

The New Motion in Black Politics and the Electoral Arena

by the Line of March Editorial Board

I. Introduction

Of all the theoretical challenges posed to communists, none are more pressing than those flowing from the need for accurate and timely assessments of new developments in the spontaneous political motion of the masses. After all, the historical function of the communists to help weld the spontaneous struggle into a powerful revolutionary force—capable of consciously altering the entirety of social relations—is totally bound up with our ability to measure most precisely, at any given moment, the level of political maturation of different sectors of the working class, especially of its proletarianized mass.

The new political motion of the Black community poses such a theoretical challenge to the U.S. communist movement. That motion, principally an upsurge of Black political activity in the electoral arena, is unmistakable. We have seen this upsurge in the emergence of a distinct and measurable Black voting bloc, largely tied to the Democratic Party. This bloc has demonstrated, in the last two presidential elections as well as in numerous state and local elections, an unprecedented voting strength capable of determining the outcome of contests in the bourgeois electoral arena.* This electoral strength is shown most dramatically in

* This was demonstrated most vividly in the 1976 presidential election. Of an estimated 6.6 million Blacks voting, approximately 94% cast their ballots for Jimmy Carter. In a number of key states (Missouri, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and Maryland) the Black vote provided Carter with his margin of victory. Carter would not have been elected without the electoral votes of those states.¹ The Black vote remained overwhelmingly

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the proliferation of Black candidacies and Black elected officials in every area where there are concentrations of Black people in the country. This proliferation has been especially pronounced at the municipal level: 240 U.S. cities—among them some of the major population centers of the country—currently have Black mayors.*

Increased Black activity in the electoral arena has been underway for almost 20 years, ever since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Recently, though, the momentum and scale of this activity have increased. These changes have surfaced most sharply in the heated Chicago mayoral campaign of 1983, which culminated in the election of Harold Washington, and in the current campaign by the Rev. Jesse Jackson for the Democratic Party's 1984 presidential nomination. This new dynamic has three distinguishing features: first, it rests on the active mobilization of the Black masses who have heretofore had a largely passive relation to the electoral process; second, it has given rise to an embryonic political program, one which clearly stands markedly on the left of the bourgeois political spectrum—its cornerstone being a sharp polarization with institutionalized racism, but embracing a broad spectrum of other social and political questions as well; and third, it has emerged largely as a Black insurgency within the Democratic Party, challenging both the operative leadership of that institution and a whole array of accommodationist Black officials and political figures who have aligned themselves with the party's traditional hierarchy.

The electoral upsurge in the Black community has unleashed conspicuous mass political energy behind an advanced program society-

Democratic in 1980, but was unable to prevent Ronald Reagan's election. Nevertheless, it has become evident that whatever prospects the Democrats have of regaining the presidency are based on maintaining the overwhelming support of the Black masses.

* Such major cities as Detroit, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, Newark, Gary, and Oakland have had Black mayors for a number of years. Following Harold Washington's election in Chicago last year, Black mayoral candidates were also successful in Philadelphia and Charlotte, N.C. Also, for the first time in the history of Boston, a Black candidate, Mel King, made it into the final run-off for the mayoralty. All told, the number of Black elected officials in the U.S. has increased from some five hundred in 1965 to more than 5,100 today.

Striking though this increase is, Blacks are still significantly under-represented among public officials. While Blacks officially comprise approximately 10% of the U.S. population, the 5,100 Black elected officials make up only about 1% of the total number of elected officials in the country. For a detailed statistical analysis, see *Black Elected Officials and Their Constituencies*, by Thomas E. Cavanaugh and Denise Stockton (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Policy Studies, 1983).

wide as well as inside the Democratic Party. But the dominant line and theoretical framework of the U.S. left, taken as a whole, remains extremely murky on the precise role of the Black liberation struggle in advancing the broader working class movement to a new level. By and large, the U.S. left—including its two largest trends, social democracy and that section of the communist movement represented by the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA)—tends to see the organized labor movement, after being steadily radicalized by the economic struggle, as the *natural vehicle* to lead a mass working class breakaway from the Democratic Party. As long as this simplistic and fundamentally flawed view prevails on the left, our capacity to analyze correctly and to participate decisively in the Black-led electoral insurgency will be seriously compromised.

This article offers an alternative view. First, we believe that the current attempt to bring the political weight of Black America to bear in the electoral arena—and on the terrain of the Democratic Party—represents a significant maturation of the spontaneous Black liberation movement and signals a new stage in its development. And second, because the Black liberation movement stands at the intersection of the class and racial contradictions under U.S. capitalism, this new stage of development promises to have a profound impact in the decades ahead on the shape and direction of working class politics overall and in fact offers the best hope of leading a working class breakaway from the Democratic Party.

In our opinion, it is essential that communists make a political analysis and assessment of what has been called "the new Black politics." At the same time, it is critical that we examine more closely the potential trajectory of U.S. working class politics in light of the contradictions this development has already revealed.

In order to make this assessment, however, it will be necessary to explore several closely related questions of theory and practical politics. This article has, accordingly, been organized along the following lines.

Section II, immediately following this general introduction, focuses on the electoral arena. Here we try to examine two issues: the laws of motion of the spontaneous movement as they concretely express themselves in the present upsurge of Black community politics in the electoral arena; and some broader theoretical questions concerning electoral politics as a crucial arena of the class struggle and as a site of the political maturation of the working class movement.

Section III consists of a reconstruction and summation of the battle for Chicago—the background to, and the most important events surrounding, Harold Washington's candidacy for the Chicago mayoralty last year. We have paid special attention to this campaign because in many ways it is the most vivid expression of the new dynamic in Black community politics and of that motion's profound impact on broader

politics. Having this concrete experience as a reference point will, we hope, give the reader a sharper sense of the propositions we advance in the sections that follow.

In Section IV, "The Split in the Working Class," we advance an analysis of the U.S. working class based on the proposition that this class is structurally divided—and that this division produces profoundly contradictory political motion. Recognition of this fundamental fact is by no means a settled question among conscious political forces of the left, including communists. In fact, the dominant tendency on the U.S. left is to speak of, and search for, an ever elusive program which might unite the *entire* working class in struggle and lead it gradually and smoothly to mount the ultimate challenge against the capitalist system itself. Our view is that such attempts are futile and inevitably wind up conciliating opportunism in the working class. We further believe that a concrete analysis of the "backlash" polarization within the working class provoked by the current upsurge in Black community politics confirms the truth of this view.

The basic Leninist theoretical framework utilized in this section, together with a concrete historical analysis of the development of the U.S. working class in the period immediately following World War II, was presented in previous issues of this journal.*

Section V attempts an assessment of the underlying significance of the motion of Black community politics in terms of the struggle against racism and of the relationship of that motion to the maturation of working class politics more broadly. As in the previous section, this analysis is based on a theoretical framework advanced in earlier issues.** In many ways, the present article as a whole represents an attempt to particularize in concrete political fashion the basic elements of the theoretical framework advanced in this earlier series.

At stake here is one of the critical aspects of the general line of the U.S. communist movement. It is not uncommon for groups on the left to make an obligatory nod to "the centrality of the Black liberation struggle." But the strategic significance of this point is frequently obscured by dropping out the fact that the political logic of the struggle for Black power is inextricably rooted in a concrete struggle against racial privilege and white supremacy which define that community's particular historical and present oppression and social condition. Beyond the compelling

* See the three-part series, *The Labor Aristocracy: The Material Basis for Opportunism in the Labor Movement*, by Max Elbaum and Robert Seltzer, which appeared in *Line of March* #11, #12, and #13/14.

** See the three-part series, *Toward a Communist Analysis of Black Oppression and Black Liberation*, by Linda Burnham and Bob Wing in *Line of March* #7, #8, and #9.

logic of the struggle against racism itself, however, is the fact that any large-scale move of the Black masses on behalf of their own perceived interests also acts to set the broader political agenda, identify the burning issues facing the working class *as a whole*, and transform the political climate of the whole country, thus making the Black liberation movement a centerpiece for any truly democratic or revolutionary formation in this country.

Finally, in Section VI we assess the long term significance of the struggle posed by the Black-led insurgency within the Democratic Party. Our thesis is that it is neither accidental nor unfortunate that the anti-racist upsurge in the Black community has, to a great extent, situated itself on the terrain of Democratic Party politics. In fact, this motion reflects a maturation of the Black Power movement since, in essence, it is an attempt to grasp the available levers of political power to try to undermine the system of racism.

Equally important is the fact that this movement inside the Democratic Party (more so than in the trade union movement as it is currently constituted) promises to give rise to concrete programs, forms of organization, institutions, trained cadres, leading political figures, etc., that will sooner or later split the Democratic Party and propel not only the Black liberation struggle, but the working class and people's movement more generally, toward a political expression which is truly independent of the bourgeois political parties.

A year ago, some of these propositions might have seemed purely speculative. But the past year has been rich in experiences which have amply confirmed them. While the Harold Washington campaign was the most illuminating, there have been other developments as well—such as the Mel King campaign in Boston, the leading role played by the Congressional Black Caucus in opposition to the whole range of policies of the Reagan administration, and Jesse Jackson's current campaign for the Democratic Party's nomination. This article, then, draws not only on the theoretical projections of communists, but on the unmistakable political dynamic emanating from the Black community and affecting the whole range of U.S. politics.

II. The Electoral Arena

A. The Present Motion of Black Politics

Looked at superficially, the Black liberation movement's new focus on the electoral arena might appear to be a political retreat from the militancy of the '60s and early '70s, when mass ghetto uprisings characterized the country's social landscape and revolutionary groups like the Black Panther Party rose to prominence. But the insurrections which erupted in city after city in that period, however much they

reflected the justified anger of the Black masses and the revolutionary potential bound up in that anger, were not able to provide any long term political direction for the Black struggle. What the times called for, and what the further maturation of the Black liberation movement required, was a political program which spoke to the immediate needs and demands of the Black masses and which would be based on *the real possibilities for accomplishing that program through the mechanisms of bourgeois democracy nominally available for that purpose*. Under the prevailing political circumstances, efforts to adopt such a program through legislation, and the election of officials committed to it, could not be skipped; even though, as Lenin warned, many revolutionaries already realized the severely circumscribed possibilities inherent in that bourgeois process and the ultimate need for the Black masses to supersede it.

But it was no simple matter for the revolutionary-minded elements in the Black liberation movement to arrive at this understanding. The widely held view emerging out of the mass movements and insurrections of the '60s tended to simplistically equate any work in the electoral arena with co-optation and slavish accommodation to the status quo. The idea that the electoral arena could become an important terrain on which the anti-racist struggle might be advanced tended to be dismissed; "purer" forms of mass organization and direct political action, such as "grass-roots" community organizing, work in the trade unions, etc., were favored instead. Any suggestion that the struggle might be usefully pursued on the terrain of the Democratic Party was generally viewed with disdain, as an almost certain mark of tokenism and individual careerism. At the very least—so the prevailing wisdom went—if the movement were to take up electoral forms, these would have to develop completely outside the two-party system.

However, by the mid-'70s it was becoming painfully clear that the more radical/revolutionary elements in the Black liberation movement lacked enough of a unified program and strategy to launch an independent political party of any substance* or, in many cases, even to

* There were a number of attempts in the early '70s to pursue the development of an independent programmatic (and possibly organizational) foundation of Black national politics in the post-civil rights movement era. The bulk of these efforts took place through a series of National Black Assemblies. The grouping was extremely broad and unstable—the forces involved ranged from moderates to communists. Needless to say, it was unable to achieve lasting unity on either program or strategy. The politically moderate elements withdrew first; the more left elements subsequently proved unable to move the process forward or even to sustain it. Objectively, the formation was too premature to accomplish its goals. But the very questions it placed on the agenda represented a step forward for the movement. What is the program for the Black liberation movement and what is the movement's relationship to the broader people's struggle? Can the Demo-

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sustain localized direct organizing efforts among the Black masses. Consequently, almost by default, some left resistance forces began to take up electoral work, usually through the mechanisms of the Democratic Party. By the early 1980s it was no longer possible for even the more self-righteous revolutionaries to off-handedly dismiss the electoral arena as little more than the guarded domain of conservative, opportunist forces in the Black community.

That the Black liberation movement should have hesitations about attaching itself completely to the Democratic Party is to be expected and quite legitimate. Historically, the Democratic Party was the chief political instrument of Black oppression in the areas of greatest Black population, the South. Even as the party nationally began to embrace a broader reformist vision in the 1930s, its essential political logic was based on an alliance in which the Dixiecrats exercised enormous influence over the party's actual legislative and governmental program. Even when the Democratic Party finally began to enact the civil rights legislation of the '60s which gave it its "anti-racist" credentials, the party was clearly acting in response to the mass movement which had begun to grip the whole nation and which had developed outside of *and, in large part, in opposition to* the Democratic Party leadership. And lastly, there was also good reason to be skeptical of the view that the election of Black public officials *in and of itself* necessarily represented an advance for the Black liberation movement.

In light of all this, the hesitations of the revolutionary elements in the Black liberation movement are understandable. Indeed, those hesitations, the suspicion, the skepticism were all healthy reactions to the illusions being promoted by liberal whites and Black accommodationists: specifically that the Democratic Party and bourgeois democracy were a panacea capable of dismantling the system of racism and of altering qualitatively the conditions of the Black masses.

But the fact remained that it was still necessary for the mass movement—without necessarily giving in to illusions about electoral politics and the Democratic Party—to find the ways to utilize these forms of bourgeois democracy as part of a broader strategy. The spontaneous gravitation of the mass movement toward these forms makes it clear that the more left-wing revolutionary-minded forces cannot afford to stand aloof from them, that instead they must learn how to interact with and master them.

In many ways this is what the force at the center of the "new Black politics" represents. This development constitutes an important *matura-*

cratic Party ever become a reliable vehicle for advancing the struggle? What are the limitations of the electoral arena and can the Black liberation struggle afford to be reduced to this? These same questions will continue to re-emerge until they are solved in a concrete, historical fashion.

tion in both the form and content of independent Black politics—and an increased capacity to influence broader national politics. Why do we characterize this development as a “maturation”—an assessment, we dare say, which will be viewed with scorn by many forces in a movement where the legacy of infantile leftism from the '60s and '70s still exercises a powerful ideological influence?

Like all *spontaneous** movements, the Black liberation movement grows out of common conditions of oppression—in this case that of racial oppression—and coheres around concrete demands to change or alleviate those conditions. The burning issues before the Black liberation movement at its present stage of development are not, in any direct or immediate sense, questions of revolution. They are political questions flowing out of a *struggle taking place in the real world to achieve immediate reforms*. History does not skip stages—and the Black liberation movement is no exception. It has not and will not make a leap, *as a movement*, to a revolutionary program without exhausting the bourgeois democratic process.

What Lenin said of the spontaneous trade union movement applies with equal force to the spontaneous resistance movement of the Black masses:

“The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and *strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation*, etc.”² (Our emphasis.)

Lenin noted that the spontaneous movement may be, at times, extremely militant and even insurrectionary. He described the early workers' riots in Russia in terms which could be used today to describe the Black urban ghetto insurrections of the '60s as

“... the awakening of consciousness to a certain extent: the workers were losing their confidence in the permanence of the system which oppressed them. They began . . . I shall not say to understand, but to sense the necessity for collective resistance, and definitely abandoned

* By “spontaneous” movements we do not mean “thoughtless,” “unnecessary” or “undirected.” Rather, following Lenin's usage (especially in *What Is To Be Done?*) this term simply implies that a given movement comes into being and develops in relation to historically specific expressions of oppression and exploitation. Lenin points out that such movements do not develop a scientific understanding of society and the broader class struggle on their own or out of the logic of their particular point of reference—even when, as often happens, they attempt to address society-wide questions. In short, the term “spontaneous” implies that a given movement is not anchored by Marxist theory or tactics—which is how the term will be used in this article.

their slavish submission to their superiors. But this was, nevertheless, more in the nature of outbursts of desperation and vengeance than of struggle.”³

In fact, Lenin even argued that the later, more mature workers' strike movement, in which “definite demands were advanced, the strike was carefully timed, known cases and examples in other places were discussed, etc.,” revealed a more advanced consciousness but still remained *qualitatively* spontaneous (i.e., not infused and transformed by Marxism). In short, no matter what militant and even revolutionary-sounding slogans such movements may temporarily inscribe on their banners, they do not overcome the objective limitations of spontaneity, which *ultimately pulls those movements time and again back to the level of reform*.

It is not our intention to strain a historical parallel beyond its usefulness. The point, however, is that the maturation of any spontaneous movement must be measured not so much by its proclamations or its forms of struggle as by the degree of consciousness and effectiveness it demonstrates in the pursuit of its concrete reform goals. It is in this sense that we characterize the present motion of Black politics—up to and including its current lodgement in the Democratic Party—as *maturation*. What this process represents, in effect, is a concerted attempt to bring the concentrated strength of the Black masses to bear on the *available mechanisms of bourgeois democracy* in order to enact legislation and grasp the powers of law and policy enforcement on behalf of the interests of the Black community.

It is a law of development of spontaneous movements that they will inevitably gravitate toward those forms of struggle that hold out the best possibility of achieving “palpable results.”* This is the essential materialism of the spontaneous movement asserting itself. And the Black liberation struggle shows this vividly today as it seeks out the most effective means of implementing a program of concrete demands.

* The phrase “palpable results” is rightly held in some disrepute in the communist movement because of Lenin's polemic with the “economist” trend in the Russian communist movement at the turn of the century. Lenin derided the “economists” for making the achievements of “palpable results”—concrete economic and political reforms—the principal focus of communist activity among the masses. Lenin's point was that communists could not base their own work among the masses on reformist objectives; but that it was inevitable that the masses themselves would gravitate toward political activity that promised “palpable results.” The task of communists, Lenin argued, was to raise the sights and broaden the vision of the masses beyond this perspective, to train the masses to conceive of their objective not merely as an amelioration of oppressive conditions but as ultimately a question of *political power*. Lenin did not berate

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Under the present circumstances, the logic of spontaneous Black politics as it matures naturally leads it to organize itself to affect electoral outcomes, whether by supporting candidates favorable to its agenda or by electing its own candidates. This is especially true in areas where there are marked Black population concentrations with the potential for forging a Black voting bloc capable of exercising meaningful political leverage. Achieving some degree of political power, in turn, holds out the possibility of attacking certain concrete and highly visible expressions of the system of racism, such as the longstanding discrimination against minority neighborhoods in terms of allocating funds and resources for schools, daycare centers, clinics, parks, street repair, refuse collection, etc.; laxity in and failure to enforce anti-discrimination laws; police and extra-legal violence against Black citizens; and an extensive white patronage system affecting municipal employment, awarding of contracts, appointment of public officials, etc.

These are obviously the types of questions most directly addressed at the level of municipal politics. And it is noteworthy that in recent years the trend in Black politics has been an increased concentration on capturing posts in the executive branch of local government, particularly mayorships. In terms of operational political power, municipal executive offices function far more directly and extensively than do city councils and the like.

But the concrete questions before the Black community which can be addressed on the terrain of bourgeois democracy do not appear only at the local level. Such questions as voting rights, consistent desegregation, affirmative action, and government-financed programs dealing with health, education, and welfare are all of direct importance to the Black masses. In addition, there is a whole range of democratic and reform questions which do not appear in explicitly racial terms but which affect the 95% of the Black masses who are workers. Taken as a whole, these issues constitute a political agenda which the Black liberation movement must bring into the electoral arena.

The current attempt to do that—accompanied by the development of new organizational forms and institutions designed to bring the electoral weight of the Black masses into the struggle—is the concrete expression of the political maturation and new stage of development of the Black liberation movement.

B. Electoral Politics as an Arena of the Class Struggle

Beyond the historically specific maturation of the Black liberation movement, a broader theoretical issue confronts the left: the role of the

the masses for trying to achieve “palpable results.” He berated the revolutionaries for accepting the political criteria of the spontaneous movement as the measure of their own activity.

electoral arena in preparing for and advancing the revolutionary struggle. Unfortunately, the infantile leftism of the '60s and '70s—raised to the level of theory by Trotskyism and Maoism—has left deeply rooted prejudices in large sections of the progressive and revolutionary movements. This is certainly the legacy of our trend, weaned on the pablum of “Mao Zedong Thought”: the *elementary beginnings* of a serious Marxist-Leninist analysis on the prospects of electoral politics—that is, the ultimate need for the revolutionary proletariat to confront the *essential nature* of the bourgeois state with its own extra-parliamentary *force* in order to seize political power and establish its own dictatorship over the exploiters—became the “profound” *conclusions* of the “new communist movement” that self-righteously “abstained” from something they were too immature even to take up.* Fortunately, the class struggle spontaneously poses to us once again questions which in an earlier period we were unwilling and ill-prepared to take up.

In trying to assess the significance of the electoral arena as a site of class struggle, it is important to begin with an understanding of the organic relationship between the state form of bourgeois democracy and the nature of the capitalist mode of production. The bourgeois democratic forms developed by capitalism are not a matter of historical accident. Nor are they primarily concessions wrested from a fiercely reluctant bourgeoisie by an increasingly militant and conscious working class, although they frequently emerge historically as the result of sharp political struggles in which working class forces have played a role. Engels, for instance, in noting the existence of qualifications of property and wealth on the right of suffrage, declares:

“This political recognition of property distinctions is by no means essential. On the contrary, it marks a low stage of state development. The highest form of the state, the democratic republic, *which under our modern conditions of society is more and more becoming an inevitable necessity*, and is the form of state in which alone the last decisive struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie can be fought out—the democratic republic officially knows nothing any more of property distinctions.”⁴ (Our emphasis.)

