance with Cyril Briggs and the African Blood Brotherhood, the CP moved toward an understanding of Black oppression and struggle in the United States as having a national dynamic as well as being central to the U.S. proletarian revolution. This legacy remained central for those revolutionary Marxists who broke (or were purged) from the CP over the various crimes of Stalinism.

It is easy to see major defects in the particular theory of the "Black Belt" in the South seen by the CP as the material basis for a Black nation. Even by the late 1920s when this conception was put forward, it had been profoundly undermined by mechanization of agriculture which displaced massive amounts of farm labor and accelerated the northward migration of Black labor. Further, Black Nationalism in real life attained greater footholds in northern urban centers than in the South, precisely because in the North the Black community felt both its potential power and the horrible effects of a racist capitalist economy.

Nonetheless the theorization of a Black Nation was clearly on to something important. Rather than the sterile exercise of demanding that a people fit into some pre-set "objective criteria" (territory, common language, culture) etc. for their claims to nationhood to be regarded as "legitimate" (to be decided by whom??), intelligent materialists should begin by recognizing the reality of national consciousness (whether partly or fully developed) and explore the material realities that have produced that consciousness.

B. Debates on theory and perspective in the Marxist left on the Black struggle tend to revolve around two models as poles of attraction. This was definitely reflected in the IS experience.

The first of these views the African American population as "overwhelmingly proletarian in composition," including the most heavily exploited part of the working class. The second sees the distinctive historical experience and culture of African Americans as constituting a separate nation (or nationality, depending on how these inexact terms are defined) within the U.S. ("American") nation-state.

In fact, both of these theoretical models capture important parts of reality--yet are inadequate by themselves. Anything

close to an adequate theoretical understanding requires a complex synthesis. It is also important to understand how, in U.S. society as a whole, white-supremacist ideology for the first time in history has been officially discredited both in the elite and popular culture, and yet the deep structure of institutional racism remains deeply entrenched.

The relevance of both models has been modified but not negated by developments of the past, say, fifty years. Thus, despite the enormous expansion of a Black middle class and openings for African American entrepreneurship, the fundamentally working class character of the Black community is demonstrated by the growing weight of African American workers in the union movement. At the same time, the end of formal segregation has not weakened the desire for African American self-organization.

We have learned that Black self-organization, including Nationalism, are not to be seen in opposition to the struggle for full equality and integration. They are both aspects of a freedom struggle. This may sound simple enough, but the process of understanding it is not so easy! After all, it is not only white leftists who have trouble getting the point--the greatest U.S. revolutionary of our time, Malcolm X, only in the last few years of his life realized the true significance of the Civil Rights Movement as going far beyond simple integrationist goals, precipitating his break from the separatist-abstentionist sectarianism of the Nation of Islam.

C. In the U.S. revolutionary Marxist tradition this synthetic understanding was best articulated by the current around C.L.R. James in the course of its complex organizational trajectory in the 1940s through the Trotskyist movement (Socialist Workers Party and Workers Party). Within the WP this view emerged as a minority as against the majority perspective authored by Ernest Rice McKinney, who was a party leader as well as a trade unionist and an important civil rights organizer in his own right.

Prior to the 1940 SWP-WP split McKinney, Dianne F. informs me, was the first Black member of the SWP Political Committee. Hence the theoretical debate took place in both groups over a fairly extended period. The McKinney/WP majority view can be summed up as a struggle for full equality (i.e. a basic democratic demand), to be fought for by means of proletarian struggle and ultimately won through socialist revolution. Thus McKinney saw a natural revolutionary alliance between the Black struggle for equality and the newly powerful industrial union movement, which could only come to fruition if the CIO undertook its responsibility to be the champion of all anti-racist struggles.

In this context, Black Nationalism was seen as an understandable, yet backward defensive response to the fact that white workers and the union movement had not taken on their anti-racist responsibilities. Nationalism or separatism in itself could accomplish nothing and would only divert the consciousness of any Black workers it could influence by aligning them with a dependent and feeble Black petit-bourgeoisie. (It should be recalled that Henry Ford in particular had enlisted Black ministers to use their influence against Black support for union organizing.)

