

Sheridan Talbott

The Centrality of the Black Worker—II

In your Volume 5, Number 3 of *Appeal to Reason*, Jim Haughton and Joe Carnegie of Fightback published an article entitled "The Centrality of the Black Worker." Unfortunately, the article falls short of the mark set by the title. While the authors make interesting points throughout, the centrality of the black worker as they understand it is reduced to the necessity of "white people" politically embracing "Black folk" on the one hand, and the black workers interpreting and teaching white people the "meaning of Black oppression and economic exploitation" on the other. Somehow, according to the authors, black men and women are thus the "most decisive lever for a thorough transformation of the U.S. social system."

But all this tells us next to nothing about the centrality of the black worker today. Here I refer particularly to the black worker in the South; and not only within the social, economic, and political context of the United States, but within that of the world as a whole as well. The centrality of the black worker in the South is an objective fact, brought about by objective, historical processes. It is the result of the unique, pivotal position he or she occupies within the class struggle in the U.S. and the implications of that position for the world communist movement. Abstractions about "political embraces" and how the interpreter and teacher have a special pipeline into "meaning" are essentially devoid of class analysis and only confuse the issue. In the final analysis, Fightback's article obscures the very centrality it seeks to explain.

In this article, I'll take a different approach, one which examines the historical processes that have brought us to the present and made the situation of the black worker in the South the burning question facing the U.S. working class today. We'll see that there have been two major economic and political turns in U.S. history—turns necessary for fur-

Sheridan Talbott lives in Chicago and is employed by Vanguard Books.

ther development of the productive forces—and that in each the black worker in the South maintained a central position. Finally, we'll see that capitalist production is now entering the most intense crisis in its history and faces yet another turn, a turn where the question of the black worker in the South must be resolved once and for all.



It was Marx who first pointed out, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, that the development of the modern industrial world depended on the development of the new world, the American colonies; that the cotton crop was the only source of real value the colonies had; and that without slavery there would have been no cotton crop.¹ Indeed, slavery was the only form of labor that made the cotton crop possible.² Concretely, slavery in the South as an institution, as an economic category, meant the African and his descendants. Thus, from the very beginning the black worker in the South was placed at the heart of United States economic life, and in the most fundamental way. The die was cast. The future and development of the working class movement in the United States was inextricably tied to that black worker.

Cotton quickly became king in the early period of U.S. history because of its dominant economic importance. But at the same time, industry (and along with it an industrial proletariat) began developing in the North primarily to meet the needs of the cotton economy. It wasn't long, though, before northern industrial production began to outstrip the South's ability to consume it. This situation—a cotton economy in the South based on slave labor, a developing industry in the North based on wage labor, and the mutually exclusive needs and demands of each—created a contradiction that could only be resolved in conflict.

Both economies had to expand and both had to look westward: southern agriculture because of its continuous need for virgin land due to soil depletion by cotton, northern industry because its continued growth depended on the development of new sources of raw materials, markets, etc. Both economies were trying to occupy the same place at the same time. It couldn't be done; the necessity of each form of labor to the respective economies made it impossible. Because of the conditions on the large plantations in the deep south and the rate of profit, cotton demanded slave labor. Northern industry, on the other hand, required wage labor.* By the 1850s it was all but impossible for either economy to expand westward because of the other.

This conflict between the cotton interests and northern industry took one of its sharpest forms in the political struggle over whether the western territories would go slave or free soil. The first key victory for the southern slavers was the Missouri Compromise of 1820. While it temporarily limited the expansion of the slave system into the West, it at the same time extended it by allowing Missouri to enter the union as a slave state. Then in 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Bill was passed. It removed all geographical limits to the westward expansion of slavery—including those set by the Missouri Compromise—by leaving it up to the majorities in the given territories to decide whether they would be slave or free. Finally, in 1857, with the Dred Scott Decision, all legal barriers to slave expansion were removed when it became the duty of the government to protect slave property in any territory.

* Wage labor is a prerequisite for industrial production. (See *Capital*, Vol. 1, International Publishers, 1967, pp. 196-97, especially the footnote.)

Thus, northern industrialists faced not only the economic domination of cotton, but the political domination of the southern slavers as well.

The existence of slavery in the South, then, was the major fetter on industrial development in the U.S. At the same time, it became the major obstacle facing the working class in the North. More and more the industrial worker in the North was being forced by industry owners to compete with slave labor. Workers were being told they had to work as long and as cheap as the slaves in the South. There was even direct competition between the two forms of labor, in the shipbuilding industry, for instance, and the railroads. Slave labor in the South meant that wage labor in the North would be driven down to the level of slavery itself. This is why, when the Civil War broke out, the wage workers in the North went *en masse* to defeat the slave system. They had to.

Thus, the black worker as a slave in the South was the central issue facing industrial development and the working class. It was not a moral issue. History had objectively made the black worker the axis around which events had to turn.

