

A Note on Self-Organization and Solidarity

by David F. (Detroit)

The following note is neither a formal "document" nor a personal statement, but something in between. Its informal character should be understood in that context. It's not intended to be provocative but it is honest.

First, something of a True Confession in response to the piece by Kay S. in the May DB, "Sometimes I Think We Have Lost Our Collective White Minds." Kay recalls the NC discussion where "the NC's one Black member raised to the group the difficulty presented by Solidarity not having a political position on Black Unity (Black Nationalism)," and protests that when that member left the room after the question was inadequately addressed, the meeting simply continued as if nothing had occurred.

I must admit that in reading this, I was startled to realize that I couldn't really respond because I had almost no memory either of the discussion or the incident. I had to figure out why and how my mind had gone almost blank. After some reflection and memory-searching I eventually remembered what happened: I left the room too. Not necessarily physically, but mentally.

Obviously I need to explain. With no disrespect at all to any comrades, I find the idea of needing "a political position on Black Nationalism" such a diversion, and so frustrating, that I involuntarily tune it out. I'm not saying this is a healthy reaction, just that it happens. Am I the only one? I doubt it.

Second, the political argument for the preceding statement. What Solidarity needs, theoretically speaking, is to affirm and update a position we already have but don't put out clearly enough:

Solidarity supports the independent self-organization of African Americans and of all oppressed peoples, at every level of society. Further, we understand Black independent organization as having a unique social weight in any struggle for democracy and revolutionary change in the USA. This includes Black revolutionary self-organization, which we do not counterpose to the need for multi-racial/multinational revolutionary working class organization. We support both. We do not have some formula for how strong Black (or Latino) revolutionary organization(s) and multiracial/multinational ones would interrelate; nothing could be more stupid than constructing formulae for relations between entities that do not presently exist.

In addition, we uphold the right of African Americans to self-determination as an oppressed nation in the USA, including the right of separation in the event (even if we consider it unlikely -- more thoughts on this below) they make that choice.

(As an aside: We have had no organized discussion and taken no position on "Latino self-determination" within the USA. Can Latinos in this country, who are of very diverse national origins and citizenships, be understood as a nation on the basis of language alone? I leave aside this question here as something we need to address from scratch.)

Having said this, where does Black Nationalism come in? Here's the problem: Some folks consider the above (independent Black organization and the right of self-determination) to be Black Nationalism. Others, including some Black Nationalists as well as non-nationalists, don't: They believe that political separation is the essential core of Black Nationalism. In short, there is no commonly agreed definition of what Black Nationalism is -- and on this, Solidarity does not need to have a "position."

To be clear, Black Nationalism is important. (A Black Nationalist individual or organization is any one that proclaims itself to be such.) It is studied and debated by important scholars (mostly Black, of course) and we should be much more familiar than we are with that research and the debates. We do not need a "political position" on them. We need to understand what the various currents represent within the African American liberation struggle: for example, how they respond positively or negatively to problems of Black-Latino, Black-Arab and Black-Asian relations which are very complex and difficult in many places. This understanding can help us develop a constructive albeit modest anti-racist practice.

Third, there's another discussion we need to undertake, which is relevant both to the evolution of Black Nationalism in all its variants as well as our own strategy. It's been raised by Joanna M: the question of how capitalist restructuring, domestically and globally, affects the strategic weight of the African American proletariat.

This is far from a simple question and will not have a single answer. To take two examples: In New York City, Black workers (in transit) have as much power as ever to shut it down. That hasn't changed fundamentally. It's not the same story in the Detroit auto industry -- that's changed a whole lot. And the fiscal crisis of the cities (Detroit is particularly critical in this regard, but not unique) has a powerful impact on the power of the heavily-Black public work force. We have serious work and thinking to do around this set of questions.

Fourth, a few additional notes on Black Nationalism and self-determination. As a matter of principle I think it's essential for revolutionary socialists to support the right of Black self-determination including the right of separation; I believe however it's a mistake to project that as part of our practical strategic perspective.

My view (following CLR James and the other great thinkers in our tradition broadly speaking) is that a general revolutionary upsurge in this country will include, crucially, a great rise in independent Black (and other oppressed peoples') organization, and a rise in Black Nationalism in the non-separatist sense. On the other hand, while a mass movement for Black separation is possible, I would expect it only in the context of major social collapse and the total failure of labor and the left. This can happen, but conditions impelling mass Black sentiment for separation imply social conditions so horrible that many of us non-Black folks would be asking permission to go along.

In short, supporting the RIGHT of separation doesn't mean we pose it as the perspective for democratic or revolutionary transformation.

Finally, another personal observation which I offer because it surely affects my thinking about all this. My own situation is not one of daily interaction with the Black proletariat; I do however live in a predominantly African American community of mainly middle class and professional folks. This is not the layer that will make a revolution; it is a sociologically important formation, however, because these are the folks who have 100% left the Detroit public school system, who fear the loss of their home equity and are leaving the city with a net population loss of 1000 per month. (White flight is irrelevant in Detroit, it's been here and flown.)

In the course of coaching baseball, discussing the city elections and so forth, there are a few occasions to discuss leftwing politics and once in a great while a chance to give someone a copy of ATC. But without attaching any great political significance to the following, I must note that if I told people that I'm in a group that debates the prospects of African American political separation, they would surely conclude, no doubt about it, that we had indeed lost our collective white minds. --7/14/05