* The foil for this infantile approach was provided at the time by the illusions promoted by social democracy and by the general line of the CPUSA. Revolutionary-minded elements rising out of the mass movements of the '60s rightly rejected both social democracy's vision of a “democratic socialism” achieved through amassing an electoral majority and the CPUSA's fantasy of an anti-monopoly coalition which could wrest power peacefully and gradually from the U.S. ruling class. Unfortunately, in rejecting such reformist strategies, many inexperienced revolutionaries also tended to reject the electoral arena altogether and thereby surrendered the possibility of developing a scientific approach to electoral politics.

Engels' point was elaborated further by Lenin, who called the "democratic republic . . . the best possible political shell for capitalism."⁵ Lenin argued that the system of bourgeois democracy (constitutional government, universal suffrage, institutionalized electoral process, systems of political parties, etc.) is much more than the bourgeoisie's "preferred form" of class dictatorship in a trivial, subjective sense. The capitalist class does not simply dispense with this form of rule casually or on a whim. In fact, the democratic republic is the centerpiece of the bourgeoisie's historically *particular* form of class rule and is rooted in the history of capitalist development and the very nature of capital itself.

Historically, the various forms of bourgeois democracy—up to and including the bourgeois democratic republic—arose in the course of the struggle of the rising class of commodity producers against feudal rule. The rising bourgeoisie inscribed on its banners the call for democracy—by which it meant democracy primarily for itself—in order to challenge the mystified, "God-given" authority of the feudal aristocracy. Its struggle for parliamentary forms was nothing but its own attempt to capture control of the state apparatus in order to bring it into line with the necessities of a system of generalized commodity production. (This sometimes led to limited extensions of democracy to other oppressed classes as the rising bourgeoisie offered political concessions to these classes in order to get them to march behind the bourgeoisie in the struggle against the feudal nobility.)

This historical process has tended to reinforce the forms of bourgeois democracy, so much so that even some communists have at times developed illusions that the bourgeoisie is unshakably loyal to this particular *form* of rule.* The bourgeoisie is prepared to abandon this "best possible political shell" if necessary, but it will not do so lightly. On the contrary, it will do so only when it perceives a direct and immediate threat to its social order.

Beyond the utility of democratic forms in the struggle against the feudal system, bourgeois democracy also corresponds to the internal dynamic of the capitalist mode of production itself. The structural cornerstone of all bourgeois rights is the right to property, just as the foundation for all bourgeois freedoms is free enterprise. The bourgeoisie's own need for democracy is rooted in the fact that, under capitalism's system of generalized commodity production, competition between rival private capitals requires a system of law through which the owners of capital agree to mediate their rivalry and regulate their relations. As the bourgeoisie consolidates its power, this "democratic"

* The word "Chile," and the erroneous proposition advanced by some on the Chilean left that the Chilean bourgeoisie had a firm commitment to constitutional rule, is the grim reminder of the price of maintaining such illusions.

system can be opened up to include, eventually, the bulk of the population. In turn, broad participation in the electoral process becomes a useful vehicle for the ideological consolidation of the masses around the system of private property. For just as the coercion and compulsions of capitalist exploitation function through—and are obscured by—the "free" marketplace which all enter "voluntarily" and on presumably "equal" terms; so, too, is the political rule of the bourgeoisie disguised by universal suffrage and "democratic" elections.

The fact that some persons in the marketplace consistently come out ahead, while others are continually ground up and spit out, thus appears to be an *individual matter* of good fortune, intelligence, skill, upbringing—and, in the U.S., racial traits. Similarly, the political dictatorship of the capitalist class functions through, and is obscured by, the system of bourgeois democracy wherein all individuals appear to have equal rights and an equal voice in the choice of public officials—and through them in making policy, laws, etc. In short, the whole edifice of bourgeois democracy is essentially a reflection of the underlying economic relations of capital in the realm of the political and legal superstructure.

At the same time, the long term predicament of capital vis-à-vis the proletariat is that as capital expands, so does the working class. The state apparatus of the bourgeoisie becomes, at bottom, increasingly unstable. Although, in its monopoly stage, capital can and does buy off the bulk of the upper strata of workers, the capitalist class—which in numerical terms and as a percentage of the population continues to shrink—becomes absolutely dwarfed by the expanding mass of the working class.

But the problem is not just one of numbers: the development of the forces of production under capitalism entails the raising of the cultural level of the working class itself. The scale and complexity of capitalist production necessitates a degree of literacy, technical and organizational skills, etc., which qualitatively distinguishes the modern day proletariat from the oppressed feudal peasant masses whose worldview is restricted by rural isolation and cultural backwardness.

This development gives rise to a political dilemma of the first order for the bourgeoisie. For all of the reasons we have previously laid out, the system of bourgeois democracy continues to provide capitalism with its "best political shell." Yet as growing numbers of the previously disenfranchised enter into public industry and the national social and economic life, it becomes increasingly untenable to exclude them from the norms of bourgeois political life. In fact, continued exclusion would be counter-productive, since these sectors of the masses would inevitably develop other, extra-legal forms of politics through which to advance their own interests and demands. And so the voting franchise has been extended to larger and larger sections of the working class: first

to unpropertied males, then to females, and, of particular significance in the U.S., to the masses of Black people.

As a result, in a developed bourgeois republic, the electoral arena is far from peripheral or inconsequential—either for the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Inevitably the working class will seek to utilize bourgeois electoral politics in order to advance its own interests, making the electoral arena—*whether the communists wish this to be the case or not*—a central site of the class struggle. It therefore becomes an indispensable arena for the training and maturation of both the masses and the revolutionary movement.

Of course, it takes time before the working class learns how to utilize the weapons of universal suffrage and the electoral process effectively. And political and ideological maturation—in any history-making sense—must also be a self-conscious, revolutionary effort to summarize and generalize such experience and practice. It nevertheless is true that, objectively, the opportunity to participate in the electoral arena provides favorable conditions for the development of class consciousness among the masses.

First, in the competition for votes, the question of developing a stable constituency brings to the fore the question of *political program*: In whose interests do you speak? How consistently and well do you articulate their needs? Second, to attempt to maintain long range participation in the electoral arena poses the challenge of building a political party (or a wing of a political party, etc.) as a pressing, practical question. Third, attempts to achieve any substantial political influence face concretely the tasks of building diverse alliances and negotiating the terms of these alliances. Last, electoral victories (local as well as national) give working class forces a hand on the reins of government—a *degree of political power* that opens up new prospects for the training of the working class movement. Such gains bring working class representatives into close quarters with contending class interests and provide an intimate knowledge about the political representatives of the bourgeoisie—their maneuvers, skills, and weaknesses. This close proximity to power also helps to demystify the formation and administration of government policy, etc.

The infantile leftist rejection of this arena of the class struggle illustrates a romantic fixation with a scenario in which the “storming of the Winter Palace,” abstracted from history and idealized, is devoid of an appreciation of how the working class movement was prepared over decades to seize power and how it might actually accumulate the experience to enable it to run a country, administer social services, etc., after the revolutionary triumph. A moment’s serious reflection shows that sustained practice in the electoral arena is indispensable for the training and preparation of the working class for such an eventuality. Moreover, the spontaneous movement will not wait for communists to be

ready—the maturation process described above has a logic and motion *independent of the activity of the conscious element*, a theoretical and ideological point we cannot underscore too much.*

The U.S. working class movement has participated in electoral politics for the last hundred years or so; yet today it is in an extremely weak and primitive position vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie. The working class has no mass political party or parties of its own.** Even within the Democratic Party, the recognized, *dominant* spokespeople of the working class are not the “socialists,” but rather some of the most reactionary and national chauvinist leaders of the labor movement. This

* In our polemic with infantile leftism we do not want our social democratic colleagues to claim an easy victory. A rejection of ultra-leftism is *not* a rejection of Leninism—despite social democracy’s long tradition of trying to equate the two. Leninism, not democratic socialism, has proved itself to be the *concentrated expression* of the capacity of revolutionary Marxism to transform the working class movement to the point that it *can actually take power* and destroy the *foundations* of the capitalist system. In this regard, Leninism continues to distinguish itself from social democracy on a number of crucial points. First and foremost is Leninism’s recognition that the workers’ movement will not, on its own accord and without a conscious vanguard party, arrive at a thoroughgoing revolutionary program in practice. In fact, as it spontaneously matures and becomes a more developed and sophisticated force in the bourgeois political arena, the basis for co-optation and reformist illusions *increases*. In the final analysis, without the intervention of the communists the revolutionary dialectic inherent in the spontaneous workers’ movement remains *qualitatively* flawed and the movement is continually reduced to the level of reformism. The theory and practice of social democracy essentially represent an attempt to raise this working class predicament to the level of theory, thereby surrendering the revolutionary task of overthrowing the bourgeoisie to turn to the task of reforming the system on behalf of the class enemy.

** In the absence of mass independent working class political forms in the U.S., the tendency on the left is to speak of the emergence of an independent working class party. In fact, a mature working class movement will most likely have more than one such party. This is the case in most capitalist countries where both communists and social democrats have developed a mass working class constituency. In some countries, these political trends and splits within them—or the success of some other trend, such as anarchism, in penetrating the workers’ movement—have produced several mass independent working class parties. Clearly, when the working class movement is debating within itself the best program and strategy for advancing its interests, it is at a higher stage of development than one which is not even able to develop a single party of its own. While we recognize this need for a working class party, we do not idealize an independent mass working class party as the magic weapon which will immediately be able to speak for a suddenly “united” class, let alone directly place the question of revolution on the class agenda.

negative phenomenon is closely tied to (although not the result solely of) the fact that there no longer exists a communist current within the U.S. working class movement. Even the social democratic trend, which the bourgeoisie views as a far more acceptable representative of socialism within the working class, has no independent electoral initiative of any significance despite its growth in numbers and influence over the past two decades.

For all these reasons, we are convinced that the present motion of Black politics in the electoral arena is a sign of maturation not only for the Black liberation movement but for the working class movement as a whole. It is essential that communists try to situate the present stage of development of that process—neither underestimating its potential for forward motion nor overstating the stage of development as it actually exists.

In this sense, Engels' much-quoted comment on the relationship between the working class and the bourgeois electoral process is exceedingly useful and uncannily timely:

“As long as . . . the proletariat is not yet ripe to emancipate itself, it will in its majority regard the existing order of society as the only one possible and, politically, will form the tail of the capitalist class, its extreme left wing. To the extent, however, that this class matures for its own self-emancipation, it constitutes itself as its own party and elects its own representatives, and not those of the capitalists. Thus universal suffrage is the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It cannot and never will be anything more in the present-day state; but that is sufficient. On the day the thermometer of universal suffrage registers boiling point among the workers, both they and the capitalists will know what to do.”⁶

III. The Battle for Chicago: A Harbinger of the Struggles to Come

The new trend represented by the electoral upsurge in Black community politics cannot, of course, be reduced to a single event. But as frequently occurs in politics, certain struggles become watersheds which both crystallize the new development and simultaneously advance the fuller unfolding of the process.

Such a watershed event was Chicago's mayoral campaign, which began in late 1982 and which culminated in the election of the city's first Black mayor, Harold Washington, in April 1983. This campaign, the battle for Chicago, merits close analysis by communists because it captured on a sizeable scale all of the main contradictions and implications of the new motion of Black community politics and because it became for a period of several months the most concentrated expression of that development.

The gravitation of the Black liberation movement toward the electoral arena, the racial split in the working class, the relation of Black community politics to the Democratic Party—all these issues came to the fore in the course of the Washington campaign. Beyond its immediate political significance, therefore, this advanced experience of the Black masses is rich in phenomena which provide vivid insights into the underlying contradictions and trends that promise to shape U.S. politics in the decades ahead.

For this reason, we have undertaken to examine the Chicago mayoral race of 1982-83 in some detail.

First, the campaign, the election and the events surrounding them clearly demonstrated the significant fact that the motion of Black politics today is increasingly concentrated in the electoral arena. During the course of the Washington campaign virtually every significant political tendency in Chicago's Black community was propelled toward the electoral struggle. The campaign became the focus which no political grouping could ignore except at the cost of becoming totally irrelevant to Black community politics. From the mass voter registration drive to the final mobilization on election day itself, the political activity of the Black community was centered on this electoral battle.

At the heart of this political motion was the fact that the Washington campaign was perceived by the Black community as the frontline of struggle against a longstanding, powerfully entrenched system of institutionalized racism in Chicago.

Beyond its specific impact on the city politics of Chicago, the election campaign became an intense arena in which one of the most fundamental issues of the class struggle nationwide was played out—the racial polarization of U.S. society. That is why the eyes of all self-conscious political forces in the country, from the left to the far right, were riveted on Chicago the night of April 12, 1983, when the drama reached the intensity of a national presidential election.

As the campaign reached its crescendo, the niceties of bourgeois politics were swept away by a maelstrom of racist reaction that compelled all forces to show their true political colors and played havoc with racially blind mechanical materialist predictions of class politics and how they are supposed to operate.

Harold Washington's bid for office became a political lightning rod precisely because it was *perceived by everyone* as a frontal challenge to the entrenched system of white supremacy in Chicago and to the corrupt Democratic Party machine whose political power sustains and enforces it. The burning issue of white privilege and white power overshadowed all others, arousing intense passions on each side and even rendering party

loyalties meaningless after decades of tightly-controlled Democratic Party dominance.*

Fueled by one racist incident after another, polarization along the color line mounted in a steady spiral fashion from the Democratic Party primary through the citywide mayoral election, ultimately transforming the political climate of the city as a whole. By election night there was no longer any middle ground. On one hand, the campaign produced the most massive and dramatic Black registration and get-out-the-vote effort that Chicago had ever seen—followed by the pivotal and noteworthy shift of much of the city's Latino vote to Washington between the primary and the general election. On the other hand, the campaign saw the equally significant (or frightening, depending on one's political point of view) swing of the city's white, ethnic, working class vote behind the racist Republican candidate, Bernard Epton.

The racial message of the electoral results was inescapable: in the March Democratic primary 80% of the Blacks voting favored Washington while only 6% of whites voted for him. A month later, in the general election, in a city so Democratic that Ronald Reagan polled only 28% in 1980, Washington squeaked by Epton with a scant 45,000-vote margin. At least 98% of all Black voters backed Washington while an estimated 83% of whites voted for Epton. The majority of Epton's votes came from whites who deserted the Democratic Party and voted Republican for the first time in their lives.

A. Historical Background to the Washington Campaign

The backdrop for all this, of course, is that Chicago is one of the most racially segregated cities in the U.S. This phenomenon is first and foremost a reflection of a contradiction internal to the working class: sociologically, Chicago is a working class city *par excellence*, and it is the working class districts which are the most conspicuously divided along the color line.** This division, in turn, is the reflection of a deeper,

* Although Washington insisted throughout that he was the "Democratic candidate" and not just the "Black candidate," he openly acknowledged that his main base of support was in the Black community, and he continually underscored his commitment to that constituency. For instance, one of the events that served to galvanize white reaction was Washington's announcement that, if elected, his first act would be to fire the number one symbol of racist repression in the city, police superintendent Richard Brzezczek.

** Naturally, Chicago districts are also class-segregated, and the bourgeois and petit bourgeois neighborhoods are also conspicuously white. However, there are two points worth noting about these upper class neighborhoods: first, since minority families constitute a minuscule portion of these classes (but not of the working class), the segregation is maintained more by monetary means than by

(cont.)

more all-sided inequality and stratification between these working class families in terms of job stability and level of income, housing, schooling, medical care, etc. The thoroughly racist character of segregation is somewhat obscured and often conciliated by the left, which frequently attributes this phenomenon of segregation along racial lines to some praiseworthy effort to maintain a sense of ethnic pride and solidarity on the part of European nationalities.* But all the petty turf squabbles between Polish, Irish, Italians, and even Jews recede before their common interest as "decent white folks" to keep the "coloreds" out of their neighborhoods. Chicago is notorious for spawning reactionary movements among whites to keep their neighborhoods, schools, parks, etc. segregated.

One result of this rigidly enforced pattern of segregation is that Chicago has become a political pressure cooker. A significant number of the city's whites who might otherwise have joined the "white flight" to the suburbs so typical of other major urban areas have chosen to stay in the city—provided they are guaranteed some "protection" in keeping their neighborhoods segregated. Meanwhile, the minority population—particularly Blacks and Latinos—has grown steadily over the past couple of decades. Minorities currently constitute at least half the total population of the city.

blatant discrimination; second, as a result, the explicit expressions of racism are often far less vehement than those which come from the working class neighborhoods. This stems from the fact that, when the class polarization in society is still at a relatively low level, the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie have a thousand and one "polite and refined" ways to keep their neighborhoods free of working class elements. For the most part, the sheer cost of dining or shopping, much less living, in those neighborhoods is prohibitive to most of the working class—especially the lower strata. And if the "lower class element" begins to become a serious nuisance, the police can find "less refined" ways to clarify neighborhood boundaries.

* Qualitatively, European nationalities are presently assimilated into U.S. society on the basis of *equality*. This was not the case in the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century when the bourgeoisie's need to stratify the proletariat coincided with extended periods of national oppression and discrimination towards a number of European nationalities, in particular Eastern Europeans, Jews, Irish, and Italians. However, today, by the second generation—and often even in the first—Europeans assimilate quickly not merely as Americans but as *white* Americans enjoying a privileged position in comparison to Blacks and non-white immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. Consequently, sustained "ethnic pride" on the part of European nationalities in the U.S. has become a generally reactionary phenomenon and a thinly disguised cover for some of the most virulent racism and American chauvinism.

For decades this explosive social contradiction was mediated and largely kept in check by the legendary Democratic Party machine and its hegemonic control over Chicago city government. In its heyday the Daley machine ran a vast network of political favoritism that held the Democratic Party together and controlled a city government which afforded the mayor and the parks department (especially) enormous discretion in hiring, awarding of contracts, etc.

In light of the general balance of forces stacked against it, the Black community had no real choice other than to accommodate itself to machine politics. The symbol of this accommodation was Daley's chief Black lieutenant, William Dawson, whose political influence and career rose and declined in close relationship to Daley's. Dawson symbolized Black machine politics *at its height*—the flip side being that he also illustrated the most Blacks could ever hope for within the machine. By the mid-60s Dawson had succeeded in building a unified apparatus in the south and westside Black belt comparable to the machine existing in the Irish wards, complete with all the patronage, corruption, and gangsterism. In short, under Dawson, Blacks had carved out a significant segregated niche from which Dawson was able to control and deliver his wards faithfully to Daley for well over a decade. Needless to say, the price of that niche was to leave real power and the final say on all questions to Daley, recognizing that first call on the machine's patronage was held by the whites in general and the Irish in particular.

This apparently unshakable system began to unravel for Daley and Dawson in the late '60s. But the objective demographic and political changes which set the conditions for the machine's decline had begun much earlier, in the period immediately following World War II. The break-up of the plantation system in the South and the consequent transformation of the overwhelming majority of Blacks into a modern proletariat produced a massive Black migration from the South. The Black exodus out of the South in the late '40s and '50s dwarfed the earlier post-World War I migration. In Chicago the Black population more than doubled in the 1950s alone; it grew steadily until by the late 1970s the Black community constituted one of the largest political blocs in the city numerically (20.1% of the total population of metropolitan Chicago and 39.8% in the city itself). This represented an important shift vis-à-vis the major white ethnic communities—the Irish (15.7% metropolitan/9.2% core city) and the Polish (11.2% metropolitan/10.0% core city). The Black community's economic and social conditions remained concentrated at the bottom of the scale, although the conspicuous entry of Blacks into the active industrial, service, and clerical labor force was a noteworthy alteration from the prewar era.

These changes in Chicago were framed by the radicalizing political dynamic of the late '60s—the period in which the civil rights and Black

Power movements reached their height nationwide and intersected with the burgeoning antiwar movement. The Black community was shouldering a disproportionately high percentage of the burden for imperialist war in Indochina (in terms of both taxes and blood), while receiving few of the return benefits for the "defense of the empire." In Chicago specifically, high Black unemployment and underemployment were as endemic as ever; rents were high and housing conditions miserable; schools were segregated and the worst were Black; and better neighborhoods were blocked from Black access, much less settlement.

The loyal Black ward bosses were increasingly faced with insurgent radicalism from the base of the community—grassroots direct political action groups took form around pressing problems which the machine could not and would not address adequately. There was a blossoming of welfare rights organizations, tenant and neighborhood associations, church social action committees, etc. This impulse towards political radicalism within the Black community intensified a dilemma for Black and white politicians alike. For the more traditional, machine-loyal Black politicians it became questionable whether or not they could even control their wards, much less continue to deliver them on demand.

The machine was willing to dispense too few favors even to begin to pacify Black discontent and disillusionment. A handful of jobs, licenses, or contracts would barely make a dent. Political polarization both internal to the Black community and between the Black community and the established powers was inevitable—and it grew and deepened into an open chasm by the early 1970s. The split was forcefully dramatized when Daley and Dawson bitterly denounced Martin Luther King, Jr. as an "outside agitator" and "troublemaker" during King's effort to spearhead the struggle against forced segregated neighborhoods in the late '60s. It was then concretized in 1972 when the Black wards were successfully organized to break with the Democratic Party machine in a landmark local election where a key issue was the coverup of the police murder of popular Black Panther leader Fred Hampton. From then on, the Black wards became the center for any progressive, anti-machine alliance within the city; by 1979 60% of the city's Black vote was considered anti-machine.