James' insight was to recognize that independent Black self-organization, arising from the national dynamics of the Black struggle, could play not a diversionary but a vanguard role not only for African Americans but for the whole class struggle. (This was seen as a potential arising, for example, from Black self-defense against murderous white mobs in the Detroit 1943 riot.) The Black working class would play a leadership role in the "American revolution" as both a class and national vanguard.

In this context, recognizing the right of Black self-determination became important, including the right of separation as a principle regardless of whether the physical-territorial separation of the Black population was seen as desirable or even practical. The McKinney view rejected this position as a diversionary irrelevance. For James it was essential to recognize and uphold the Black national struggle against oppression (not only segregation). I think we can apply this understanding to many present-day campaigns around, for example, affirmative action, the demand for reparations for slavery and racial oppression, etc.

D. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements were powerful stimulants to the emergence of the 1960s New Left and the organized socialist currents that developed during the period. It is fair to say that with or without the adoption of formal resolutions, all our currents had recognized the superiority of an approach that embraced the central importance of independent Black self-organization. (In the IS experience it must be admitted that a lot of mimeograph ink was spilled in the not particularly successful attempt to figure out whether this actually represented "nationalism" or something else. It is horribly easy to become entangled in debates over abstractions.)

The IS and its predecessor grouping (the Independent Socialist Clubs) were clear on a number of key issues: in defense of Black Power, support of community control of education in NYC against the racist and disastrous Shanker-led teachers' strike there (1969) and principled support for the Black Panther Party. In fact the Berkeley ISC was instrumental in forging an alliance between the Panthers and the Peace and Freedom Party, which should be recounted in more detail.

When the IS formed in 1969 and began discussing industrial union perspectives, we saw the possibility of an alliance with the emerging Panther caucuses and RUM groups in auto in California and Detroit respectively. By the time we located ourselves in Detroit and began to get some auto implantation, the obstacles to this hopeful perspective proved to be overwhelming.

The first big problem of course was the weakness and inexperience of our own group. Second, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (successor of the RUMs) was greatly weakened by its isolation and had undergone a sectarian evolution. Third, the UAW bureaucracy (and corporate management as well) had learned the dangers of Black rank and file insurgency and had applied its most sophisticated techniques of cooptation and repression. The latter climaxed in 1973 when the Doug Fraser leadership mobilized cadres of union officials with the help of police to smash up a wildcat strike at Mack Avenue, ending a series of plant walkouts over heat, intolerable conditions and arbitrary discipline. Finally, the recession of 1974-75 wiped out the spirit of militant resistance in the inner city plants which frankly has never recovered.

During this same period the IS had to confront the question of school busing and the white backlash against it. This was a hard issue and initially uncomfortable for us, especially for those laboring under certain illusions that putting forward a revolutionary program of "classwide demands" was the road to interracial unity, because busing affected working class whites while leaving the elites untouched.

If nothing else the busing issue brought home the raw realities of white racism in America. (Comrades who are not old enough to recall the politics of this once-explosive issue can get some background from Malik Miah's insightful "Race and Class" column in ATC 82. Malik, then a leader in the SWP, was assigned to organize that party's work in Boston where the racist mobilization was at its height.)

In Detroit and in a new branch we had formed in Louisville, the IS became active in busing defense activities. Comrades who were centrally involved in that work should be encouraged, indeed compelled to write up the experience, which I believe has never really been done to the necessary extent.

Finally, perhaps most important, the mid-'70s IS "turn to agitation" and intensified industrialization effort did actually lead to recruitment of Black rank and file workers. I have not attempted to check the numbers, but I believe that during this period several dozen Black workers passed through the group--not a huge number, but enough to represent a meaningful experience-- although most of them briefly. (Kim M. once estimated the number might have been close to 100, a figure which probably includes members of our youth group, the Red Tide. This may be an overestimate.)