With the defeat of the South in the Civil War and the end of the slave system, the fetters on the productive forces were smashed and room was made for further economic expansion. Marxism teaches us, though, that an antagonism is not resolved simply by changing its form, but by the mutual destruction of both of its sides; that is, through the change of both form and content. The Civil War resolved the conflict between two competing capitalist economies. It decided which capitalist class would exploit labor in both the North and South, the northern industrialists and bankers or the slavers; and under which form of labor, slave or free, this would be done. Consequently, the destruction of the slave system meant liberation neither for the working masses in the North, both black and white, nor for the white dirt farmer and "freed" slave in the South. On the contrary, the Civil War and period of Reconstruction which followed set the conditions for the next period of capitalist expansion. This was the first major economic and political turn in U.S. history and it determined the course of development for almost 100 years.

To understand this post-Civil War period and why the question of the black worker in the South would again come to the fore at the

end of World War Two, it is necessary briefly to consider the national question and how it applies to the South.

Nations, in the modern sense, are a product of rising capitalism. At the same time, the continued development of capitalism would have been impossible without the development of nations. Stalin in *Foundations of Leninism* sums up the importance of the national question for the proletarian revolution. "The national problem is a part of the general problem of the proletarian revolution, a part of the problem of the dictatorship of the proletariat."³ Whether or not the South is a distinct nation is of central importance to the revolutionary process in the United States and has tremendous international implications.

In his *Marxism and the National Question*, Stalin defines a nation as "a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture."⁴ This definition is not something Stalin simply picked from the blue or arbitrarily invented, but is a scientific description of an historical phenomenon produced in a specific historical period.

Whether the South was a distinct nation prior to the Civil War is a fluid question because we are talking about a formative period of development in U.S. history. Certainly there were separate economies in the North and the South, one based on wage labor and the other on slave labor, each with crossing but distinct paths of historical development. There were distinct exploiting and exploited classes in the two "regions." But the key question is whether or not the economy in the South was developed enough, and had enough internal economic cohesion, to be nationally distinct from the North. What can be said without oversimplification is that all the conditions to make the South a separate nation existed by the time of the Civil War, and that by the end of Reconstruction it had been forged not only into a distinct nation, but into a colony of the North firmly in the financial grasp of Wall Street bankers.* As we shall see, the fact that part of the South, the Negro Nation (that is, the Black Belt and the surrounding, economically dependent areas), is a separate nation is the basis of the centrality of the black worker.

* See Nelson Peery's *Negro National Colonial Question* for a more detailed discussion of the origin and development of the Negro Nation. See especially Chapter 3.

By the end of Reconstruction everything had worked out in the interests of the northern capitalist class. The period of expansion that followed saw tremendous growth in northern industry. It saw the taming and development of the West and the brutal oppression and exploitation of the Negro Nation. It saw the extension of U.S. economic control over Cuba, Mexico, and other areas. Not that there weren't periodic crises; there were. But overall, economic expansion was possible. The period also saw a growth of the working class, but not one that meant meat and potatoes. The struggle to build trade unions had been well under way at least since the mid-1850s. Grassroots movements sprang up in both the North and South. Still, the expansion continued until it could go no further, ending in the crash of 1929 and the Great Depression.

The Depression was the result of a crisis of overproduction within a capitalist world which had entered into a permanent economic and political crisis in 1914. (World War One and the Russian Revolution which it spawned, and which tore a large chunk of the capitalist world market away forever, worsened rather than helped the crisis.) The situation had been analyzed by Lenin in 1916, in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. It was characterized primarily by direct colonialism, the existence of a small number of colonial empires each ruled by a "great" power—England, France, Holland, Belgium, Japan, the U.S., et al. Although there was some shuffling of the colonies after World War One, the basic empires were left essentially intact. This led to a situation in which the more vigorous imperialist countries, especially the United States, latecomers to the colonial grab, were unable to expand into the older countries' empires owing to tariff regulations, currency restrictions, and other legal prohibitions. The crash of 1929 was the result of the unequal development of imperialism and its inability to expand further on the basis of the old direct colonial boundaries. The growing economic might of the Axis powers, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other, sent the world spinning toward World War Two.

The outcome of World War Two was different from that of World War One. While both began as struggles among the bourgeoisie of the large capitalist countries for a redivision of the colonial world, the Second World War turned into a struggle for hegemony within the international capitalist class itself between certain national industrialists and

the emerging, truly international financier. At the same time, many of the national industrialists, especially those of Germany, saw the solution to their economic problems in the defeat of the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union, which would bring that part of the world back under capitalist control. Hence the financiers and the Soviet Union found a common interest in the defeat of the industrialists, especially of Germany and Japan, and were able to unite for that purpose.

The outcome of World War Two did not leave the colonial world intact. The economic and political changes that took place between 1947 and 1953 represent the second major turn in U.S. history and set conditions for the period of capitalist expansion which spanned the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Without these changes, further expansion would have been impossible. Some of them were international in scope. Others pertained more directly to the United States. All were interconnected. Let us first consider those of international scope, of which two are key.