"Old man" Daley was quick to see the writing on the wall, proving himself once again one of the shrewdest machine politicians this country has ever seen. While Daley had always kept his main base in the southside Irish wards, the machine's growing instability in the Black wards led him, after 1970, to move steadily and conspicuously to expand and solidify his base among other blue-collar, white constituencies—the Polish and Italians specifically. While Daley managed to accomplish this racist shift without ever completely losing the Black vote, the centrifugal force of Black politics was great and could not be kept under machine control indefinitely. After Daley's death in 1976, machine

control over the Black wards continued to weaken, although it was not until Harold Washington's recent campaign that the majority of Black city officials openly broke with the machine.

After Daley's death, the machine was ripe for takeover. This feat was accomplished by Jane Byrne who won the mayoralty principally on the strength of an anti-machine campaign and support from minority communities. But, on assuming office, she had less control of the Democratic Party, fewer favors to dispense, and a more difficult overall economic and political climate in which to function. As a result, Byrne could not resolve the social and political dilemma of satisfying the old-line machine adherents who still retained significant strength, delivering on her promises to the minority communities (especially to Blacks), placating her base of support among the white ethnics, and properly managing the city on behalf of Chicago's bourgeoisie. Consequently, she committed a number of politically crude turnabouts and betrayals within the short period of a single term in office.

B. The Democratic Primary

Having made so many political enemies in her short tenure, Mayor Byrne could not expect to run unopposed in the Democratic Party primary as she sought nomination for a second term. Richard M. Daley, son of the late mayor, had been groomed for some time, and the formal announcement of his candidacy in the fall of 1982 came as a surprise to no one. He was probably the strongest candidate that Jane Byrne's opponents within the machine could field against her. Daley quickly moved to resurrect the old machine with a new cleaned-up image, projecting himself as the true standard-bearer of the Democratic Party, while charging that Byrne was a turncoat "Reaganite" Democrat—a charge which most recognized as having some truth.*

Daley also operated on the assumption that he would be able to pick up the bulk of the Black vote. The political blunders of the mayor herself were largely responsible for that widely held view. Anticipating a challenge from the old Daley machine, Byrne set out to claim the mantle of protector of the interests of the white community. Piling racist insult on top of injury, she replaced two Blacks on the Chicago School Board with two whites, both of whom were prominent anti-busing figures from the Marquette Park neighborhood. (Over 80% of Chicago's public school population is Black and Latino.) Then, even before the political fallout from that racist action had settled, she turned around and broke

* Byrne was relatively open about her Republican support. Not only did she publicly agree with most of Reagan's policies, she also appointed the former Republican governor of Illinois, Richard Ogilvie, to head up her re-election campaign and hired the top-flight Reaganite firm of Black, Manford and Stone of Arlington, Virginia, to run her public relations.

the Black majority on the Housing Authority Board by appointing three whites to that body. (Over 84% of public housing residents are Black.) Adding additional fuel to the mounting anger in the Black community, Byrne called in the police to remove Black community demonstrators protesting the housing board meeting where the action was announced. A number of demonstrators were arrested.

Afterwards, Jesse Jackson, speaking to the press, captured the widespread sense of political outrage and betrayal within the Black community.

"You remember that Cinderella trip she [Byrne] made from the Gold Coast to the Soul Coast [a reference to Byrne's two-week televised stay at the Cabrini Green public housing project]? You'd think with all that publicity she got, she would make a real commitment to running the CHA. But take a look at what happened. . . . So her actions are baffling. She either assumes Blacks will not vote for her and has written them off, or that we are so docile and stupid we will vote for her no matter what she does."⁷

Further signs of the Black community's growing political response to Byrne's attacks emerged in the summer of 1982. One highlight was the re-election of Alderman Allan Streeter after Byrne's illegal attempt to oust him from office. This was followed by the successful mass boycott of the mayor's traditional Chicagofest (summer fair) spectacular.

Therefore, as the primary season approached, it was Daley who had high hopes of winning the Black vote. In the Black community, "little Richard" was widely seen as nothing but the candidate of the old machine. Something else was stirring: the candidacy of Harold Washington, a Democratic congressman with a progressive voting record and a history of challenging the racist prerogatives of the Democratic machine.

So opened the final ironic act in the drama of the old Daley machine: two white candidates certain to split the white vote, with a longshot Black candidate coming from behind.

Even after Washington's candidacy had been announced, the primary race was considered strictly a Byrne vs. Daley affair. Washington had drawn only 11% of the vote in an earlier run for mayor in 1977, and among Blacks and other minorities there was a widely held assumption that a vote for Washington—or any Black candidate for that matter—would be wasted.

Byrne and Daley also operated on the assumption that the Latino vote (mainly the Mexican/Chicano and Puerto Rican communities) would go to one of them or be split between them. Traditionally, the competition for crumbs between Blacks and Latinos has produced political tensions which have been easily manipulated to the detriment of the masses of both communities. Harold Washington's conscious effort to win a

substantial section of the Latino vote was an unexpected upset—as well as an important milestone in forging a more long term, progressive front in Chicago.

But as the primary contest unfolded it became clear that the Black community was mobilizing for Washington in unprecedented numbers.* And even as Washington's momentum built, it was clear that neither Byrne nor Daley was prepared to make way for the other, even though their continued rivalry had raised the prospect that a Black man, owing nothing to the machine for his victory, might become mayor of Chicago.

Perhaps both were locked into the logic of their respective ambitions; perhaps the racist motivations behind such a move would have been too obvious and, therefore, too embarrassing to the array of national figures involved in the political jockeying in Chicago; perhaps both the Byrne and Daley camps were so blinded by the legacy of white supremacy that they profoundly underestimated the potential of Washington's candidacy to galvanize the Black community and make him a viable contender. Whatever the explanation—and all three factors were undoubtedly present—by the time the Byrne and Daley camps recognized that Washington might walk off with the prize, it was too late to merge the camps behind a single white candidate. In the waning days of the campaign, the Byrne supporters particularly played up to the racist "spectre" of a Washington victory. Thus Edward Vrdolyak, Democratic Party chairman and Jane Byrne's most powerful political backer, argued—as the primary race came down to the wire: "A vote for Daley is a vote for Washington. . . . It's a racial thing. Don't kid yourself. I'm calling on you to save your city, to save your precinct. We're fighting to keep the city the way it is."⁸

Of course, Harold Washington's victory in the primary was not due simply to a combination of good luck and skillful maneuvering. Rather, it was due principally to the fact that his candidacy became a powerful expression of the underlying motion of Black politics in defense of the perceived interests of the Black community. Given the scale and intensity of the attack on the Black community and the ensuing social and

*A major thrust of the Black Power movement has been repeated attempts to expand, mobilize, and direct the "Black vote." In Chicago, sporadic efforts in this direction have gone on at a grassroots level for years. But in the months prior to Washington's entry into the race, new efforts by a number of organizations produced one of the most successful voter registration drives in Chicago's history. The net effect of this growth in the Black voter rolls was to further increase and dramatize the importance of the question—to whom would the Black vote go? In fact, Washington's decision to run was influenced to a great extent by the success of the registration effort. Subsequently many of the forces at the forefront of the voter registration drive were also central to the Washington campaign.

economic crisis it faces, the demands for mounting a political defense movement are increasingly urgent and are echoing throughout the country. This basic fuel propelled the Washington campaign.

In addition, Harold Washington himself was the catalyst—the right man at the right time. His ability to galvanize those demands rests upon a solid political foundation and not merely on the fact that he is Black. Through a tested record of years as a determined and consistent defender of the interests and rights of Black America, he had earned respect as one of the strongest Black elected officials in the nation before his bid for mayor.* And his commitment to the Black community remains the bedrock of his broader set of progressive politics.

Harold Washington ran his campaign for mayor forthrightly, making it explicit that the Black community had to be the principal base for his victory. This stand of course, gave his racist opponents additional ammunition. It also put his non-Black supporters to the test. At his kickoff rally Washington stated,

"This campaign will be won in the 'hood' [solid Black neighborhoods on the south and westside]. I have cultivated that 'hood'. I understand that 'hood'. I worship it. I cherish it. I'm part of it. Those are my roots, I expect those roots to spring forth mightily on February 22."⁹

Midway through the campaign, after having been baited by racists of all hues, he went on record again. To a nearly all-Black rally he said,

"We've been giving white candidates our votes for years and years and years, unstintingly, hoping that they would include us in the process, deep-seatedly knowing that they probably would not. And so now it's come to the point where we say, 'Well, it's our turn. It's our turn.' And we don't have to make any excuses for it. You don't have to explain it. . . . I'm not stupid, I understand how the world is made, and I know there are problems in some other communities. We're going to reach out to them, but this is the base. This is the base. We don't have to be ashamed of it."¹⁰

Such statements were much more than campaign rhetoric. Washington won to his team the most committed and influential community activists. The campaign took on the substance of an organized, truly grassroots movement in the Black community. Over 25 community organizations formed the Task Force for Black Political Empowerment,

*While it is true that Washington has been a consistent progressive, his political origins are in the Democratic Party machine. In fact, if it were not for his lifelong experience in city politics (his father was also a machine politician), it is unlikely that he could have succeeded in taking on the battle-hardened white power structure of the machine. Other progressives, like Dick Gregory and white liberal Bill Singer, tried before him but failed.

which provided the backbone for organizing the campaign's door-to-door work, get-out-the-vote mobilization, poll watching, etc. The underlying thrust of this movement was a call to increase Black political power. This in fact gave the campaign its momentum and mass character. The force of this independent political motion of the Black community became unmistakable midway through the primary race. And on the day of the primary election, the political strength of the Black community did in fact spring forth. With 80% of the Black vote, Washington edged out both Byrne and Daley and, much to the dismay of the old line leadership of the Democratic Party, became its candidate for mayor of the nation's second largest city.

C. The General Election

By tradition, winning the Democratic Party nomination has been tantamount to winning Chicago's mayorship. But fine traditions can of course be broken, especially when the successful nominee turns out to be a Black man with the political posture of Harold Washington. In this instance, the racialized split in Chicago's working class was intense and undisguised.

Any attempt to deny or gloss over the racist politics underlying the campaign became nearly impossible after Washington's victory in the primary. In the general election, race surfaced as the overriding criterion, splitting Chicago's working class almost completely along the color line.

Jane Byrne was the first to up the ante and become the harbinger of things to come. Shortly after her defeat in the primary, Byrne announced her intention to run against Washington as an "independent." The logic behind this ploy was obvious to all. Byrne was offering the mass of working class whites a way to vote "white" without voting Republican.

The frustration of her scenario provides us with a clear look at the potential for the decisive exercise of Black political leverage within the national Democratic Party apparatus. Harold Washington's response to Byrne's trial balloon went straight to the point. If the Democratic Party officialdom refused to endorse and support his bid for mayor, he said, "I will with gusto, alacrity and firmness preside over the demise of the Democratic Party."¹¹ Every serious political observer knew this was no idle threat, especially since it was quickly echoed by every leading Black within the Democratic Party: a conspicuous racist betrayal of Harold Washington by Chicago's Democratic Party stalwarts could precipitate a mass defection of Blacks from the Democratic Party nationally, hardly a cheerful prospect for a party which is counting on overwhelming Black support in its effort to regain the U.S. presidency.

The message hit home; the Democratic Party's national apparatus swung into action with money and muscle. Money poured into the Washington campaign. Party luminaries like Kennedy and Mondale (who had backed Byrne and Daley, respectively, in the primary) made

appearances and endorsements. Jane Byrne also got the message—probably delivered to her personally by the party's master power brokers. Citing an unfavorable ruling on her ballot status, Byrne unceremoniously abandoned her "independent" candidacy. Meanwhile, most of the machine and trade union officials were also pulled into line.*

If the slightest doubt about the current backwardness of the white section of the Chicago working class remained, the emergence of Bernard Epton as their "great white hope" of the campaign settled the question. A more unlikely prospect for the hero of Chicago's white working class could not have been imagined—a Republican, a millionaire, stuffy corporate insurance lawyer,** and a Jew in one of the most virulent centers of anti-Semitism in the United States. But Epton had two important things going for him: he was white and he was the only choice left.

With these as his assets, Epton launched an appeal to white supremacy, thinly disguised in his campaign slogan, "Epton, Before It's Too Late." Harold Washington was made to symbolize the collective "Black threat" to the "white birthright"—a birthright which for many white working class families had already been diminished substantially in recent years. Epton steadfastly refused to drop his controversial campaign slogan. When pressed, his campaign supporters posed the "reverse discrimination" issue squarely, "Is it racist for whites to unite, but not racist for Blacks?"***

*Although a number of the most rabidly racist Democratic Party functionaries jumped ship and worked for Epton, the majority formally supported Washington, but in a conspicuously perfunctory fashion. Organized labor dutifully, if not enthusiastically, endorsed Washington. Even party kingpins well known to be racist, like Daley and Vrdolyak, were forced to do some token campaigning in their wards for Washington. But the prevailing sentiment among these machine professionals was probably more accurately reflected by the westside Democrat who said, after a meeting of ward committeemen and precinct captains: "The question isn't Epton or Washington. Everyone's for Epton. The question is whether it would help or hurt Epton for them to come out openly and say so. . . . What we have to decide is whether to sit on our hands and watch [Epton] get 24,000 votes in our ward, or whether we try and hype people up and get him 30,000 or 32,000."¹²

** During his years in the state legislature, Epton earned the name "Mr. Insurance." Seventy-five percent of the legislation he introduced benefited insurance companies. In addition, he gained a reputation for actively opposing any strong measures to stop district "red-lining" by insurance companies for speculation purposes.

*** This battletory in defense of white supremacy has surfaced with greater frequency in recent years. Our answer to Epton's question is, "Yes! It is racist for whites to organize as whites and it is not racist for Blacks to organize as Blacks." The difference is a simple but crucial one. The self-organization of the racially

Particularly sobering is the fact that many of Epton's most dedicated, hard-core supporters came from explicitly white supremacist, fascist groups. Even though much of their participation was "unofficial" and "independent," it was nonetheless done with the knowledge and complicity of Epton's key campaign organizers. The Klan-type underside of Epton's campaign was conducted in a truly grassroots, door-to-door fashion in the predominantly white working class wards. It ranged from very crude to slightly less crude, from campaign buttons proclaiming "vote right, vote white" and Epton's unofficial theme song (appropriately and deliberately sung to the tune of "Bye, Bye, Blackbird") to outright fascist propaganda slipped into mailboxes and beneath doors.* While many of Epton's backers undoubtedly had mixed feelings in the face of such bigotry, they were ideologically held hostage to the modern day "brown shirts" by the fact that the fascists asserted in the crudest terms the underlying political logic of their own more subdued racist fears and confusions.

Of course, not every Epton backer was consciously motivated by the blindest racist bigotry. Surveys of voters revealed a broad spectrum of political rationalization for supporting Epton. But the fact remains that while Washington was endorsed by the Democratic Party machine, the AFL-CIO labor council and both major newspapers, the vast majority of Chicago's whites fell in behind Epton and his army of neo-fascist field marshals in support of an openly reactionary, Reaganite program.

There can be no escaping the fact that the watershed of this regressive political motion of the bulk of Chicago's white working class was the issue of racism. In the general election, when Epton's campaign was clearly nothing but a thinly disguised call for white power and continued Black subordination, only 17% of whites mustered the minimal democratic commitment necessary to vote for Washington, while the white voter turnout for Epton was so massive that it even surpassed the historic mobilization of Blacks.

oppressed, whether based on mutual support for survival, defense of a common history and culture, or political resistance to oppression, is rooted in opposition to racism. On the other hand, the self-organization of whites *as whites* can have no other function than to reinforce and defend the system of racial privileges which constitutes the essential material content of racism.

* For example, one surreptitious group calling itself "Democrats for Epton" distributed leaflets declaring, "Your vote for Mr. Epton will stop contamination and the occupation of city hall by a Mr. Baboon . . . elected racially with the vote of thousands of baboons . . . non-productive, irresponsible Americans, American baboons who cannot care less for their duty towards America." Meanwhile, another leaflet from "a concerned neighbor" asserted, "If the majority of voters choose Harold Washington, you can expect the value of your property to depreciate in price by many thousands of dollars overnight. Equally disastrous, your prospective buyers will probably be black bargain hunters."

On election day, whites bolted from the Democratic Party in record numbers: Epton got 82% of their total vote, and in certain white wards it approached 100%! Even the much heralded northside lakefront "liberal wards" only managed to distinguish themselves by narrowing the gap by which Epton was able to beat Washington.*

For the few whites who did vote for Washington, the critical factor was not that they hailed from the working class, but rather that their anti-racist consciousness was strong enough to recognize the crucial issues at stake beneath all the racist demagoguery and to act accordingly.

Much has been made in some left quarters of the 17% of whites who voted for Washington, since, in a narrowly statistical sense, it could be argued that these votes provided him with his margin of victory. But such an analysis misses the essential political point. That a certain number of democratic-minded whites were able to wrench themselves out of the racialized consciousness is certainly a good thing. But when this point is used to obscure the fact that 82%—the vast majority of them from the working class—could not identify their class interest and wound up supporting a neo-fascist candidacy, then we have an important shade of difference before us. While seemingly a mere statistical point, this margin-of-victory analysis actually is advanced in the service of an opportunist political line.**

* Nor was this mass demonstration of racism among whites—including white workers—an exceptional trend confined only to Chicago and valid for that city alone. On the contrary, the extremely moderate Blacks who have been elected mayor in U.S. cities have, on average, won about 10% of the white vote in their first effort. Richard Hatcher of Gary won 7%; Carl Stokes of Cleveland, 14%; Kenneth Gibson of Newark, 10%; Coleman Young of Detroit, 8%. Only Maynard Jackson of Atlanta (21%) and Tom Bradley (in Los Angeles, a city that is only 15% Black) won a greater percentage of the white vote than did Harold Washington in Chicago. Even Andrew Young managed to win only 10% of whites to his side in his recent successful bid for mayor in Atlanta. In short, the mass racist sentiment in Chicago was hardly an isolated incident. It is an accurate indication of the sorry present political and ideological consciousness on a national scale of white people in general and white workers in particular.

** Unwillingness to face the problem of racism in the U.S. working class and polarize the class around this issue is one of the gravest failings of the strategic political line and practice of most of the U.S. left, and of the CPUSA in particular. Nowhere was this more vividly demonstrated than in the CPUSA's analysis of the Harold Washington campaign. Early in the campaign, the CPUSA boldly predicted that "hundreds of thousands of white voters will vote for Washington based on their own self-interest in a united struggle for better schools, transportation, health care, housing and city services."¹³ Eventually the CPUSA was forced to report the actual outcome of the vote. But this did not stop them from bending over backward to obscure the racial split in the working class. Two days after the election, for example, they argued that, although the Black community was the main factor, "The Washington victory also resulted

(cont.)

In reality, were it not for the hard-hitting and explicitly anti-racist campaign mounted by Washington, he would not have been able to unite the anti-racist forces and win the election. Indeed, Washington's "margin of victory" can more precisely be attributed to two crucial factors: the political enthusiasm in Chicago's Black community which led to the development of a massive grassroots organization and an unprecedented voter turnout; and the dramatic swing of the majority of the Latino vote to him.

In the face of Epton's blatantly racist campaign, the unity and determination of the Black community hardened. So powerful was the pro-Washington sentiment that even the more lethargic sections of the Black masses were drawn into politics; and no Black leader of any stature could afford to remain silent, let alone advocate a vote for Epton, without suffering irreversible loss of credibility. Even the major Black capitalists, who were relatively cautious and inactive in the primary, stepped forward with financial and political backing during the general election—with a number joining Washington's steering committee and transition team.

The intense racial polarization in the general election also clarified the main political issue for the majority of Chicago's Latino voters. Especially noteworthy was the shift in the predominantly Puerto Rican precincts on the northwest side where support for Washington shot up from 10% in the primaries to about 80% in the general election. There was a similar trend among Mexican voters. The overall result was dramatic—an estimated 75% of the total Latino vote went to Washington.

In short, the main political power which propelled Harold Washington into office was the combined Black and Latino vote which accounted for over 80% of his support. In the main, *this represented the politically most forward-looking section of Chicago's working class*, whose racial interests and class interests coincide, and who succeeded in recognizing Epton for what he really was.

If matters had been left to the white section of the working class, Chicago today would still have a thoroughly racist, anti-working class reactionary as mayor.

Our point here is that beneath what might appear to be a hair-splitting difference on the left over how to analyze the Harold Washington victory, and especially the weight and significance given to the 17% white vote, lies a crucial line struggle central to the class analysis and

from the role of organized labor, led in the main by Black trade unionists but encompassing rank-and-file activists that led to the *mobilization of the whole labor movement on Washington's behalf*." ¹⁴ (Our emphasis.) Stretching credulity further, the party concluded, "The Washington victory cannot but . . . strengthen faith in the potential for winning support among white working people" for the struggle against racism. ¹⁵

strategy for socialist revolution in the U.S. Some on the left exhibit a pronounced tendency to either deny or understate the reactionary nature and mass strength of the spontaneous "white rights" movement *within* the working class and *anchored* in the organized labor movement (as it is presently constituted). This opportunist political line is rooted in two key theoretical errors widely prevalent on the left: the refusal to grapple with the *material basis* for the perpetuation of racism and white supremacy *internal* to the working class and its concrete intersection with the bribed *labor aristocracy*; and, second, the failure to grasp firmly the *distinct nature* of racial oppression, Black oppression in particular, and its actual intersection with the stratification of the U.S. working class—concretely, the failure to recognize the underlying spontaneous motion of the *lower strata* of the working class as it steps into the electoral arena announcing itself as the Black liberation movement.