The problem was that we mistakenly believed, in keeping with our general expectation of rapid worker radicalization (we failed to realize that the possibility of this had been snuffed out, not accelerated, by the mid-'70s slump), that recruitment of a small number of working class militants would be rapidly followed by others, producing a proletarian transformation of our group. Important note: It wasn't that we didn't want these recruits to be leaders of our organization--indeed, we had illusions about how quickly this could be accomplished, and very little understanding of how to do it.

Instead, workers who joined discovered themselves in an environment pretty much totally alien to their fellow workers, families and communities--Black workers most of all. Our woefully underdeveloped cadre development structures only contributed to their rapid departure.

I believe that there are critical lessons to be learned here both about the possibility of recruiting worker militants, both Black and white, and the difficulties of retaining them in what will continue to be a small revolutionary group.

In any case, for the purposes of this informal history, I don't think there is much to be added from the last five or six years of the IS when we were more or less attempting to maintain our work in the unions and a presence in the

movements while barely holding ourselves together. I hope that the above history and that of other currents now present in Solidarity can help to inform a discussion of our present tasks.

II. TRANSFORMING SOLIDARITY TODAY. The following ideas are my own-- perhaps some of them will be incorporated into a collective report.

A. We need an updated theoretical statement of what I believe is a collective majority view in our organization, the character of the African American freedom struggle as having both class struggle and national dimensions. (There may be other viewpoints that should also be developed.) That is not the task of the May leadership conference, however, and I won't go into it here.

B. I believe we all recognize that we are a modest organization, with a great deal to be modest about--but I think we have a tendency to take it to extremes. There is a critically low level of collective self-esteem in our organization, which has to be addressed if we are to move forward. Too often we seem to have trouble believing that anyone would want to actually join us.

C. As a first step, I suggest that each branch have some explicit anti-racist component in its organized activity, including two things in particular: (1) Organizing an educational series or study group for members and contacts, consisting partly of some common core readings and partly of materials pertaining specifically to the history/culture/politics of its particular city. (2) Finding some arena for anti-racist activism. This does not necessarily have to be around African-American-centered issues, e.g. it might be Latino-centered; it could involve affirmative action, police brutality or other things, but there should be something. It should be possible to develop relationships with groupings already engaged in the communities. In Detroit, for example, through the exemplary work of a few comrades, we have developed a friendship with the Xicano Development Center (XDC) on the southwest side.

D. We should design and implement cadre and leadership training programs in our organization, with a strong affirmative action emphasis (including for example our intern program). From the inception of Solidarity we have been rigorous in striving for gender parity in leadership bodies. This is a good beginning, but only a beginning. A danger in the early phases of transforming our organization is to super-exploit non-white-male comrades by placing an unbearable leadership burden on them. Programs for leadership development and training should be seen as a primary responsibility of the incoming leadership bodies and commissions.

E. Regarding staffing, Rodney is preparing a report. I will offer here only some scattered observations.

Some of the material we have received in preparation for the anti-racism leadership retreat, while thought-provoking, seems to reflect a staff-driven model of NGO or social justice organization in which relatively high-paying jobs of authority are in the hands of mostly white males, with lesser roles and lower pay assigned to women or people of color.

There are numerous problems in using this model to think through our problems or stages of development. First, we are a membership organization with an elected leadership, not a staff-run organization governed by a board. Second, we are enormously under-staffed--without one single paid branch organizer, for example!--and what staff we have comes from our membership, not hired from a large outside talent pool.

Third, because we are resource-starved, we confront a situation which is the opposite of the NCO with the high-paid executive directorship, although the effect may be regrettably similar: The wages we pay our staff effectively preclude anyone who needs to support a family or maintain anything other than an activist-without-other-responsibilities life style, unless they have a relatively well-paid partner or other resources to draw upon. In our recent history, this has meant that young white males without children have been the bulk of available talent.

Our low-wage mode of operation is not by choice but rather of necessity. If we grow and prosper politically it will change over time, but our capacity to sustain staff at a level reasonably resembling a stable working class job will not happen in the first stages of this transformation.

Rather, the changes must begin in the branches, at the base, where the core of the life of the organization is located. Changing the public "face" of the organization in a way that reduces the gap between our group and people of color communities must also begin at this level.