The first was the replacement of the colony by the neocolony. This achieved two things. First, it allowed the export of large amounts of (primarily) dollars to the previously Japanese-, French-, and British-controlled (now ex-) colonies, making possible large-scale industrialization. Second, the setting up in the ex-colonies of nominally independent states which were still economically dependent on Wall Street temporarily stabilized at least part of the colonial world.

The second major change during this period was the coming to power of the Khrushchev group in the Soviet Union. Its policy of peace at any cost eventually came to fruition in *detente*. This, too, helped stabilize the world politically.

When we look at what was happening in the United States during this period the importance of the Negro Nation and the centrality of the southern black worker become evident. Basically, the moves the U.S. bourgeoisie made within the country were based on what should be called its "southern strategy," which addressed three interdependent areas of combat: the trade union movement, the domestic communist movement, and the changing social environment in the Negro Nation itself.

Consider some of the developments, and their ramifications, which occurred between 1947 and 1953. First there was the beginning of real industrialization of the South, and, facilitating it, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, with the implementation, especially in the South, of

the "right-to-work" laws. There was also the beginning of the civil rights movement, which temporarily stabilized the South politically. There was also the general and massive bribing of the leadership and upper strata of the trade union movement, which, after the communists were driven out, became tied ever more closely and consciously to the Democratic Party and its policy of worldwide imperialist expansion.* Finally, there was the liquidation by the Communist Party USA of its organization in the South and, at least objectively, its linking itself also to the Democratic Party.

Generally, all these trends led to the achievement of the bourgeoisie's goal. They derailed the working class movement and did so by pitting the working class of the Anglo-American nation against that of the Negro Nation.

Thus again the conditions for economic expansion were set. The black worker in the South was again central because the bourgeoisie's strategy revolved around the Negro Nation. The strategy was successful because it could play on the rest of the country's national chauvinism toward the Negro Nation—a chauvinism which ultimately finds its rationale in the historically constituted bias toward the southern black worker.

Until the present time, the Anglo-American working class has not had to address itself to the question of the Negro Nation and the southern black worker in a way that resolves the problem of inequality once and for all. But today the question of the black worker in the South faces the U.S. working class for the third time. This time, however, it is no longer possible simply to change the form of the contradiction existing between the Anglo-American working class and that of the Negro Nation; it must be resolved.

The system of capitalist production has now entered a crisis it cannot pull out of. There's no longer any room left in the world to allow the scale of expansion necessary to relieve it. The further development of the productive forces under the capitalist mode of production is no longer possible. In short, the productive forces are openly rebelling against the relations of production. There is no economic solution for

* The merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955 was the direct result of the massive purge of the left from the unions during the 1947-53 period.

capitalism, only a political one, socialism. And this time history demands a resolution of the Negro question.

Lenin and Stalin both showed and history has proven that until the national question is recognized, understood, and taken up by the working class, a socialist revolution is impossible. The capitalist nations are in the most intense crisis in their history. They can't expand, so they must retrench. They (especially the United States) will do this from a position of strength, the western hemisphere. It is going to mean social oppression and exploitation of the working classes in all capitalist countries.

Big nations make history, and the working class in the U.S. has the most historic role to play among the capitalist nations. In order to do so it must recognize that the oppression of the Negro Nation is the key condition of its own oppression. It must also recognize that independence for the Negro Nation is the road to its own emancipation from capital.

The black worker in the South is central in this final stage of class society precisely because of the centrality of the Negro Nation. It, above all, is the one colony the U.S. bourgeoisie cannot give up and survive as a class. At the same time, the Negro Nation's independence is a necessary condition for the proletarian revolution in the U.S. Thus, the Negro Nation is the battleground; the southern black worker, again, is the pivot upon which events will turn. He or she stands at the cutting edge of the class struggle. Objectively, the national liberation movement is already underway in the Negro Nation in the form of the various struggles for equality—struggles around education, health care, housing, jobs. The bourgeoisie in the U.S. must stop this movement and it will do it through an attack on the black worker. The rising activity of the KKK is one example. At the same time, the bourgeoisie must attempt to solve its crisis at the expense of the entire working class. It will do this through an attack on the latter's weakest link. Historically that has been the black worker in the South.

The difference between the centrality of the black worker in the Negro Nation today and that of the two earlier periods is that the question can no longer be ignored by the U.S. working class or covered up through further U.S. economic expansion. There is no solution to the black worker's present inequality that would leave the capitalist system

intact. At the same time, there is no longer any way that the U.S. working class as a whole can acquiesce in that inequality and hope to survive.

Footnotes

¹ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, International Publishers, New York, 1963, p. 111.

² Nelson Peery, *The Negro National Colonial Question*, Workers Press, Chicago, 1975, p. 14.

³ Joseph Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism*, International Publishers, New York, 1939, p. 79.

⁴ Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Colonial Question*, Proletarian Publishers, San Francisco, 1975, p. 22.