The sections that follow will take up each of these points in detail.

IV. The Split in the Working Class

One of the most useful, albeit sobering, aspects of the Black upsurge in the electoral arena is the spotlight it has cast on the marked tendency of the U.S. working class to split along the color line. Unfortunately, much of the left has for so long paid ritualistic homage to "working class unity" as an abstract principle that even calling attention to the virtually self-evident split that does exist is often considered tantamount to promoting it.

It is becoming increasingly difficult, however, to deny the fact that the U.S. working class is wracked by sharp ideological and political divisions. As the experience of the Chicago election all too vividly demonstrates, when they are confronted with the candidacy of a militantly anti-racist Black political figure, a substantial section of white workers (in this case an overwhelming majority) is prepared to fall behind political leaders who are completely tied to the most reactionary sectors of capital that openly advance rabidly racist and jingoist programs.

It is safe to say that this reaction came as no big surprise to the masses of Blacks in Chicago or elsewhere. Now, if the left can begin to come to terms with this phenomenon—or at least stop denying its existence—it may be possible to open up a serious theoretical discussion about the source of this profound contradiction in the working class and its long range implications for a revolutionary political strategy in the U.S. The biggest obstacle to such a dialogue is that most of the left insists on downplaying the phenomenon of racism within the working class and dismissing the strategic significance of the racial contradiction. When racism is to some extent acknowledged as an internal problem of the working class, the usual explanation is that the white workers have been

“temporarily misled” by bourgeois propaganda. The solution to the problem is then deemed simply to be more systematic and patient educational work by the left among these backward workers, to show them why their true class interests are bound up with the interests of their Black brothers and sisters.

Now certainly we have no argument with the left using whatever opportunities are open to us to conduct the broadest possible propaganda and educational work among the white section of the working class about the crucial and pivotal character of the struggle against racism. However, when this activity is advanced as a *strategy* for gradually transforming the working class into a *single, homogeneous political force* united around its underlying class interests—then we would maintain that such an approach is fundamentally flawed theoretically because it rests upon unscientific premises.

In our view, this split in the working class is neither temporary nor simply the consequence of bourgeois propaganda. Fundamentally, racism has a *material basis*, and quite a substantial one, in an imperialist country such as the U.S. U.S. imperialism, even while under siege internationally, still has a tremendous reserve to bribe a large section of the working class—and the *principal* criterion for extending the bribe is the color line.

A. The System of White Racial Privilege

The naive notion that racism will disappear as soon as people individually stop being racist is a subjective view that grows out of the worldview of petit bourgeois liberals. The system of racism is a *social reality* that objectively functions independent of the will or intentions of individuals. The system extends a series of concrete opportunities and privileges to whites *as a social group* directly in proportion to the denial of those same opportunities and privileges to non-whites. In short, racism is a social relation of white supremacy and racial oppression. Racism remains one of the central characteristics of U.S. society as a whole. It serves as a cornerstone in the maintenance of capitalist class relations, in particular providing the basis for the most profound division within the working class itself. And because of this, racism constitutes politically one of the most important strategic reserves for the U.S. bourgeoisie; it encourages the white section of the working class to ignore the full extent and impact of capital’s “austerity” attack on the least protected section of their own class, disproportionately people of color, in order that white workers might receive relatively privileged treatment.*

* For an extensive theoretical and historical analysis of racism in the U.S., see Linda Burnham and Bob Wing, *Toward a Communist Analysis of Black Oppression and Black Liberation, Part II: Theoretical and Historical Framework, Line of March #8*.

To be sure, the *extent* of the racial privilege accruing to whites is completely bound up with (and ultimately dependent upon) the class status of the whites in question. Nevertheless, it is also true that a system of *relative* privilege extends to all whites across the class spectrum vis-à-vis minorities. This system of privilege gives rise to a cross-class, white racial interest. This “white interest” is also not a *neutral* social category; it is inherently oppressive toward non-whites, since it is historically rooted in the perpetuation of the system of white supremacy.

True, if one quantitatively compares how the system of racism benefits white capitalists as distinct from white workers, surely the racial privilege for white workers will seem absolutely minuscule. However, this fact is all too often seized upon by some on the left to argue that racial privilege is not a material basis for opportunism in the working class. Such an argument is the height of mechanical materialism. The fact of the matter is that the fundamental condition of proletarian existence under capitalism is precisely the most *intense competition with other workers* to secure the means of livelihood for oneself and one’s family. In this context, *any social advantage*—be it an advantage of color, sex, age, nationality, citizenship, etc.—becomes a material force which cannot help but have its ideological manifestation.

In U.S. society, the central social contradiction of this nature which mediates relations within the working class is racism. The split along the color line is a division which intersects extensively, *but does not completely duplicate*, the split of the working class into upper and lower strata. Race, more than any other social factor, determines the winners and losers in the continual competitive battle for survival among U.S. workers. Regardless of individual talent and merit, racism affects and in large measure determines the overall conditions of life and, as a result, much of the worldview of different sections of the working class. As the result of racism, Blacks (and other people of color) in the working class are concentrated in the lower strata in numbers totally disproportionate to their percentage of the population as a whole, while the upper strata of the class are overwhelmingly white.

Our main point here is that all people in the U.S. fall on one or the other side of the color line and thereby face *material inequalities*. Consequently, the white section of the working class stands in a relation of *relative privilege* to the non-white section, most especially the Black section. That privilege is manifested in a thousand ways in everyday life, and ranges from such quantifiable matters as greater access to employment, better schools, more extensive government funding to neighborhoods, a higher level of health care, access to a wider range of housing, to a qualitatively different relation with government and, in particular, law enforcement agencies, etc.

Needless to say, the minority sector of the working class is keenly aware of this inequality of condition. However, the overwhelming

majority of white workers are also aware of it, even if that awareness is often expressed in thoroughly racist terms, i.e., the notion that the difference in life condition is due to white "birthright" and is a "natural" reflection of the "different" (read: superior) biological, social and/or cultural characteristics distinguishing "decent white Americans" from "coloreds."

B. The White United Front

The point that much of the U.S. left still denies or glosses over is that the subjective outlook and conscious politics of a substantial section of the working class is shaped by the system of white supremacy. In particular, a large number of white workers, faced with any perceived threat to that system of racial privilege, will still act in a politically reactionary manner to maintain and defend that system. In so doing, they constitute what we have termed the *white united front* within the working class.*

To the extent that racism serves to protect white working class families, as a racial group, from shouldering an equal share of the general emiseration of the U.S. working class, there exists a material basis for significant sectors of white workers to see their *racial interests as principal over their class interests* and essentially to ally, on that basis, with the white bourgeoisie against the interests of the minority sector of their own class. It should thus come as no surprise to Marxists—armed with an accurate and penetrating revolutionary theory—that a large number of white workers might enlist behind a racist call for defense of white privilege—even when such a move clearly runs counter to what we understand to be their more fundamental class interests.

The phenomenon of a section of the working class tying itself politically and ideologically to the bourgeoisie along lines of race provides one of the most stubborn bases for class collaboration within the U.S. working class movement. Because this *special sectoral interest* of white workers is part and parcel of a larger white racial group interest, it is an integral, *not incidental*, component of the overall system of white supremacy. Hence it is incorrect to reduce the problem of racism to a contradiction between white *capital* and minorities.

Traditionally, the white united front has been the centerpiece of capital's political rule in the U.S. Throughout the nineteenth century it was concretely an alliance between the white capitalist class and the white petit bourgeoisie, which encompassed the *majority* of whites. However, in the twentieth century the working class has come to dwarf

* For a more comprehensive discussion of this concept and an elaboration of a general strategy for the struggle for Black liberation, see Burnham and Wing, *Toward A Communist Analysis of Black Oppression and Black Liberation, Part III: Strategy, in Line of March #9.*

all other classes, making up the vast bulk of the U.S. population as well as the majority of white people. The bitter corollary of this development, of course, is that today the alliance which makes up the white united front is in large part the one between the bourgeoisie and a section of the working class.

C. The Labor Aristocracy

Naturally, not all whites in the working class enjoy the same degree of privilege and relative stability vis-à-vis Blacks and other non-whites. (This is precisely the pivotal contradiction that holds out the strategic promise of breaking up the white united front.) In fact, it is the *labor aristocracy* which has been, and remains, the political center and natural social base in the working class for the white united front. As noted earlier, this specially-protected upper stratum of the working class which benefits most from U.S. imperialism's exploitation of the world's labor and resources is, for all practical purposes, a lily-white preserve.

Ultimately our movement will not be able to explain the full depth of this critical division in the U.S. working class, or any other basic element of class analysis, unless we resurrect Lenin's theory of the labor aristocracy and apply it with painstaking precision to the particularities of the U.S.—especially the intersection of the labor aristocracy with the white united front. Absent such a theoretical foundation, our movement will not be able to grasp the material basis for the political splits in the working class, including the racial split.

The relevance of Lenin's thesis of the labor aristocracy is that it establishes within the objective laws of development of capitalism itself the material foundation for the growth and prominence of opportunism in the workers' movement. The basic thrust of Lenin's argument is that the tendency for a section of the labor movement—in particular, its most organized and influential section—to attach itself to the cause of the bourgeoisie cannot be explained solely in terms of its vulnerability to ruling class propaganda. Rather its material source must be sought in the fact that, in the epoch of imperialism, the monopoly on capital enjoyed by a handful of imperialist countries provides the bourgeoisie in those countries with the wherewithal to win a section of the working class over to its side. This is accomplished by affording this aristocratic section of the working class a standard of living, access to cultural and educational opportunities, material goods, political influences and relative security denied the mass of proletarians. Lenin depicts this economic cushion as a "bribe" made possible by the "super-profits" accessible to capital in an age where monopoly reigns.*

* As in our time, Lenin's starting point for the theory of the labor aristocracy was the dominant influence of opportunism in the workers' movement in Europe prior to and during World War I, when the bulk of the labor movement in each

(cont.)

However, the world capitalist crisis of the 1930s, the international struggle against fascism, the devastation of World War II, and the growth of mass communist parties in the major capitalist countries all contributed to a political dynamic in which, for a time, Lenin's theory of the labor aristocracy appeared to have become historically outdated. At the very least, as the workers' movement in the imperialist countries united in the struggle against fascism, Lenin's thesis fell into disuse. As a result, the communist movement has been theoretically ill-equipped to explain the post-World War II rejuvenation of opportunism in the labor movement and, in particular, the deep-seated and widespread opportunism within a significant section of the working class in the imperialist countries—particularly within the organized labor movements.

This problem has been especially acute in the U.S. communist movement which, for the most part, has profoundly underestimated both the scope and the significance of opportunism in the ranks of labor. By and large, the class-collaborationist politics which dominate the U.S. trade union movement have been explained away as due merely to some combination of bourgeois propaganda and bureaucratic suffocation of a presumed inherent radicalism in the rank and file.* However, if all the

imperialist country supported its "own" bourgeoisie in the imperialist slaughter. Lenin's hypothesis, verified by scientific examination, was that the depth and stubbornness of the opportunist trend in the working class could not be accounted for unless it had a material basis. In developing this thesis, an important historical frame of reference was the ideological backwardness and political corruption of the British working class in the period of England's dominant monopoly position within the world capitalist system in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although England's monopoly position was gradually eroded as the other major capitalist countries developed industrially and expanded internationally, the capacity of British capital to bribe a large section of its own working class became a characteristic feature of English politics. From this study, Lenin developed the generalized theory of the labor aristocracy as it applied to imperialist countries.

* Granted there is more than a grain of truth in these explanations. Bourgeois ideology hangs heavy over the U.S. working class which is impacted not just by one of the most sophisticated propaganda machines in history but by an all-pervasive system of education, culture, and information processing thoroughly infused with national chauvinism, racism, bourgeois patriotism, and the supposed virtues of the "free enterprise system." And there is no arguing the fact that from the McCarthy period until at least the '70s the bulk of the AFL-CIO's bureaucracy was firmly controlled by forces committed to undemocratic and corrupt practices and to a thoroughly reactionary program for labor—which had the effect of fettering and repressing much of the militance and progressive leanings of U.S. labor.

Still, there is something sorely lacking in an analysis which leaves the explanation for the pronounced influence of opportunism in the workers' movement simply at the level of propaganda and bureaucratic manipulation.

bourgeois propaganda about the virtues and *benefits* of being an "American" did not in some fashion correspond to the concrete experience of a sizeable section of the working class, its ability to win their political allegiance to the policies of imperialism would not be nearly so great.

In short, we believe that a serious class analysis must be rooted in an attempt to ascertain *the material basis* for the opportunism which has visibly dominated the workers' movement in the U.S. for the past three decades. For this reason, the time for resurrecting the basic concepts of Lenin's theory of the labor aristocracy is long past due.

The starting point for such an analysis, however, is not the working class, but the bourgeoisie. Throughout the twentieth century, U.S. imperialism has steadily gained a position of hegemony in the capitalist world that dwarfs even the British empire in its legendary heyday. Even today, when the U.S. monopoly in various aspects of production and finance is under serious challenge from its capitalist rivals, U.S. imperialism still enjoys tremendous reserves—both economic and military—which enable it to maintain its dominance of the world capitalist economy. The mounting troubles that beset the U.S. are symptomatic of the decline of the imperialist system as a whole; they are not principally the result of the loss of relative U.S. hegemony within that system. The size and concentration of U.S. monopoly capital on an international scale allow it to dominate the world banking system, control access to sources of raw materials, subordinate labor, and manipulate the world market in a manner conducive to the continued production of a scale of profit—both quantitatively and qualitatively—that far outstrips its rivals. These super-profits provide the muscle enabling U.S. imperialism to maintain its hegemonic position within the world capitalist system and the wherewithal to sustain the bribery of a substantial section of its own working class.*

Of course, the imperialist bribe does not qualitatively free the U.S. proletariat—even the most "aristocratic" section—from the yoke of capital. All workers are exploited, regardless of the level of their remuneration and protected position; they produce surplus-value which is appropriated by the bourgeoisie. The struggle to wrest from capital a greater portion of the value produced and retain it for the benefit of the workers is the essential thrust of the immediate economic struggle between capital and labor. But to say that and no more, which is where all too many on the left are content to leave the matter, is totally inadequate. For what gets dropped out is the crucial fact that the *terms* on which the U.S. working class conducts its economic struggle with capital are

* For a fuller elaboration of this thesis, see Max Elbaum and Robert Sellers, *The Labor Aristocracy: The Material Basis for Opportunism in the Labor Movement*, *Line of March* #11, #12, and #13/14.

privileged in comparison to the rest of the international proletariat.*

In fact, material conditions of life and relative stability of the most protected, aristocratic sector of the U.S. working class thoroughly obscures their essential proletarian condition and separates them in a thousand and one economic, cultural, and ideological ways from the mass of proletarians even in their own country, not to mention those in the oppressed countries.**

In short, it is the privileged position of the labor aristocracy that is the material basis which binds a significant section of the U.S. working class to its own bourgeoisie. Perceiving their privileged position as the natural birthright of citizens of a "superior nation," they tend to see their own continued security and well-being as dependent on the fortune and destiny of their own bourgeoisie, thus creating an opportunist, pro-imperialist political current in the labor movement. This current, which

* A standard argument on the left is that the economic gains of the U.S. working class are strictly the result of its own militancy and hard-won gains. All this argument demonstrates, however, is that the national chauvinist ideology which dominates the U.S. working class enjoys considerable influence in the left as well. First of all, the assertion is not even factually accurate. Extensive benefits were extended across the board to large sections of the organized labor movement in the U.S. throughout the late '50s, the '60s, and well into the '70s with relatively little struggle. Furthermore, the insidious implication of this argument is that workers in other countries whose conditions of life are less favorable, simply have been less militant than U.S. workers in fighting for their interests—a proposition which is even harder to sustain factually.

**In the U.S., the traditional core of the labor aristocracy has been "native," white, and male—and concentrated in the skilled trades. In the two decades immediately following World War II, however, the U.S. bourgeoisie—more favorably situated than ever before—was able to expand the labor aristocracy substantially to incorporate the main bulk of unionized industrial workers in monopolized industries as well as the new crop of unorganized, skilled "professional" workers. This development brought a number of minorities into the labor aristocracy for the first time. However, today, as the aristocracy among industrial workers in particular is shrinking, it should be painfully obvious to everyone on the left that the defense of "seniority rights" as a "sacred trade union principle" to be upheld above all others is a thinly disguised means of defending racial privilege by assuring that minority industrial workers will be the first to be bounced out of the labor aristocracy.

At the same time, it is apparent that a "new" type of labor aristocracy is now emerging in the high-tech and service enterprises which are replacing traditional smokestack industry in the U.S. economy. And it is also quite clear that this new privileged strata of largely unorganized, skilled professional workers is overwhelmingly white. While many of the white workers bounced out of traditional smokestack industry are gradually making their way into this new sector, the same cannot be said of the displaced minority workers who, for the most part, sink back toward the more proletarianized mass.

is based principally (but not solely) in the labor aristocracy, is a relatively permanent feature of the proletariat in all imperialist countries and will undoubtedly be such in the U.S. for a long time to come. It is the main social base for the opportunist right wing of the labor movement. Any attempt to explain the reactionary politics dominant in the U.S. trade union movement in the post-World War II period—especially the pro-imperialist consensus bolstered by the labor movement until almost the very end of the Vietnam war—which does not take into account the material foundation for this opportunism is fundamentally flawed.

Consequently, one of the cornerstones of the struggle against opportunism within the U.S. working class must be the most determined struggle against the pro-imperialist current firmly rooted at the center of the trade union movement.

However, in the U.S., the privileged condition of the labor aristocracy exists not only in relation to the international proletariat; the labor aristocracy holds a position of privilege internal to the U.S. working class as well—a position which is overwhelmingly delineated along racial lines. As a result, the struggle against opportunism does not revolve solely around questions bound up with the struggle against imperialist war and intervention. It is equally tied to the struggle against racism and, in particular, against the defenders of racial privilege in the working class movement—that is, against the white united front whose natural resting place in the working class is in the labor aristocracy. The political and ideological maturation of the U.S. working class will thus occur only to the extent that it polarizes time and again over the cutting-edge questions of imperialism and racism—and the existing split within the working class movement becomes consciously organized into opposing trends, each with its own relatively coherent set of politics.*

* This proposal to consciously identify the political axis of the objective split in the U.S. working class and organize around it is viewed by most of the left as a treasonous proposition. We contend, however, that all of the admonitions against "splitting the working class" would be put to better use if they started with the readily obvious fact that the working class is *already split*. It is split economically into two strata: a relatively sizeable and stable upper stratum whose conditions of life are marked by a significant measure of well-being and economic security; and a lower stratum containing the majority of workers whose condition of life is marked by instability and uncertainty. And while there is a certain amount of motion between these two strata, the overwhelming mass of workers are pretty much locked into one or the other. (This is why the question of race and racism is absolutely crucial for conducting a penetrating class analysis of U.S. society.) *All attempts to gloss over this already existing split in the working class and to deny the political implications flowing from it lead inevitably to the conciliation of opportunism. And in effect, this is what the demagogic appeals of much of the left for "unity among the workers" (read: the workers of a "civilized" imperialist country and, even among them, those already unionized) based first and foremost upon their immediate economic*

(cont.)

D. Opportunism Beyond the Labor Aristocracy

Although the labor aristocracy constitutes the main social base for patriotism and racism within the workers' movement, the matter is not quite so simple when it comes down to concrete political struggles. In particular, the problem of racism and of white defense of racial privilege can and does extend far beyond the labor aristocracy. Even in the lower, unstable strata of the working class, racism among whites is a material force—although the material benefits of the racial privilege may seem relatively negligible. Ironically enough, it is precisely because the general conditions of the lower strata are unstable that the defense of whatever small advantages may accrue as the result of racism is often times even more fervent. For members of this section of the proletariat are locked into the most intense (and often ugliest) competition with each other for work and survival. In that battle, one's white "birthright" can be an important competitive edge even though, on the surface, the stakes are small—a clerical job, a position as a teacher's aide, etc.

In addition, for the poorest of whites, the white labor aristocracy often remains the point of reference *internal* to the working class (the notion of "middle class America")—the living proof of white superiority—the reality that keeps their frustrated dreams of racialized advancement alive even when the objective basis they face may be grim and getting worse. They are also intimately tied to the labor aristocracy in countless ways. To begin with they are in the same families as the "aristocrats"—a "better off" brother, a "go-get-'em" cousin, a "lucky" uncle, etc. They usually share the same neighborhoods, social and religious circles. Their kids go to school together, marry each other, etc.

For all these reasons, there exists no automatic or mechanical tendency for those white workers who are themselves locked into the lower strata of the class to be willing to cross the color line and unite in the struggle against racism. On one hand, these workers certainly have the most favorable material conditions for functioning politically on the

struggles come down to. From this vantage point, all the broader "political questions" are viewed as optional at best, and at worst as detracting from forging the unity of the working class. (In the early part of the twentieth century, this opportunist current among "socialists" was associated with social democracy. However, since World War II the main bulk of the communist movements in Europe, Japan, and the U.S. have adopted essentially the same line—a testament to just how deep Lenin's theory of the labor aristocracy has been buried!)

But the sad fact of the matter is that under these conditions, all talk of the "unity" of the labor movement that is not rooted in a concentrated struggle to politically isolate the already dominant opportunist trend around the two cutting-edge questions of war and racism will simply lead to "unity" on the terms of opportunism—which is a "unity" hostile to the long term interests of the U.S. proletariat.

basis of their class interests, of being won to the struggle against the various expressions of class collaboration which characterize the opportunist trend in the working class movement. On the other hand, precisely because of their unstable position, many of these workers—at times, significant numbers of them—can be won to jingoistic and racist appeals and even be enlisted behind the banners of the Ku Klux Klan and other populist fascist formations.

E. The Split in the Working Class Played Out in the Harold Washington Campaign

In our opinion, all of the major elements of this analysis were concretely and vividly played out during the 1983 Chicago mayoral election. Specifically, the backlash against Harold Washington's campaign by the majority of Chicago's working class whites was primarily a racist backlash. For them, Washington's program, combined with his massive support from the Black community, represented a concerted threat to their perceived interests and well-being as "white people" (i.e., their racial privileges) at a time when this normally stable sector of the working class was—and is—experiencing increasing anxieties provoked by the structural shifts in the U.S. economy.

One factor affecting Chicago politics particularly is that the greatest social impact of the shift away from traditional smokestack industry is being felt in the Midwest, industrial heartland of the U.S. Both the "retooling" of monopoly industry and the shift in capital investment into other areas is, of course, taking place completely at the expense of the working class. Concerted attacks on the unions, assaults on wages and benefits, and sharp reductions in the size of the work force itself are the concrete expression of the major adjustments now being made by the U.S. bourgeoisie as it seeks to rejuvenate a sagging rate of return on investment capital.

This process in turn has been coupled with a deepening social crisis increasingly characteristic of major U.S. urban centers. In cities like Chicago, the rising prevalence of crime, the housing blight in poor neighborhoods, and the general deterioration of social services, unfortunately more often than not gets racialized in the eyes of a majority of whites and translated into a "problem of the coloreds." This has further heightened tensions along the color line, especially in a city as segregated as Chicago. An additional factor specific to Chicago was the degree to which the threatened old Democratic Party machine had been the main institutionalized expression of the systematic political subordination of non-whites to whites within the working class in terms of the distribution of patronage jobs, city services, etc.

All of these underlying contradictions served to fuel the massive white backlash against Harold Washington. And clearly, the core of the racist opposition within the working class of Chicago was the labor aristoc-

racy—the most stable and politically active section of the white ethnic communities—that overlaps extensively with the Democratic Party machine as well as the officialdom of the organized labor movement. This is precisely the social base for which the defense of white privilege has a stubborn material basis—and its reactionary political motion can not be glossed over as merely a “momentary confusion” caused by slick bourgeois propaganda. No, this section of the working class understands its *racial interests* quite well and quite concretely—and it consciously bases its politics on those racial interests.

Certainly not all of Chicago's working class whites are in the labor aristocracy. But during the elections, the vast majority were, and remain, very much a part of the city's racist white united front. (And it is precisely here where mechanical materialism has rendered so much of the left's political analysis superficial and rhetorical.) Although the mass of less privileged white workers may be frustrated in the achievement of their white “birthright” (i.e., to get into the labor aristocracy, if not out of the working class altogether), they are far from ready to give up their claim on it. In fact the dream is often more treasured because it is so elusive. In short, the worldview of the majority of the non-aristocratic white workers still remains thoroughly racialized. Their working-day reality may place them shoulder to shoulder with Black and other minority workers on assembly lines (or unemployment lines). But at 5:30 p.m. they still get off at different subway stops—in both a literal and figurative sense—and that's also how they vote.

Despite this (concededly grim) assessment of the present political and ideological backwardness of a large percentage of the white section of the U.S. working class, the experience of the 1983 Chicago election also shows the glimmer of what the future can and must become. The significance of 17% of whites voting for Harold Washington, small as this figure is, goes far beyond their numbers. The white workers who were able to break out of the racist framework—especially in such a highly polarized struggle as in Chicago—opened up themselves to being victimized by the *white united front* and were in fact subjected to some of the bitterest verbal and physical abuse as well as various types of retaliation.

The crucial point to be made about the 17% of whites who voted for Washington is that, in spite of what at times seem overwhelming phenomena to the contrary, *the essence of the split within the working class is not one of race, but racism.*

In other words, the concrete political reflection of the system of white supremacy is the *white united front*—not all white people. On the other hand, the white united front is not confined merely to the white bourgeoisie. The white united front is a reactionary political formation which penetrates deep inside the working class. The labor aristocracy provides the main leadership and social base for racism within the

working class. And while the labor aristocracy certainly does not constitute the majority of the class, it would be naive to downplay the influence and strength it enjoys among the masses of white workers, in particular because of the political grip it has on the organized trade union movement.

The dialectical opposition to the white united front is the *anti-racist front*. This front is also essentially not a racial formation—although, left to spontaneity, it, too, will continue to appear overwhelmingly a movement of Black and other minority peoples. *In the course of the actual class struggle it has been proven again and again that the racial contradiction cannot be mechanically subordinated and reduced to class terms.* It does not follow that white workers will be part of the anti-racist front because, in fact, the capitalist class utilizes the system of racism to weaken the whole working class and intensify the attack on it. No, the struggle for white workers is, and will continue to be, a difficult one, requiring a class consciousness thorough enough to prepare them to be *consistent* in exposing and fighting against the system of petty racial privileges, comprehending this struggle as the only basis to truly unite the working class in any strategic sense.

It is precisely the development of such a thoroughgoing anti-racist consciousness—tested time and again in the actual class struggle—that is a prerequisite for timely revolutionary consciousness among the mass of white workers. The class consciousness of any white worker (no matter how militant in the economic struggle) who has not yet confronted the centrality of the struggle against racism remains qualitatively false and incomplete. And any political line on the left that serves to trivialize this point in the slightest objectively conciliates opportunism within the working class movement.

V. The Direction and Content of Black Community Politics

The 1980s are likely to produce another flow in the Black liberation struggle. The most promising sign of a new upsurge in the Black community is the visible and enthusiastic mobilization of the Black masses in the arena of electoral politics—especially captured in the Harold Washington campaign in Chicago and in Jesse Jackson's campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination.

While much of the left recognizes the fact that a political upsurge in the Black community is a positive development, it is safe to say that this is largely an intuitive understanding or, at most, a pragmatic response to phenomena. Unless our movement can situate the significance of the Black liberation struggle strategically in the overall motion of U.S. politics, we will be unable to understand, let alone interact with, one of the central dynamics in the shaping of a more politically advanced U.S. proletariat.

In our opinion, *the fundamental significance of the Black liberation struggle in the period since the end of World War II is that it spontaneously concentrates not only the key democratic question facing the U.S. people (i.e., the struggle against racial inequality), but also the key class question in U.S. society (i.e., the struggle of the unprivileged mass of the proletariat). As such, the Black liberation struggle constitutes, more than ever before, a centerpiece of any broader revolutionary movement of the U.S. masses.*

It is for this reason that the bourgeoisie—even though its theoreticians and political representatives do not consciously articulate such an assessment—closely monitors the motion of Black politics and views it as the Achilles heel of the whole imperialist social order. Today, as the Black movement surges into the electoral arena it is quite evident that the central issue for the Black struggle is to achieve some degree of political power, since without it concrete advances in the social and economic realm will be ephemeral and the fate of the Black masses will remain in the beneficent hands of the liberal bourgeoisie. In this sense, the Black liberation movement's new focus on the electoral arena represents an important maturation. The historic Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave Black people a new and potent weapon with which to fight—and by moving front and center in the electoral process, Blacks have served notice that they plan to learn to use it to its fullest.

In the course of the electoral struggle, Black people can gain a vivid understanding of their actual political relationship to the rest of society—who their reliable friends and consistent enemies are. However, this road forward will not be straight and even. In fact, participation in the bourgeois electoral process can also prove to be a political and ideological minefield. Especially in the period of monopoly capitalism, the electoral arena remains at bottom an instrument by which the bourgeois state apparatus locks the masses into politics on a terrain that is most favorable to the apparatus itself—by strictly confining the electoral process to “improving” (and thereby perpetuating) the fundamental bourgeois order.

Consequently, the real question facing revolutionaries is whether the electoral fight will serve only this intended purpose of lulling the Black masses into reliance on the bourgeois state—or whether it can become the scene of their political advancement and maturation. There is no automatic answer to this question, because this is where correct political line, program, and strategy come to the forefront and are decisive for the Black liberation movement. The challenge facing Marxists and other revolutionary forces in the Black liberation movement—as well as Marxists and others in the broader socialist left—is whether they will seriously interact with the process, combat the bourgeois illusions inherent in it, and attempt to advance it in a direction that contributes to forging a strategic revolutionary formation in this country.

In taking up this challenge, it would be a great mistake to reduce the Black liberation struggle to the electoral arena. In fact, one of the critical limitations of today's movement is that it is largely confined to the electoral terrain. Unlike the '60s, the flow in the movement has not yet reached truly mass proportions and has not yet brought people into direct, ongoing political activity.

But it will not help to stand on the sidelines and wait for the rebirth of the '60s. The spontaneous movement follows no preordained blueprints. So while we contend that the resurgence of the Black movement in the electoral arena is a sign of a certain maturation, this should not be misread as advocating that the movement stay strictly within those limits. The dialectic to be grasped is that precisely because the Black liberation struggle is crystallizing in electoral battles, it is incumbent upon the revolutionary forces to understand and interact with that motion in order to advance the process beyond the inherently passive role that the bourgeois electoral process slates for the masses. But while “the vote” is an important weapon, if the movement gets reduced to only that arena, it can never become an *organized, mass* movement of any historical significance.

In the pages that follow, we will attempt a more precise assessment of the Black liberation struggle today by focusing on four issues: the historical evolution of the struggle for Black rights and equality and its concentration point in the electoral arena at the present stage; the traditional struggle between resistance and accommodationist forces in Black community politics and how this struggle manifests itself on the terrain of electoral politics; how the democratic struggle for Black equality and the class interests of the lower strata of the proletariat are concentrated by the Black struggle in the electoral arena; and how the struggle in the electoral arena brings to the fore the broader political questions before the Black masses.

In our view, the left's capacity to develop scientific answers to these questions will help determine whether our interaction with the Black liberation struggle in its next flow of activity can illuminate both the dynamic and direction of that struggle, thereby setting the conditions for communists to forge a vanguard relationship to the spontaneous motion of the Black struggle—a relationship which has the greatest potential for pushing forward the U.S. working class movement as a whole.

A. The Historical Struggle for Black Equality

The Black struggle for freedom and equality has always been the most concentrated expression of the broader struggle for democracy within U.S. society. For over 200 years it has been the point of reference and inspiration for every other major struggle for democratic rights—and it remains the litmus test for distinguishing progressive, democratic forces (even in a bourgeois context) from backward, reactionary forces.

The distinct character and role of Black politics vis-à-vis the political life of broader U.S. society is, of course, not something inherent in skin color. However, the essential historical materialist reality is that in a racially organized society, as in the U.S., skin color has been, and remains, a *central determining factor* of social conditions and life destiny for all.

Consequently, the key to understanding the continued force and energy of Black politics *in its own right* as it moves into the electoral arena—as well as the mounting contradictions in its straining for a more advanced program and strategy—absolutely requires an accurate analysis of the historical and current conditions of the *masses of Black people* in U.S. society.

Historically, the disenfranchisement of Blacks has been essentially the political and legal reflection of their extraordinarily exploited class position as slaves and sharecroppers within U.S. society. In this sense, one of the most noteworthy (and far-reaching) developments of the twentieth century has been the socio-economic shift of the overwhelming majority of the Black population from a southern, semi-rural proletariat to a national, urban proletariat, and, equally significant, the concentration of Blacks into the least stable, most impoverished section of the U.S. working classes—due precisely to the continuation of the system of racism. This inextricable link between the race and class questions encompasses the *bulk* of Black experience in America and objectively determines the inevitable logic and direction of that struggle in broad historical materialist terms.

Contrary to the national mythology, the collective historical experience of Blacks is not incidental, but central, to the economic development and socio-political formation of the U.S. An accurate analysis of the historical role of the shifting forms of Black oppression in the “building of America” concretely illustrates the dialectic between economic base and political superstructure as well as between race and class in the U.S. In every historical period, the distinct class status of the Black masses—as slaves, sharecroppers, urban proletarians, even in the transitions from one to the other—was shaped by racial determination and orchestrated by the bourgeoisie. In turn, this racialized class status was the basis of a corresponding political status characterized most decisively by the extent of Black enfranchisement.

The capitalist foundations of the U.S. rested upon the slave labor of the plantation system—in fact the pace and scale of early U.S. development would have been inconceivable without slave labor. Slavery represented the nearly complete identity of racial and class oppression for the Black section of the population—i.e., the development of a specially oppressed class restricted solely to Blacks. Given the historically unique centrality of the slaveholders in the revolutionary

independence coalition in the U.S.,* the “founding fathers” of this *model* bourgeois republic had little choice but to swallow their high-sounding egalitarian principles and continue the oppression and disenfranchisement of the Black slave population, while extending relatively *advanced* liberties to *all* its white (male) citizens using a thoroughly racialized criteria for determining who was a “citizen” and who a “slave.” Any serious attempt to call the system of racial slavery into question in that period would have *undermined* the economic cornerstone of the young republic and shattered its political unity in the independence struggle against England.

By the mid-nineteenth century the economic foundations of the U.S. had developed and diversified substantially. The plantation system had shifted from being the most developed sector of the economy to being its most stagnant and backward sector. The burgeoning economy of the Northeast as well as the developing middle western and western territories, rested upon a far more advanced technological and social (i.e., “free” proletarian) foundation than the “slave regions.” Consequently, the social question of Black freedom became the burning political issue crystallizing this underlying economic contradiction. At stake was the pace of U.S. capitalist development on a nationwide scale.

It is safe to say that if “proud Dixie” had not been crushed in the Civil War, the U.S. would not have emerged as a major imperialist power by the turn of the century. However, the political costs were tremendous. From the point of view of the U.S. ruling class, the Civil War had been a bitter fratricidal war that threatened the very existence and future of the republic. Therefore the militarily vanquished planter class (and its army of white retainers) had to be reincorporated into the national economic and political structure of a newly expansive capitalist system. In order to effect their reintegration into the system, the southern agricultural capitalists had to be economically subordinated to the industrial capitalists of the North and West and neutralized politically. In this “healing of the bourgeoisie’s wounds,” the substance of Black freedom became the North’s main bargaining chip.

Once again, the racial oppression of Blacks as a people qualitatively determined their class conditions and political status. The restoration of southern agriculture was a central consideration for the victorious capitalists of the North—a need which would not have been met if the plantation system had been broken up and the land distributed to the former slaves. What better way to resolve this problem—and the political problems of “reconciliation” with the now-vanquished slave-

* In all other slaveholding countries in the Americas (the Caribbean, Central and South America), the independence movements against European colonialism were initially connected to the anti-slavery fight and were thus anti-racist in character. This is one of the important historical distinctions which frame the differences in racism in the U.S. vis-à-vis the rest of the Americas.

owners—than by locking the newly “emancipated” Blacks into a semi-proletarian class of tenant farmers and agricultural laborers to provide a stable labor force for a plantation system now deprived of its slaves?

This alteration in the class status of southern Blacks had its corresponding legal and political reflection. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution formally freed the slaves and nominally endowed Blacks with all the rights of citizenship. But had Blacks been permitted to exercise those rights, the stability of the plantation system would have been undermined. And so unfolded what is sometimes called the “betrayal” of Reconstruction—the political deal struck between the political representatives of northern capital, who controlled the federal government and the nation’s armed forces, and their southern counterparts, now reduced to the status of junior partner. Union troops were withdrawn from the South, a degree of political power was restored to the planter class; an elaborate system of Jim Crow and racial segregation maintained distinctions of privileges and rights between the masses of Blacks and the poor whites; and legal qualifications combined with extra-legal terror effectively disenfranchised the Black masses. This situation prevailed for more than 50 years—from the 1870s right up to World War II.

From the point of view of the newly dominant section of U.S. capital, it was a good bargain. The Civil War had qualitatively settled the question of national political power in favor of the industrial capitalists of the North. The post-Reconstruction deal consolidated that triumph, politically restabilizing the South and effectively diverting any impulse on the part of southern whites toward a resurrection of the “lost cause” into free license to racially terrorize and subordinate southern Blacks.

The economic cost to northern capital—that of placing the whole southern region “on the back burner” for a relatively extended period—could be absorbed without jeopardizing the pace of the nation’s overall development. As a result, the South entered a period of stagnation in which its regional economy and social backwardness stood in sharp contrast to the spectacular growth and development of the rest of the country during the same period—in particular the Midwest and West. In human costs, the brunt of the South’s backwardness was carried by the Black population who lived in the most severely economically oppressed and politically terrorized conditions under Jim Crow. From the point of view of ruling monopoly capital, the whole Black population constituted a vast, *latent reserve army of labor* locked in the semi-rural South and ready to be pulled into the active proletariat whenever the times required it.

In the period following World War I—and most intensely after World War II—came the maturation of the conditions for that dramatic transformation of the social and economic life of the Black population. A dramatic decline in European immigration to the U.S., combined with

the most rapidly expanding economy on earth, created a strong demand for Black labor in urban centers outside the South. And the relatively undeveloped South became a prime target for the irresistible expansionist compulsions of monopoly capital, hitherto focused on consolidating its domination over the rest of the economy.* The result of these two processes was the decay of the southern plantation system and an unprecedented redistribution of Blacks from the rural isolation of sharecropping into the growing urban industrial manufacturing centers throughout the country, including the South.

With the final destruction of the plantation system, the mass of Blacks were largely freed from coercive forms of agricultural labor and incorporated into the mainstream of the modern urban proletariat. No longer did white supremacy and capital combine to produce a unique, specially oppressed form of labor bondage for Blacks only; but neither did the integration of Blacks into the working class take place in a color-blind fashion. Although the mass proletarianization of Blacks coincided with the emergence of U.S. imperialism as the undisputed world economic power amidst an unprecedentedly lengthy period of economic prosperity in the 1950s, they were not allowed to share in the bounty of imperial hegemony. While significant economic, political, and social privileges were allotted to the expanded upper aristocratic strata of the working class, these were basically reserved “for whites only.” Meanwhile, Blacks were systematically tracked into the most unprotected, unstable sections of the working class—in short, the lower strata whose life experiences remained more classically proletarian despite the prosperity of the empire.

The racialization of the stratification internal to the working class became the prime material basis for the system of racial inequality to continue to thrive. Defying the optimistic hopes of those who predicted that the demise of the southern plantation system would sound the death knell of white supremacy, the system of racism instead became entrenched at the very center of the political economy of U.S. imperialism.

The dialectic of racial and class oppression became more complex, but the continued functioning of the system of racism under these altered conditions only served to increase the bitterness and political explosiveness of Black oppression in U.S. society. The Black struggle now coincided with the struggle of the unprivileged mass of the proletariat against capital.

Nonetheless, the *particularity* of the Black predicament in U.S. society was not the class question *per se*. Not surprisingly, the modern-day frustrations of the Black masses were galvanized politically around the democratic struggle for Black equality—through the mass civil rights

* While it is certainly true that the migration of capital to the South (the so-called Sun Belt) has rapidly accelerated in the '70s and '80s, this process actually began in the 1950s.

struggle. In the segregated South of the '50s, where the majority of Blacks still lived, the institutionalized and extra-legal racist terror of Jim Crow effectively denied Blacks the ballot, as well as the most basic and superficial social equalities with whites. At the same time, northern Blacks who could vote were locked into segregated ghettos from which they could not exercise sufficient leverage to make the electoral process one which could, in any significant way, offer the prospect of altering the race relations and social inequalities they faced.

The underlying racial and class contradictions inherent in the situation facing Black people came to a head politically in the period of sustained struggle beginning in the late '50s through the Black Power movement of the late '60s and early '70s. Taken as a whole, this period marked a qualitatively new stage in the Black liberation struggle. Basically, the fact that the Black population had shifted from being a marginal population locked in the semi-rural South to being a central component of the working class nationwide meant that their continued political disenfranchisement *as a people* had become untenable.

The mass civil rights movement of Blacks attracted to its side the most democratic forces among the white population. And, for the first time since the Civil War era, a major section of capital itself felt that the most odious features of racism had become an obstacle to the efficient, smooth, and profitable management of the capitalist system. Thus it became fashionable for the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie to champion Black rights—to a limited degree, of course. However, it was this crack in the cross-class white united front that provided the opening for the emergence of the modern-day Black liberation struggle.

The dynamic unleashed by this historic civil rights movement eventually resulted in the various pieces of legislation which brought the system of law-enforced racial segregation and legally mandated denial of Black political rights to an end. In a broad historical sense, the gains won by the civil rights movement resolved the democratic rights struggle of Blacks on a *legal and juridical level*. Despite the present period of rising racist reaction, a *qualitative reversal* to the point of explicit legal denial of Black democratic rights would probably politically require full-blown fascism.

However, what has been said many times before is undoubtedly true—the elimination of legally sanctioned Jim Crow did not mean the elimination of racism as a social relation defining the unequal condition of Black people in the U.S. Even more, it did not at all alter the fact that a special measure of oppression is borne by the lower strata of the working class, where Blacks are concentrated in disproportionately large numbers. Still, the democratic gains won by the Black liberation movement in the '60s represent a major advance in the struggle against racism and in the working class struggle generally. This is true, first, because the rights thus won provide the most oppressed sector of the

U.S. working class with a whole array of additional weapons in the political arena; and, second, because these legal gains serve to clarify in a most telling fashion the fact that the *essence* of the oppression of Blacks is not the denial of formal *rights* (nor backward agricultural relations) but the system of institutionalized racial privilege and class exploitation.

Surely, the underlying significance of the Black Power movement coming out of the southern-based civil rights movement was much more than a tactical squabble over violence vs. non-violence. Rather it was a spontaneous and largely unfocused attempt to carry the Black liberation struggle beyond the level of formal legal equality. It was also not chance that the center of gravity shifted to Black urban ghettos outside the South where the glitter of formal equality had long since faded in the face of frustrated Black expectations for some degree of real social equality and economic advancement in relation to whites.

Even as the legislative victories of the civil rights movement were being celebrated in the mid-'60s, the movement's most consistent and politically astute figures were aware of the fact that the gains in the struggle for legal equality marked the beginning of a new political agenda for the Black masses. Certainly the movement's most prominent leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., had realized the necessity to broaden the social content of his program—witness his campaigns against de facto segregation in northern metropolitan areas, his developing orientation toward economic struggles of the Black masses, and, of course, his opposition to the imperialist war in Vietnam. It was a progression which undoubtedly made him all the more a prime target for assassination.

More than a decade later, the emergence of a new kind of Black political figure—typified by individuals like California Congressman Ron Dellums, Mayor Harold Washington, and Jesse Jackson—signifies the gravitation of Black politics toward a broader social and political agenda and toward the attempt to impose that agenda on the electoral arena. That broader agenda flows primarily out of the concentrated intersection of democratic and class questions among the Black masses and is becoming the political program which will increasingly define the content of the Black liberation struggle in the next decade.

B. Accommodation vs. Resistance: The Struggle Internal to Black Community Politics

Despite a certain amount of metaphysical mystification as to the source of the phenomenon, each election and public opinion poll reaffirms that Black community politics functions decidedly to the left of mainstream U.S. politics. The Black community's conservatives are less reactionary than white conservatives: for example, there is no Black version of the John Birch Society or the New Right, and Black participation in the Republican Party is negligible. And Black progressives are generally more radicalized, more politically grounded, and

more sophisticated than their counterparts in the broader progressive/left movement. In contrast to the nationwide electorate which put Ronald Reagan in the White House, the spectrum of political opinion in the Black community (with a few individual exceptions) runs from liberal Democratic leftward. The material basis for this political differential between Black community politics and those of the broader society is rooted in the objective conditions of the masses of Blacks and the pervasiveness of racism throughout U.S. society.

Nevertheless, the Black community is far from politically homogeneous. The fundamental dividing line in Black community politics has always been between forces whose outlook is based on *accommodation* to the racist system and those whose outlook is based on *resistance* to that system. The struggle between these two tendencies has emerged in every arena in which the Black masses have sought to obtain relief and a redress of grievances from the racist system. When Black politics first began to assert itself in the electoral arena in the mid-'60s, there was a tendency to look at any attempt to utilize the system of bourgeois politics—particularly on the terrain of the Democratic Party—as inherently accommodationist. But this politically infantile view has had to give way to reality. The point that has emerged clearly in recent years is that the struggle between accommodation and resistance is also played out, often in a most visible and concrete manner, in the electoral arena itself.

At times the sharp antagonism between these two tendencies is somewhat masked because the Black liberation struggle is essentially a cross-class movement whose principal unifying bond, wherever Blacks happen to fall in the overall class structure of the U.S., is the common struggle for Black equality vis-à-vis whites. However, the system of white supremacy is so deeply rooted and prevalent in the U.S. that it has almost precluded the entry of Blacks into the bourgeoisie (in any qualitative sense) and severely discriminates against their entry and functioning within the petit bourgeoisie. As a result petit bourgeois Blacks, regardless of their individual aspirations, are objectively thrown politically into the arms of the masses of working class Blacks—just as their talented (or fortunate) counterparts in earlier periods were thrown back towards the masses of Black slaves and, later, sharecroppers. In short, because racism envelops the whole Black experience in America, the *full* class polarization among Blacks has been and continues to be retarded. This also explains why the distinct quality of the Black community and Black politics has been sustained in the U.S. Nowhere is this political dialectic more sharply displayed than in the electoral arena.

Traditionally, petit bourgeois elements have been the main spokespeople for the Black community. They were certainly the first to step forward in the electoral arena as well. As petty entrepreneurs and professionals for whom the Black community represents the prime

market, the Black petit bourgeoisie naturally gravitates toward positions of “representing” the community as a whole. Nevertheless, because of the logic of their own class position and interests, their basic class impulse is to *accommodate* the white power structure rather than confront it. The influence of these forces (and their social base of support) far exceeds their numbers, and they cannot be discounted lightly. They have access to money, political favors, media, and the pulpit; and they have a most important role to play on behalf of the bourgeoisie in diverting the Black masses away from radicalization and into safe and acceptable channels. As such, they constitute the most serious obstacle internal to the Black community to the qualitative political and ideological development of the Black liberation struggle in the decades ahead.

Yet, in a broad strategic sense, this accommodationist leadership of the Black community is fundamentally unstable. Given the racist character of the broader political structure of the country—whatever the individual illusions of the Black petit bourgeoisie to the contrary—their capacity to function in the electoral arena is, in the final analysis, closely tied to their ability to continue to represent some substantial segment of the Black community. Herein lies the dilemma of the accommodationist trend in Black politics and the root of its instability strategically.

The combination of racial and class oppression which the masses of the Black community face is often so intense and blatant that it creates an explosive political dynamic which even the most backward of Black public officials cannot afford to ignore if they intend to remain in political life. This dialectic exerts a powerful leftward pull on them and serves to neutralize some of their more reactionary features. As a result, even the more conservative and opportunist forces in Black politics can be held somewhat accountable to the pressing concerns of their community. For example, they are often obliged to take formally advanced positions on the major democratic questions of the day: on every aspect of racial discrimination, racist terror and police violence against the Black community, governmental spending and priorities, etc. Even on foreign policy questions, the Black accommodationists are more likely to unite with the liberal sector of the bourgeoisie than with the more openly jingoist policies such as those pursued by the Reagan administration.*

* Once again, the problematic nature of many of the standing Marxist analyses of the Black liberation struggle has been painfully illustrated by the way in which this phenomenon has usually been analyzed. The strong impulse towards racial solidarity across class lines has been branded “nationalism” and identified as the principal diversionary ideological current within the Black movement. Building multi-racial working class unity is advanced as the only correct course to be followed in the struggle against racism. There are a number of problems with this analysis. First of all, nationalism embraces a wide range of outlooks, from reactionary to revolutionary. And, while nationalism cannot scientifically chart

(cont.)

Of course, the *strategic instability* of the accommodationist trend in Black politics does not mean that it is going to collapse or disappear by itself. To the contrary, the accommodationists inevitably gain the backing (implicit or explicit) of the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie. This is a key factor in their ability historically to dominate Black community politics except in relatively brief periods of intense political ferment like the 1960s. Our point here, however, is that these forces, with few exceptions, must ultimately also rely on some level of support from the Black community, and that this *unavoidable relationship* serves to check the development on their part of full-blown reactionary politics and keeps them generally within the broad anti-racist camp. Still, the Black liberation movement must ultimately isolate these accommodationist forces, break their hegemony over Black politics, and replace them with consistent resistance forces, if it is to advance.

On the other hand, the *resistance* pole in the Black liberation movement, while it is politically and ideologically diverse and suffers from the lack of a clear political program and organizational immaturity, is *strategically* stable in class terms and remains alive in a broad network

the future course of the Black liberation movement and its intersection with the motion of the working class as a whole, many nationalists will play an important progressive role in revolutionizing the Black masses—a critical element of the development of the revolutionary formation in the U.S.

Second, it is not the case that all those who call for cross-class racial solidarity are nationalists at all. In the absence of any substantial anti-racist political formation within the white sector of the working class, it is more than understandable that the spontaneous movement would continue to put forth the call for *Black unity* as the starting point of a reliable strategy for the liberation of Black people in the U.S. This is not necessarily evidence of an ideological and political commitment to nationalism but rather a pragmatic assessment of the state of consciousness of the mass of white workers. It is an assessment that won't be shaken until the chimera of working class unity can be made to take material form as a political force in the anti-racist struggle.

Finally, given the fact that fundamental questions of equality remain on the Black liberation agenda, petit bourgeois forces can and do play an important role in the struggle for democratic rights. The formulation of cross-class Black unity vs. multi-racial working class unity is too crude and mechanical to capture this. At this stage, the advancement of both the Black liberation movement and the working class movement turns on the struggle for the ascendancy of resistance politics within the Black movement and the polarization over the struggle against racism within the white sector of the working class. The simplistic call for the Black movement to embrace the leadership of the "multi-national working class" has only served to trivialize the complexity of the system of racial privilege in U.S. society and the resulting depth and stubbornness of the political split *within* the working class itself. The lesson for the communist movement is as valuable as it is painful: primitive theory—in spite of its internal logic—will ultimately be rejected by the spontaneous movement because it fails to illuminate the source of the actual phenomena which must be confronted day to day in the struggle.

of grassroots opinion-makers in the Black community. While these range from seasoned reformists to various types of revolutionaries, they have in common a tested dedication to the militant and uncompromising struggle for Black equality. The politically active left wing of the Black church is a major organized force in the community and remains probably the most powerful institution nationwide. In addition, there is an extensive network of community activists who grew up politically in the struggle of the '60s and '70s, many of whom are now working in social service agencies, schools, clinics, unions and city government—as well as organizations of all types. Although much of the rhetoric of earlier days has faded, and the levels of political activity vary widely, *taken as a whole* this grouping is still dedicated to its basic politics of open resistance and struggle. They remain keenly aware of the continual racist assault on the Black community and other minorities as well as the intensifying social crisis facing the Black community in the U.S. On questions of war and peace they are thoroughly distrustful of U.S. foreign policy and in favor of peace and non-intervention abroad. In short, their political sentiments are anti-racist and anti-capitalist in the broadest sense of the term, even though many are political reformists rather than revolutionaries. The key assessment to be made of these forces, however—aside from what they continue to *think*—is that, as the class struggle sharpens, there is every reason to believe that many can be reactivated politically for the fight.*

Obviously, the resistance forces in the Black community were not immune to the infantile leftism that infected large sections of the whole U.S. left in the late '60s and early '70s. But here, too, there were noteworthy differences: To begin with, the state's repressive response against Black "militants"—in the form of death, political suppression, prison terms, and harassment—was more widespread and qualitatively greater than the repression meted out to their white counterparts. For the Black liberation struggle, many of the lessons from that period have been sealed in blood, and the resulting political maturation process has been broader and deeper. Therefore, although the intensification of the class struggle in the years ahead is bound to bring with it a resurgence of infantile leftism and anarchism throughout the U.S. left, the collective political memory of the Black movement is far stronger and its chances of keeping such infantilism in check, far greater. In addition, although the Marxist-Leninist formation within the Black liberation struggle remains

* The same cannot be said of many of the radicalized whites from the same period who have also stepped back from active political life. They will not be so easily reactivated, due largely to the material force of their proven ability to cash in on their racial and class privileges as they "grew up and settled down"—a dynamic accurately captured in the recent movie, "The Big Chill." As a result, it is safe to assume that there will be a far stronger political continuity from the radicalism of the '60s to the upcoming struggles of the '80s within Black community politics than in the broader movement.

weak and anti-communist prejudices are still prevalent, the Black exposure to Marxism during the '60s and '70s was extensive (albeit eclectic and uneven), in particular among the radicalized students. Today it has become a cumulative material force across the whole revolutionary spectrum of the Black liberation movement, from revolutionary nationalists to "independent" socialists of all varieties.

C. The Motion Toward a Political Program of Democratic and Class Demands

As the locus of the Black liberation struggle moves increasingly toward the electoral arena, the fundamental elements that constitute Black oppression and resistance continue to frame the political challenges it faces. First and foremost is the ongoing struggle for racial equality which serves to unite the Black community across class lines. Second is the struggle for the broader social needs of the lower strata of the working class, which is the class reality for the great majority of the Black community. In terms of concrete political reality these two elements are of course inextricably intertwined and determine both the issues facing the Black liberation movement and the tensions within it.

Although the Black struggle of the '60s marked a qualitative milestone in the struggle for formal equality, even that struggle is far from over—in many ways it remains the cutting edge of the Black protest movement. Perhaps the clearest example of how the struggle in the electoral arena has focused this question for the Black liberation movement is to be found in the Jesse Jackson campaign.

In terms of the struggle for equality, Jackson has highlighted the fact that the Black liberation movement's agenda for reform in the area of democratic rights is far from completed. Jackson has particularly focused on issues of voting rights, challenging all the various rules, dodges, and deliberate technicalities designed to maintain a qualitative disenfranchisement of the Black community even though it enjoys the nominal right to participate in the electoral process. Here is a good example of how a Black resistance pole in the electoral arena can highlight the democratic struggle for Black equality which otherwise might stay hidden. The Jackson campaign has become the political instrument for exposing the myth that the civil rights legislation of the '60s has fully resolved the issues even of formal democracy for the Black masses. As a result, a raft of new political questions—"new" in the sense that they could not have appeared before Blacks won formal enfranchisement through the Voting Rights Act—have now become a matter of broad public debate in a presidential election year and are high on the agenda of the Black liberation movement. These include such questions as gerrymandering of voting districts to dilute Black voting strength, at-large (as opposed to district or ward) electoral systems, dual primaries designed to minimize the possibility that competition between white

candidates will result in the victory of a Black candidate,*various obstacles to registration and voting, etc. All these things, along with outright coercion and terror, have the net effect of continuing to deny even the basic right to vote to a substantial section of the Black community.

Beyond the formal violations of Black democratic rights lies the powerful and stubborn fact of cross-class white solidarity—to the point that, as late as 1980, fully 60% of successful Black electoral candidates required Black majority jurisdictions in order to win.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the mounting white racist backlash of the late '70s has succeeded in watering down most of the democratic gains won earlier by Blacks and other minorities. Under the reactionary banner of "white rights" and "reverse discrimination," affirmative action programs and efforts to desegregate schools and neighborhoods have been dismantled completely or halted dead in their tracks. The rightward shift in the national political climate has aggravated the Black community's perennial victimization by racist, terrorist groups as well as by the state's police agencies, all of which are extensively honeycombed with fascist, white supremacist infrastructures.

In short, the ongoing struggle for equal rights—for the full extension of bourgeois democracy to the Black section of the U.S. population—remains very much a centerpiece of the political program of the Black struggle for the '80s.

At the same time, the winning of certain democratic gains has, in the post-civil rights era, served to bring forward the underlying class aspect of the Black liberation struggle. As a result, basic working class issues promise to be a far more prominent feature of the Black struggle in the decades ahead.

With the steady strategic decline of the imperialist system worldwide, the U.S. bourgeoisie has intensified its exploitation of the whole U.S. working class. This stepped-up assault from the capitalists has been most conspicuous in the period since the end of the Vietnam war and has taken a wide range of forms—from a concerted effort to bust the unionized section of labor and substantially weaken their contracts to widespread cuts in social services. The bourgeois attack has also produced a leap in the "acceptable" levels of structural unemployment, increases in the working class share of the tax burdens, etc. Given the fact that the principal stratifications within the U.S. working class fall along the color line, the main thrust of the bourgeoisie's assault has been thoroughly mediated by the politics of racism, and is being felt primarily by the unprotected mass of the proletariat. The racism involved is usually thinly disguised and fairly explicit, but even when it is not so overt, the effect is still to increase the racial oppression of Black and other minority communities while simultaneously intensifying capital's squeeze on the

* As happened in the Chicago mayoral primary.

lower strata of the working class. Indeed, in periods of economic crisis the racial polarization within the working class as well as the contradictions between the labor aristocracy and the lower strata of the class actually intensify.

All attempts to obscure this reality are continually frustrated by stubborn statistics that show a persistent (and increasing) racial differential between whites and non-whites in matters of employment and conditions of housing, education, and health. And the social misery, never fully captured by the statisticians, gets concentrated in the deepest recesses of the Black ghetto, on the Indian reservations, in the underworld of undocumented Latinos, etc. As a result, both objectively and subjectively, the strongest cries for democratic rights and social justice emanating from the U.S. working class often take the form of the political movements of minority peoples—and nowhere does this get expressed more forcefully than in the independent political motion of the Black struggle.

Concretely, it was precisely the combination of all these underlying contradictions—ignited politically—that propelled the Harold Washington campaign forward and so dramatically altered the political atmosphere in Chicago. Data from the 1980 census show 34.5% of Chicago area Blacks below the official poverty line as compared to 6% of whites. The median income for whites stood at \$25,644, while for Blacks it was less than half of that, \$12,716 (and for Latinos, \$16,557). Figures for 1982 showed official Black unemployment at 26.8% and white unemployment at less than half that, 11.8%—while unemployment for Black youth stood at an astounding 69.2%. Furthermore, the tendency is for this employment gap to widen, since the Reagan administration's "recovery" has overwhelmingly benefited whites in comparison with minorities.

On top of these problems of income and employment is a much larger social crisis facing Chicago's minority communities. Given the sharply segregated nature of the city, broader social attacks on the less protected sections of the working class have a thoroughly racist edge to them. For example, the inner city's deteriorating public school system is overwhelmingly a problem for Blacks and Latinos, since the majority of white school children have long since gone into private school systems. Similarly, Chicago's crippled public health system is principally a problem for minorities, reflected in such stark statistics as a Black infant mortality rate almost twice that of whites (23.9 per thousand vs. 13.4). The examples go on and on.

In short, for the vast majority of working class Blacks throughout the country, the pressing issues of class oppression are absolutely bound up with racism—and any attempt to neatly separate them in terms of the concrete politics of the class struggle in the U.S. today is little more than an academic exercise in obscurantism.

D. The Struggle for Allies: With Whom —and on What Basis?

Ironically, the relatively advanced character of the spontaneous Black liberation struggle serves to aggravate a longstanding backward tendency of the left: belittling the role of the conscious element and the decisive importance of correct theory, program, and strategy. This is especially true when the sharpening social crisis of the Black community appears to produce "like magic" relatively advanced political sentiments, holding out the promise of keeping more conservative, accommodationist forces in check while providing the more militant, resistance forces much initiative. At such times the straining of the spontaneous movement for a *more advanced program* may be overlooked, and attention to the underlying questions of political line and strategy may be neglected by the left—both the broader left and the conscious element internal to the Black liberation struggle itself.

In many ways, these basic questions of line and strategy get crystallized in the question of alliances. With Blacks constituting only 11% of the total population of the U.S., the nature of the Black liberation movement's alliances—with whom and on what basis?—is clearly of enormous immediate and long range significance.

One great virtue of the attempt by the Black liberation movement to advance its political program through the mechanisms of the electoral arena is that this focus immediately forces the question of alliance onto the agenda of every serious political force.

Certainly it concentrates the struggle between that sector of Black nationalism which advocates a strictly separatist course for Black politics, shunning alliances with whites on the grounds that they are *inherently* racist, and those who believe that forces outside the Black community are capable of being won to the anti-racist struggle.

Of even greater political significance than the struggle with Black separatism, however, is the fact that the question of alliances also concentrates the struggle between the resistance and accommodationist forces in the Black community. Here the debate is not principally over *whether* the Black community needs allies, but over *who* those allies should be and on what basis will alliances be established. Invariably the allies to whom the accommodationist forces turn are the white liberal elements in the bourgeois power structure and the political representatives of the labor aristocracy. The accommodationist line of argument, of course, is always couched in highly pragmatic terms: its preferred allies have "clout" and can deliver results, etc. What gets obscured is that these alliances are based on a "balance of power" conception in which Blacks are permanently locked into the position of supplicants whose requests may be given some special consideration if and when these allies find it politically convenient to do so. Based on such an alliance, the political program of the Black community can never go beyond tokenism and the most limited reforms.

The resistance forces, on the other hand, tend to identify those sectors of the population who are also oppressed in various degrees by the political and economic power of capital as the Black liberation movement's natural allies. Inevitably, whether they articulate it in class terms or not, this outlook propels Black politics toward others among the proletarianized mass in the lower strata of the working class.

Jesse Jackson's "rainbow coalition" of the disadvantaged and disinherited is a concrete expression of this underlying impulse for alliances in which the full range of democratic and class demands of the Black masses can speak for, intersect with, and embrace the interests of other sectors of the population.* To be sure, the "rainbow coalition" itself is a somewhat imperfect and imprecise expression of this impulse since class-conscious forces do not stand at the center of the movement represented by Jackson. But even the imprecision of this movement's own political articulations cannot hide the fact that the "rainbow coalition" in essence demonstrates how the Black liberation movement is again and again compelled to strain toward such alliances.**

In fact, one of the lasting gains of the '60s was the recognition that the Black movement could galvanize and give impetus to the struggles of other minority peoples against racism and national minority oppression and that the unity of minority peoples could become a potent political force. The struggle for what was then called "third world unity" was an expression of the fact that the class position occupied by the Mexican/Chicano people and Puerto Ricans, together with the minority oppression they faced, provided the objective basis for a substantial degree of programmatic unity with the Black liberation movement. Although the

* For example, central to Jackson's domestic policies has been the call to end the "second-class" status of Blacks and other minorities—explicitly targeting racism in matters of unemployment, housing, education, etc. He has also taken strong and progressive positions on discrimination against women. He has endorsed the ERA, supports the democratic right of women to choose abortion, and supports federal funding to make such a choice safe and accessible to poorer women, etc.

** In its broadest sense, the "rainbow coalition" would appear to be a popular front of democratic and progressive forces from many sectors, including not only lower strata of the working class, but elements of the labor aristocracy and petit bourgeoisie as well. But, the defining *core* of this broad front is a united front of the lower strata of the working class. And the *basic* program of the "rainbow coalition" stems, fairly explicitly, from the pressing needs of that sector of the masses. Therefore, all the broader popular front forces who support this program and are drawn to the coalition do so on that basis. The failure thus far of any significant motion toward the "rainbow coalition" among these broader forces is in many ways attributable to the fact that a polarization along class lines has not yet occurred within a number of the popular movements (the women's movement is a good example)—a polarization which might bring proletarian elements more central to their leadership.

substance of that political alliance never fully materialized in any lasting form in that earlier period—in fact the cornerstone of that alliance, Black/Latino unity, was often the site of major tensions—still the strategic soundness of the principle is today recognized by almost everyone. As a result, what was viewed as a somewhat new and tenuous alliance in the '60s has become almost the assumed starting point for taking up the practical anti-racist struggles of the '80s.

Both Harold Washington's campaign and Jesse Jackson's have focused the call for Black/Latino unity in the electoral realm. And, though developing the unity, program and organizational forms for the further maturation of such an alliance is still a long way off, resistance forces in both the Black and Latino communities recognize the necessity to engage in the highly complex political process that will be required to forge it.

The question of alliances also helps the Black liberation struggle focus the *class question*—the increasing intersection between advancing the interests of the masses of Blacks and the mass of the working class as a whole. The role assigned the Black masses in capitalist production is today more explicit than ever before. Consequently, the substantive class issues confronting the Black masses—jobs, housing, health care, old age protection, reproductive rights, and, more broadly, questions of war and peace and government spending priorities—are the very same questions facing the bulk of the U.S. working class. Similarly, the Black community's struggle in defense of its democratic rights in the face of racist terror from the Ku Klux Klan or the police merges objectively with the ongoing working class struggle for securing full democratic rights against fascist infringements.

For these reasons, it is becoming clear in the '80s (as compared with the period of the civil rights movement) that the motion of Black politics concentrates the struggle of all the lower strata of the working class: the Black liberation movement has objectively become its only consistent political voice. As this process matures, the overriding question of program and political line confronting the Black liberation movement is whether or not it is prepared to *explicitly* appropriate the banner of the U.S. working class.

Unfortunately, this is far easier posed than accomplished. Certainly the outstanding obstacle to its realization is the racist and class-collaborationist leadership that dominates the U.S. trade union movement. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the Black liberation movement and the mass of the Latino communities (and even a substantial section of white workers) continue to be alienated from the organized labor movement. And they do not see their interests represented by these designated spokesmen of the working class who overwhelmingly reflect the sectoral interests of the labor aristocracy—class-collaborationist interests which are narrowly based on defending their position of relative economic and racial privilege within the existing

bourgeois framework. This contradiction was played out vividly in the 1960s and '70s when the Black and other minority peoples' movements—whose bulk was from the working class—had no real choice but to find vehicles other than the labor movement to defend their interests and exercise their political initiative.*

Is there a more vivid demonstration of the fact that this same dynamic characterizes working class politics in the '80s than the struggle within the Democratic Party leading up to the 1984 presidential election? On one hand, we have the candidate of "labor"—former vice president Walter Mondale—advancing a political line explicitly rooted in defense of the imperialist system, in support for U.S. aggression in Central America, in sustaining the huge U.S. military build-up, and in ensuring the continual underrepresentation of Blacks and other minorities in the Democratic Party by means of the Hunt Commission's anti-democratic electoral rules and procedures. On the other hand, there is Jesse Jackson, openly attacking the leadership of the AFL-CIO for its complicity in the imperialist system and the defense of racism, advancing a political program which on every major political and economic question objectively takes into account and attempts to advance the interests of the proletarianized masses—both minority and white—in the lower strata of the working class.

This juxtaposition has brought the contention between accommodationist and resistance forces in the Black community sharply out into the open. Those elected officials and other political figures in the

* Given this concrete and vivid political predicament, it is truly ironic and tragic that a long line of "socialist theoreticians" would arrive on the scene to blame this anomaly principally on the "nationalist deviations" among oppressed minority sections of the working class and not upon the opportunism and racism of the labor aristocracy. One of the principal ideological sources for this one-sided analysis, which is fundamentally nothing but an apologist defense of racism and opportunism in the labor movement, is the line and framework, held by most of the U.S. left from social democracy to the CPUSA, that insists upon equating the U.S. trade union movement with the U.S. working class movement.

The designation of the organized labor movement as the *only rightful force* speaking for the working class is so widely held on the left that it has become virtually a tenet of faith. However, as we have argued elsewhere, this viewpoint constitutes a negative concession of major proportions, both politically and ideologically, to the labor aristocracy. Such a line allows an opportunist program, laced with racism and national chauvinism, to be inscribed on the "banner of labor."

Historically, however, before the 1950s, there was more *conscious* and conspicuous political and ideological struggle within the trade union movement—with the left wing championing the cause of the unprotected, unorganized mass of the proletariat against the privilege of the "aristocracy." During the '30s and '40s this political split had a mature organizational expression—CIO vs. AFL—and the Black and Latino movements during that period could and did in fact "identify with labor," meaning a *particular wing of labor*.

Black community who see the liberal bourgeoisie and the labor aristocracy as their natural allies have rallied, for the most part, around Mondale. At the same time, Jackson's call for a "rainbow coalition" with others also "disadvantaged and disinherited" in U.S. society is clearly tapping a reservoir of sentiment among the Black masses which has rarely had an opportunity to get registered in the electoral arena. (Indeed, the potential being tapped by Jackson is so powerful that it has forced some among the accommodationists to avoid taking an open stand between Mondale and Jackson even though the former has been desperate for their endorsements.)

And so the essence of the alliance question for the Black masses is sharply revealed: alliance with whom and on what basis? This is the precise question that the struggle in the electoral arena has shown to be central to the political strategy of the Black liberation struggle.

V. The Motion of Black Politics and the Democratic Party

The characteristic feature of the political activity of the Black community in the electoral arena today is that, for the most part, it takes place on the terrain of the Democratic Party. The fact that the Harold Washington campaign unfolded and was fought out within the framework of Democratic Party politics is neither a local nor an accidental phenomenon. With few exceptions, the basic thrust of Black politics in the U.S. over the past 15 years has oscillated in and around the Democratic Party.

This has been true at virtually every level in the electoral arena. The 240 Black mayors in the U.S., the roughly 2,400 members of city councils and other local governing bodies, and the several hundred Black state legislators are preponderantly members of the Democratic Party. The members of the Congressional Black Caucus, who make up the only consistent progressive voting bloc in Congress and who include in their ranks the most progressive figures in national politics, are all Democrats. It is also readily apparent that Jesse Jackson's capacity to personify this upsurge of political consciousness and activity in the Black community would not have been possible were it not advanced through the mechanisms of the Democratic Party and its process for selecting a presidential candidate.

But while the facts are undeniable, it is safe to say that their full significance has not yet been grasped and appreciated by most of the left. Of course, most left forces have been astute enough at the practical level to recognize the essentially progressive thrust of the current motion of Black politics, even though it is taking place within the framework of the bourgeoisie's two-party system. One way or another, most conscious forces of the left have tried to position themselves within the flow of the progressive Black candidacies. In fact, no serious left force can afford to

do otherwise—for the alternative is isolation from the most consistent social base for progressive politics in the U.S. today.*

Even if this response has been, to a great extent, pragmatic, it signals nevertheless a degree of political maturation for the left. It was not so long ago, after all, that the supposed hallmark of radical politics was disdain for the electoral arena and contempt for all attempts to vie for influence or position within the Democratic Party.**

We cannot, however, be satisfied with such a pragmatic response. The left, communists in particular, must try to understand, first, why the Democratic Party has become a terrain of struggle for the Black

* There are, of course, some exceptions. Certain Trotskyist and semi-Trotskyist grouplets, consistent with their dogmatist legacies of seeing the class question only in its "pure" workerist form, continue to be "horrified"—to the point of abstention or opposition—at the role and influence of petit bourgeois forces in Black politics and at any process associated with the Democratic Party. This infantile left tendency also crops up among some groups, such as the African People's Socialist Party, trying to establish their influence internal to the Black community. In addition, many of the utopian reformists grouped around a formation such as the Citizens Party, whose main social base is among white petit bourgeois liberals, have argued that the present motion of Black politics—in particular, the Jesse Jackson candidacy—is indelibly compromised because it has developed on the terrain of the Democratic Party.

** The spontaneous impulse underlying this aspect of the radicalism of the '60s and early '70s is quite understandable. In the massive flow of the anti-war and civil rights movements, it was quite clear that the electoral arena in general and the Democratic Party in particular were more influenced by the mass actions taking place in society at large than by the largely circumscribed and ineffectual struggles being waged internal to the electoral system. Eugene McCarthy's spectacular success in challenging Lyndon Johnson in the early 1968 Democratic Party primaries was nothing but the pointed expression of swelling mass opposition to the Vietnam war which had been led and developed outside the normal framework of bourgeois politics. It was also readily apparent (and even openly proclaimed) that many of the first Black elected officials at the municipal level owed their elevation to the bourgeoisie's view that Black mayors and other Black officials could help cool out the insurrections which were sweeping those cities with large concentrations of Black residents. Nevertheless, the infantile generalizations made from these analyses, and which became the conventional wisdom of much of the left, were quite one-sided and, in many cases, were rooted in an incorrect assessment of the political capacities of the spontaneous movement.

Yet, many who criticized the ultra-left illusions and tactics of left politics 10-15 years ago must also be held accountable. Those who pose the electoral arena as an *alternative* to the mass movement or try to tailor the motion of the mass movement to electoral politics are no more exempt from responsibility than those who were equally one-sided in the other direction. Similarly, those who conciliated the opportunism which, especially at that time, was rife in the labor

(cont.)

liberation movement and, second, try to understand the longer range significance of this development for the maturation of the whole working class movement in the U.S. Absent such an analysis, we will not be able to appreciate fully the significance of the spontaneous motion of Black politics at this juncture of history nor the strains it provokes within the Democratic Party: the issues upon which the tensions are concentrated; the concrete manner in which they play themselves out politically; and the long term perspective on how a split in the Democratic Party could propel the U.S. working class onto a path of truly independent political activity.

A. The Split in the Working Class Played Out on the Terrain of the Democratic Party

For a variety of historical reasons, this motion of Black politics, if it is to be a serious force, must objectively express itself *in the present period* within the mechanisms of the two-party system. And not surprisingly, it has settled upon the Democratic Party as the political vehicle through which this process principally develops.*

The *fact* that the Black movement's activity in the electoral arena takes place almost exclusively within the Democratic Party is not a matter for serious debate. Rather the controversy on the left centers on how this fact is to be interpreted. For the communist movement in

movement and tried to hold the mass movement hostage to a politics acceptable to the trade union officialdom helped set the conditions which propelled many militants into a long purgatory of ultra-leftism. As Lenin pointed out in his analysis of the causes of infantile leftism in his day, "Anarchism was not infrequently a kind of penalty for the opportunist sins of the working class movement."¹⁷

* For many years, up until the time of the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, the Republican Party was the principal vehicle through which Blacks tried to influence the political process. While this phenomenon is usually simplistically described as a lingering loyalty to "the party of Lincoln," it was really a reflection of the fact that in the area of greatest Black population and most concentrated oppression, the South, it was the Democratic Party which functioned as the key political institution for the enforcement and reproduction of the Jim Crow system. Nonetheless, Black influence in the Republican Party was less than minimal; the vast majority of Blacks were completely disenfranchised and were unable to impact the direction of national or local electoral politics. But as the Democratic Party, after the 1930s, increasingly became the party through which working class politics in general attempted to assert itself, the orientation of the Black masses also shifted toward that party. Since then, this tendency has accelerated so that today, other than a few token Black politicians who provide useful symbols for the Republican Party, the dynamic of Black electoral politics revolves solely around the Democratic Party.

particular, coming out of an extended period of infantile leftism, remnant dogmatic prejudices are still widespread and usually right beneath the surface. The fact that communists might already understand that the system of racism will not be eliminated in the long run through the mechanism of bourgeois democracy, much less led by the Democratic Party, cannot prevent the spontaneous movement from pursuing such a course. As Lenin pointed out, in terms of supporting a social revolution—and nothing less will dismantle the system of racial oppression in the U.S.—“Propaganda and agitation alone are not enough for an entire class, the broad masses of the working people, those oppressed by capital, to take up such a stand. For that, the masses must have their own political experience.”¹⁸

This is especially true in a period in which the possibilities of achieving the goals of the Black liberation movement through the mechanisms of bourgeois democracy have not been fully tested, let alone exhausted. Consequently, the tendency to pursue this course will rise again and again. And it will continue to re-emerge until the Black masses, *through their own experience*, become convinced that such a course is fruitless and turn to other political forms through which to defend and advance their interests. This experience itself can prove invaluable over the long haul in the forging of independent Black political institutions and the development of a corps of Black political figures trained in the uses of power. Simultaneously it can bring a new level of political sophistication in which the complexities of tactics and the necessity of distinguishing political friend from foe become part of the everyday political life of the most active forces in Black politics. And this is precisely what is occurring.

As the spontaneous movements of the masses continue to emerge and re-emerge, they constantly seek to penetrate the political process in pursuit of their own interests. In doing so, these spontaneous movements inevitably seep through every opening in the bourgeois democratic electoral process—trying to fight their battles on whatever terrain seems to offer the possibility of practical advances. This is how and where both working class politics and Black politics have intersected, almost completely, with the Democratic Party for at least half a century.

In this regard, the noteworthy vitality and significance of the Black insurgency within the Democratic Party is that it exposes and aggravates the underlying and most fundamental class and racial contradictions within that party.

The essential defining feature of the Democratic Party, in class terms, is that it is the organized expression of the political unity between the liberal wings of the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie, on one hand, and the most bourgeoisified section of the working class—specifically the labor aristocracy represented by the organized labor movement—on the other: what is usually referred to as the “liberal/labor” alliance. This

alliance is fundamentally under the hegemony of the bourgeoisie whose wealth and whose control of the state and the main institutions of mass propaganda provide a powerful check on any tendency by the party to strike out on a course independent of the real needs of the imperialist system.

As a result of this constellation of class forces, however, the Democratic Party has become the terrain on which not only many of the conflicting interests between working class and bourgeois forces get played out, but where many of the contradictions internal to the working class itself get fought out as well. *Of these, the decisive struggle is the one internal to the working class—since it is only through the struggle against the social imperialist trend that presently dominates it that the proletariat will mature politically and become a truly class-conscious force on behalf of its own class interests. This is the cardinal point of our differences with the CPUSA and others on the left who inevitably subordinate the struggle against opportunism within the working class to the need of the labor aristocracy to speak on behalf of a unified class as it seeks to resolve its own contradictions with the bourgeoisie.*

Basically the struggle internal to the working class pits the interests of the lower, less stable mass of the proletariat against the narrow sectoral interests of the labor aristocracy who are tied to the imperialist system economically, politically, and ideologically. It also pits resistance forces in the Black community against the alliance between the accommodationist forces who have traditionally represented the Black community inside the Democratic Party and the political representatives of the labor aristocracy.

But these are not two separate struggles. Because the Black liberation movement stands at the intersection of the racial contradictions in U.S. society and the class contradictions facing the mass of the proletariat, both these struggles find their most concentrated expression in the Black insurgency within the Democratic Party.*

This is not always easy to recognize. First of all, the Black insurgency is still at a fairly early stage of its development and has, as yet, no

* In this struggle, the odds are obviously stacked against the insurgents. Not only are the opportunists in the labor movement and the opportunists in Black community politics powerful in their own right, but their “senior partners” will back them to the hilt in a showdown. In addition, they have arranged the party’s rules and regulations in such a way as to make a challenge to the status quo even more difficult. For these reasons, the Democratic Party cannot indefinitely remain the key political terrain on which this struggle gets fought out: even though, at the present stage, openly joining the struggle on that terrain is a major political advance. Nevertheless, as the Jesse Jackson campaign vividly demonstrates, the Black insurgency is not without its own leverage in this contest, since the Democratic Party needs the loyalty of the Black masses as it contends for power with its Republican rivals.

developed and self-conscious strategy of its own. As a result, this expression principally represents, as Lenin put it, "consciousness in an embryonic form."¹⁹ This consciousness appears at the present time principally as a recognition of the pressing need to make the Democratic Party more relevant and vital to the struggle of the Black community and the masses more broadly. In other words, while it appears and identifies itself first and foremost as a cross-class, anti-racist challenge centered in the Black community, its inherent class logic pushes the movement toward a politics and vision of itself as a class movement.

B. War and Racism: The Cutting-Edge Questions of Working Class Politics

The working class character of the Black insurgency in the Democratic Party is underscored by its political content, expressed primarily by the fact that this is the only force internal to the Democratic Party which has emblazoned on its banners consistent opposition to war and racism.

Consistent opposition to U.S. imperialist aggression, intervention and counter-revolution elsewhere in the world must be a centerpiece of working class politics in the U.S. Absent such a stand, there can be no independent working class politics worthy of the name. All else, whether active support to the imperialist counter-offensive or passive acquiescence in it, is nothing but class collaboration.

In this area, one of the basic thrusts of the Black insurgency inside the Democratic Party has been to pose again and again the working class demand for an end to U.S. aggression abroad. This phenomenon has been seen many times over the last few decades around every major foreign policy issue. Most recently, after the invasion of Grenada, when Reagan's gunboat diplomacy and demagogic rhetoric effectively created a jingoistic national consensus favoring the intervention, the bulk of the Democratic Party liberals who had initially voiced hesitations about the President's actions went scurrying for cover. In Congress, it was conspicuously only members of the Congressional Black Caucus who refused to knuckle under, while Jesse Jackson was the only presidential hopeful who spoke at the November 12 mass demonstration protesting the invasion. A similar pattern has emerged around Central America, where the Democratic opposition has done little more than issue faint-hearted demurrers that perhaps Reagan's threats were doing the imperialist system more harm than good. Meanwhile, those political figures most closely identified with the new motion of Black politics have been unequivocal in opposing support for the U.S.-financed Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries and equally opposed to support for the fascist regime in El Salvador.

And while establishment Democrats were trying to find the courage to

register concern with Reagan's policy of intervention in Lebanon—pegging their opposition principally at the level of fear for the safety of the U.S. Marines stationed in Beirut—Jesse Jackson dramatically challenged that policy with his trip to Damascus, the "enemy" capital. While Jackson has been given credit for his individual boldness and initiative, the fact is that no other Democratic presidential candidate could have staked out a political position sufficiently independent of the U.S.-Zionist axis either to risk such a trip or have it welcomed by the Syrians.*

No, the political essence of the matter is not one of individual courage (although this cannot be completely discounted). The anti-interventionist assumptions that stand center stage in Black politics reflect the fundamental conditions and sentiments of the Black community. Objectively, Black America has the least material basis to support or defend "the empire": the imperial privileges that trickle down to the Black ghetto are negligible; the war budget to defend the empire cuts deeply into desperately needed social services; and as soon as the imperial wars bog down in defeat the frontline cannon fodder is overwhelmingly Black youth. In addition, there is a fairly widespread recognition and sympathy among Blacks that since World War II every act of U.S. aggression has been directed against people of color.**

Needless to say, the Black insurgency within the Democratic Party also serves to continually refocus the struggle against racism. In fact, the active Black membership inside the Democratic Party is the most stable social base for scrutinizing the program and practice of the Democratic Party on this burning issue.

Presently, the most obvious role of Black pressure is to toughen up the Democratic Party's opposition to Reagan's largely racist assault on the working class. However, the fact of the matter is that quite a substantial section of the Democratic Party vacillates in the face of Reagan's "patriotic" war drive and is prepared to live with some "belt tightening," especially if it is mainly at the expense of Blacks and other minorities in terms of unemployment, cuts in social services, etc.

* Almost lost in the publicity barrage attendant on the trip to Syria was the fact that Jacqueline Jackson, the candidate's wife, was simultaneously on a visit to Nicaragua in which she expressed sentiments of friendship and support for the Sandinista government.

** The anti-imperialist trend in Black politics is of long standing. Even in the McCarthyite '50s, when the communists were effectively isolated from their former mass trade union constituency, figures like Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois enjoyed a base of support in the Black community for anti-imperialist politics. In the '60s, figures, like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, who emerged out of the spontaneous Black liberation movement likewise embraced a broader politics which placed them in opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam and other expressions of imperialist policy.

In addition, the Democratic Party, taken as a whole, has shown a willingness to do little more than voice feeble opposition to the "white rights" movement in the country and the resulting legal and policy reversals by the government of the gains won during the civil rights era. From the *Bakke* decision to the crippling of the Civil Rights Commission, it has consistently been the Black section of the party that has protested the loudest and pressed the hardest for the Democratic Party to put up some kind of serious and sustained opposition.

One need not look very far for the source of the Democratic Party's inconsistent opposition to racism. Contrary to a carefully cultivated liberal myth, not all white racists are Republicans. In fact, a substantial section of the Democratic Party is very much a part of the country's "white backlash"—and it functions as a conscious, organized, and powerful white supremacist block internal to the Democratic Party structure, right from the local precincts to the National Executive Committee. These racist "loyal Democrats" hail from the lily-white unions, from the "solidly Democratic"—and solidly racist—white neighborhoods stretching from Boston to Los Angeles, and from the South, where sections of the Democratic Party remain bulwarks for Jim Crow. Democrats of this type and with such a social base thoroughly permeate both the ranks and the functionaries of the party.

In short, there is a substantial social base for racism internal to the Democratic Party that serves to *qualitatively* compromise the anti-racist character of its political program. Even the most "darling white liberals" cannot escape the powerful pull exerted on the Democratic Party by these forces (and by their racist politics) who, in many ways, comprise the party's backbone—thus leaving the Black section of the party as its most consistent and determined anti-racist bloc.

C. The Black Insurgency Emerges

The social conditions for a Black insurgency within the Democratic Party have existed for a long time.* The party's "integration" of Blacks into its political structure has historically paralleled the way in which Blacks have been integrated into the working class—that is, on a thoroughly racist basis which, by and large, took the form of permitting selected Black politicians to manage the Black community on behalf of the bourgeoisie. With the Democratic Party a willing prisoner to its racist strongholds and with most of the Black elected officials either unwilling or unable to surpass the limitations imposed on them, the Black masses have grown increasingly alienated from the party. While Black

* One of its first expressions was the challenge posed in 1964 by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the Jim Crow delegation representing Mississippi at the Democratic Party convention. Their challenge failed, but it planted the seeds for future struggles.

voters, considering the alternative, dutifully and overwhelmingly supported Democratic presidential candidates, they did so with little enthusiasm; and very large numbers did not bother to register or vote at all.

Sooner or later, this situation was bound to give rise to a new motion in Black community politics, concretized in the candidacies of a new type of Black political figure who would seek to tap the electoral potential of this great alienated mass. This tendency was undoubtedly accelerated by the blatantly racist character of the Reagan administration's attack on the working class and by its open proclamation of a politics based on war and white supremacy. Even more to the point, however, it was provoked by the craven complicity of much of the Democratic Party in the Reaganite program and the narrow, sectoral response of the labor aristocracy whose principal point of reference remained the defense of its own privileged status in the class structure.

Certainly these broad social conditions helped to crystallize the particular contradictions which had been developing internal to the Democratic Party in Chicago. Indeed, this is why the Harold Washington campaign took on a *national* significance. For the Black insurgency represented by the Washington campaign, which was as much a move to break the racist hold on the Democratic Party machine as it was to challenge Chicago's system of racial privilege and segregation, was itself a concentrated expression of the rising strains in Black community politics throughout the country.

In this sense, the line of development from the Washington campaign to the Jesse Jackson candidacy is unmistakable. Chicago became the living proof that a vast reservoir of support and enthusiasm was ready for a new politics and strategy that held out the promise of strengthening the position of the Black masses in the electoral arena. It is precisely this promise that has invigorated the Jackson campaign, which challenges the nominal anti-racist politics of liberal bourgeois figures and trade union leaders at the center of the Democratic Party as being inadequate, out of touch, and unresponsive to the real needs of the Black masses and other minorities.

In fact, nowhere are the underlying political tensions inside the Democratic Party more graphically personified than by contrasting the candidacies of Walter Mondale and Jesse Jackson. Clearly Mondale is the choice of the traditional liberal/labor alliance at the center of the Democratic Party (and the program that implies)—while Jesse Jackson represents the left-wing insurgency centered in the more militant Black section of the party and flanked by the fledgling "rainbow coalition."*

* Gary Hart's late-blooming candidacy is peripheral to this contradiction, which is the main reason why the Black vote in the Democratic primaries and caucuses has been divided between Jackson and Mondale.

Jackson has been quite explicit in his charge that Mondale's political perspective does not speak to the real needs and interests of the masses who have been the traditional voting base of the Democratic Party. Even Jackson's provocative campaign slogan "Our Time Has Come!" implies the new political aggressiveness which this bloc of the "disadvantaged" represents.

The liberal bourgeoisie, fully cognizant of the overwhelmingly working class social base of the Democratic Party, has pushed its "labor lieutenants" to the forefront to do battle with the "young Turk," Jackson. Consequently, much of the actual substance of the political split—in terms of blocking and maneuvering—is concretely manifesting itself as a polarization between the organized labor movement, on one hand, and the Black liberation struggle on the other.* Indeed, the Jackson candidacy is the first significant attempt by political forces essentially representing the lower strata of the working class to challenge the traditional political monopoly enjoyed by the reactionary labor aristocracy within the Democratic Party.**

No one can seriously expect that this first major attempt to undermine the labor aristocracy's pre-eminent position within the Democratic Party will succeed. Not only are the trade union establishment and party hierarchy powerful and highly motivated opponents, but there is also still much that is ambiguous and unstable about the Black insurgency itself.

* The early endorsement of Mondale by the AFL-CIO's Executive Committee was not able to discourage Jackson's candidacy. Subsequently, the "moderate" center of the organized labor movement has attempted to intimidate and muscle up on any forces contemplating a "breakaway" movement for Jackson within the trade union movement. They have gone to the extent of demagogically appealing for "labor unity against Reagan," while attempting to depict Mondale as a "credentialed" trade unionist as opposed to Jackson who is pictured as an "anti-labor maverick." Of course, it is the positioned social democrats within the labor movement, in particular Blacks, who are most seriously compromised by the knuckling under to this blatantly racist and reactionary pressure exerted by Kirkland and his ilk—which goes to prove once again that some of the greatest crimes against the working class have been committed under the guise of upholding the "unity of the working class."

** There have been other significant challenges from the left within the Democratic Party, notably the movements built around Henry Wallace in 1948 and Eugene McCarthy in 1968, as well as the McGovern candidacy in 1972. But none of these can be said to have emanated from the political motion of the lower strata of the working class. To its credit, the Wallace candidacy tried to tap this potential, but to little avail, since this occurred before the modern coalescence of the Black liberation movement as a force with political leverage. The Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern candidacies, on the other hand, were significant as attempts to focus the split within the ruling class over the Vietnam war into a viable bid for political office.

Of particular concern are the Black accommodationist forces, who, in time-honored fashion, continually attempt to pull the Black masses back into their traditional subordinate relationship with the political representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie and the labor aristocracy crystallized in the Democratic Party establishment. These are the forces who pragmatically argued that Jackson's independent candidacy would end up benefiting John Glenn(!) and who invariably counsel Black mayoral candidates like Harold Washington to downplay their frontal assault on racism, warning against any "unnecessary racial polarization"—at the very time when every agent of white supremacy, from the White House to the KKK, is doing nothing else but polarizing along racial lines.

Despite this stubborn backward pull, the overriding fact remains that all the political forces in Black politics are already being held accountable to a more advanced standard around the crucial questions of war and racism. And this in itself is a development of utmost importance—the absolutely necessary preparation for focusing the attention of the broader working class movement on these two fundamental political issues.

However, it is safe to say that qualitatively the Black insurgency within the Democratic Party is not yet fully conscious of what its effort represents. Its political program and strategy remain theoretically undeveloped, incomplete, and fragmented. As a result, this movement has not yet developed sufficiently consolidated organizational expressions—the ongoing institutions, the finances, the propaganda organs, the networks of experienced office holders and tested cadre—which will be the indispensable mechanisms of a truly *independent* working class political trend, and which can be developed and consolidated only with the utmost consciousness.

Indeed, it is not even a settled matter whether or not the Jesse Jackson candidacy itself will mature into a more permanent political expression of the interests of Blacks and the rest of the lower strata of the working class. What gives the Jackson campaign its historical significance—over and above its immediate political impact on the 1984 elections—is precisely its potential to be a milestone in the development of such a movement.* Whether Jackson throws his support to the party nominee after the Democratic Party convention (and this is the most likely course given the overriding concern with defeating Reagan) is not, in this sense,

* We speak here, of course, not of a process which is dependent on Jackson personally, but rather of the underlying historical force behind his candidacy, which has made him a spokesperson for the most politically aware sectors of the lower strata of the working class. While as an individual, Jackson is catalyst in this relationship, he is objectively impacted and molded politically by the needs and demands of this section of the masses—and will continue to be so as long as he individually strives to maintain this basic relationship.

a critical question. More important is whether his campaign will serve to identify a distinct and coherent political program for the left wing of the Democratic Party and help bring into being the ongoing organizational forms for this new political trend to sustain itself and grow in the face of what is bound to be a determined post-convention effort to stamp it out.

But even if Jackson falters and is unable personally to be this historical instrument, this sector of the masses is bound to find new opportunities and new spokespeople to struggle for and articulate its own distinct political platform within the Democratic Party. The political awakening now taking place in the Black community in particular cannot be snuffed out. It is constantly produced and reproduced quite spontaneously by capital's all-sided attack on the Black community and the lower strata of the working class more generally. Consequently, the need to fight back is strong and will insist on finding a political voice and will keep giving rise to political figures attempting to represent it.

D. An Independent Working Class Party

Ultimately one measure of the historical significance of the present Black insurgency inside the Democratic Party will be determined by the role it plays in forging an independent mass working class party.

The need for such a party is fairly obvious to every force on the left. Lacking such a party whose standard—however imperfectly formulated or realized—is the defense of the *distinct* class interests of the working class and the projection of a political program suited to that purpose, working class electoral politics in this country will continue to have an inherent limitation and cannot mature beyond the parameters set by the bourgeoisie in its two-party system. Corralled within the Democratic Party, in particular, the U.S. working class will objectively remain more closely tied to the bourgeoisie, politically and ideologically, than probably any other working class on earth.

For decades, the communists in particular have emphasized the strategic importance of a mass independent working class party. But despite numerous appeals to the workers to break with the bourgeois two-party system, our engineering efforts have failed thus far to create a truly mass, alternative political form.*

* Perhaps the closest the U.S. working class ever came to having its own party was the Socialist Party of Eugene Debs. While that party played a relatively advanced role in the two decades or so at the beginning of the twentieth century when it enjoyed its greatest influence, it was never able qualitatively to penetrate the arena of electoral politics in any permanent fashion. Of course, the formation, in a concrete historical sense, of such a mass working class party rests principally on objective conditions and the spontaneous maturation of the class struggle and
(cont.)

However, the obstacles facing the left's attempts to advance this process even now do not lie *solely* in the obvious realm of objective conditions, practical measures, concrete alliances, tactical compromises, etc.—but in the realm of *theory* as well.

By and large the theoretical framework for such a party is seriously flawed and incomplete. Major points are glossed over pragmatically, the essential political substance of such a party remains unclear, the path of development is not thoroughly sketched out, its possible concrete sub-stages, preconditions, and vehicles are not identified, etc. To flesh out this conception will require a serious and sustained theoretical discussion and debate on the left, an activity which, unfortunately, our movement has a well-deserved reputation for neglecting. However, the price of neglecting the theoretical work will be ultimately paid in the practical realm in terms of wasted and unfocused activity, mechanical schemes, etc.

The major theoretical problem revolves around the failure to recognize the inherent antagonistic contradiction arising out of the split in the working class. A precondition for the development of a mass working class political party in the U.S., independent from the bourgeois parties, is the maturation of the programmatic contradiction between the labor aristocracy and the lower strata of the working class—which at a certain stage of its development must take the form of a polarization and ultimately a split within the Democratic Party.

Our movement will continue to harbor all manner of illusions and pursue a variety of political will-o'-the-wisp schemes—until it comes to terms with the fact that the working class gives rise to two opposing political motions. And without a highly conscious, concerted, and sustained push in the opposite direction, the opportunist trend is bound to dominate the working class movement; for at the level of the spontaneous movement, bourgeois property relations appear “natural” to the mass of workers themselves and the capitalist system seems eternal. In

the working class movement. In addition, some measure of programmatic unity and cooperation between the social democratic and communist trends is needed in order to constitute the cadre framework for such a mass party. Given the fact that U.S. imperialism was a growing, vibrant (and even hegemonic) force throughout most of the twentieth century, it is questionable whether objective conditions have yet been ripe for such a spontaneous development of the working class movement or favorable for that level of maturation of either the social democratic or communist trends. Looking into the closing decades of the twentieth century, however, with the all-sided and irreversible crisis of U.S. imperialism rapidly deepening, the situation is quite different. It is possible to anticipate that the question of a mass independent working class party may, in the not too distant future, become a practical question before both the working class and the left.

addition, the bourgeoisie itself will find a thousand and one ways to encourage, subsidize, and protect this opportunist trend, up to and including incorporating it central to the state apparatus.

Therefore, the dialectical motion toward independent working class politics will come about, and can only come about, not just as a movement in opposition to the bourgeoisie; more precisely, *it will come about as a movement in opposition to opportunism within the working class itself.* (This, of course, was one of Lenin's principal contributions to the theory of proletarian revolution.)

Failing to grasp this crucial point, a significant section of the left continues to wait—in vain, we believe—for the trade union movement to lead a mass breakaway from the Democratic Party, bringing into being a new working class formation that would ultimately polarize the bourgeois political arena between the bourgeois parties, on the one hand, and a labor party, on the other. However, we would argue that so long as the trade union movement remains dominated by the forces representing the sectoral interests of the overwhelmingly white, most privileged sectors of the working class and is sitting pretty at the very center of the Democratic Party, there is no political basis to expect the organized labor movement to challenge the fundamental bourgeois structure of the present two-party system. Whatever differences there have been in the past within the alliance between the liberal bourgeoisie and the labor aristocracy, these can continue to be mediated through and settled within the confines of Democratic Party politics.*

We cannot emphasize this point too strongly. It is the central theoretical point in any attempt to analyze the trajectory of the spontaneous working class movement and, therefore, absolutely crucial if communists (and the left more generally) are to be able to influence and guide that process along its most politically productive path. Any notion of a homogeneous, "unified" trade union movement in an imperialist country such as ours can be nothing but a trade union movement dominated by opportunism. A political clash of programs, leading essentially to an organized split in the labor movement between the right and left wings is a *necessary precondition* before the *long range* interests of the *whole* proletariat can gain a substantial footing and voice within the trade union movement. For it is only by directly challenging the opportunist politics of the labor aristocracy—most concentrated in that stratum's defense of imperialism and racism—that a consistent working class political trend truly independent of the compulsions of capital can possibly emerge. *All attempts to facilitate the development of*

* Occasional pronouncements by one or another trade union leader expressing interest in the formation of a labor party have rarely, if ever, been more than devices used to strengthen the bargaining power of organized labor inside the Democratic Party.

independent working class politics which fail to take into account the existing split in the working class and then base themselves on it are doomed to failure. On the other hand, attempts to consolidate the left wing of the labor movement consciously around the split will be fought out not only in the unions, but also in the minority communities and, at least in the initial stages, within the Democratic Party itself.

E. The Split in the Democratic Party

The conception of a mass independent working class party in the U.S. emerging out of a split in the Democratic Party is itself not a new one. Merely grasping this point, however, represents a tremendous political advance for the left, since it helps put to rest all idealist, romantic, and a-historic visions of such a party arising directly out of the spontaneous movement or—even more illusory—out of some theoretical projection of the communists.

Nevertheless, this materialist advance in the left's understanding will remain basically flawed until our movement sets to rest two fairly widespread notions concerning the forces in the spontaneous movement most likely to lead the breakaway from bourgeois politics. First, the "unified" organized labor movement will *not* lead the working class breakaway from the Democratic Party because a precondition for that breakaway will have to be an all-sided split in the labor movement itself—a split qualitatively more mature than it is at present. And it will be the left wing of that split which will be instrumental (and possibly crucial) to the launching of a truly independent motion of the working class in the electoral arena. Second, the left wing of the trade union movement will *not* be the *only expression*—and may not be even the most advanced expression—of the attempts by the mass of the working class to assert its distinct interests within the Democratic Party.

This, of course, brings us back to a closer examination of the long term implications of the present Black insurgency within the Democratic Party. As we have already pointed out, the Black insurgency inside the Democratic Party essentially concentrates the class and racial contradictions in the whole of U.S. society. As such, Black politics, especially as it moves more forcefully into the electoral arena, objectively asserts the interests of the mass of the working class which it is already beginning to try to rally around itself. Consequently, the main thrust of the Black challenge to the existing power relations within the Democratic Party is directed toward the "labor lieutenants of capital" who represent the narrow interests of the labor aristocracy and have cemented their alliance with imperialism and the liberal bourgeoisie—but nonetheless insist upon speaking on behalf of the *entire* working class.

In the long run, this struggle is bound to contribute much in focusing the political need for a split in the trade union movement itself. For a

considerable period of time, however, the surface appearance of the fight within the Democratic Party could very well be the Black liberation movement locking horns with the "unified" labor movement. Shackled with a simplistic theoretical framework that equates the labor movement with the working class, and a superficial class analysis that refuses to take account of the stratifications and antagonisms internal to the U.S. working class—much of the U.S. left will be extremely disoriented and compromised in the course of such a struggle.

The specific nature of this process is not, any longer, a matter of theoretical speculation. In particular, both the Harold Washington campaign and the Jesse Jackson campaign have shown that the split in the Democratic Party is proceeding precisely along these lines.

We have already seen how this split unfolded and matured in the course of the Harold Washington campaign. But in the post-election period this split has persisted, deepened, and taken new forms. Once again it is explicitly back on the terrain of the Democratic Party, only now the split is expressed in the contention between the mayor's office, occupied by Washington, and the Chicago City Council which is controlled by a reactionary bloc of old machine Democrats led by Cook County Democratic Party Chairman Edward "Fast Eddie" Vrdolyak. The ensuing "council wars," which have dominated Chicago politics ever since Washington's victory, have principally swirled around Washington's attempt to reform and overhaul Chicago's notoriously racist patronage system by eliminating the number of posts filled on a political basis and setting out on a path of altering the disproportionately white racial composition of the city government's work force. The struggle has also focused around budgetary questions and the attempt by Vrdolyak to invest the City Council with a power and authority without precedent in Chicago politics in order to block Washington.

This ongoing struggle has already brought into being two Democratic Party organizations in Chicago, a "reform party" headed by Washington and a "conservative party" headed by Vrdolyak. And Vrdolyak, while essentially representing the interests of capital, is himself not from the bourgeoisie, but invokes and speaks with working class credentials as good as anyone else's. Most importantly, Vrdolyak speaks for a social base internal to the working class, the more stable, white, and politically backward section in particular.*

A similar tension frames Jesse Jackson's campaign for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, although clearly this contradic-

* A useful profile of post-election Chicago politics is to be found in David Moberg's "Man Who Wants to Break the Mold," in *Chicago Magazine*, October, 1983. Also see a report on the first nine months of Washington's term by Bruce Sato and Robert Sellers in *Frontline*, Jan. 23, 1984.

tion has not yet matured at the national level to the same extent that it has in a number of local areas where Blacks are highly concentrated.

Thus Jackson, responding to a question in the recent debate between Democratic Party candidates prior to the New Hampshire primary on whether he would support the ultimate nominee of the party, stated:

"We are in the Democratic primaries. And there are some Democratic Party struggles at this point wherein the aristocracy or the old wineskins must make room for the new wine; that is, the new majority of this party. Twenty years ago Blacks, Hispanics, teen-agers didn't have the right to vote. Women didn't have much motivation and now 20 years later the party in San Francisco* will be 50% female, 30% Black, Hispanic, Asian, young, and poor. So the party leaders ultimately must make room for the new members. If room is made, the party will expand and be strong. If the leadership, in fact, tightens up, it will split the party. I hope we expand."

Of course, Jackson's thinly veiled threat of a split in the Democratic Party is, at this stage, more an attempt to exercise leverage within the party than a serious motion toward a breakaway. But what can be said with absolute certainty is that this type of challenge is bound to reassert itself again and again because it is impossible for a party founded on the common interest of the liberal bourgeoisie and the labor aristocracy in defending the interlocking systems of imperialism and racism to "expand" toward the lower strata of the working class in such a way as to satisfy their pressing needs.

There can and probably will be token concessions in the immediate years ahead to Blacks and other minorities within the Democratic Party in the form of job offers to individual personalities, some high-sounding rhetoric, and even some ameliorating reforms. But the entire logic and history of the labor aristocracy is that it has always cut a deal with the bourgeoisie at the expense of the lower strata of the working class—and there is absolutely no basis for believing that this dynamic will change in the foreseeable future. In this sense, a split in the Democratic Party—as one of the main (though not only) reflections of the broader split in the working class—is an inevitable political development. And such a split will most likely be one of the indispensable conditions for unleashing the political force necessary to launch an independent working class party of any truly mass quality.**

* At the Democratic Party national convention.

** Despite the illusions fostered by social democracy, it is highly unlikely that the "liberal/labor" alliance will permit the Democratic Party to be taken away from them, so that the formation of an independent mass working class party in the U.S. is more likely to emerge as the result of a split from the Democratic Party.

(cont.)

At this stage it would be foolhardy and mechanical to attempt to engineer this split organizationally. It can only come about after a sustained political polarization—concentrated in a clash of programs, one representing the interests of the lower strata of the working class, the other one representing the interests of the alliance of the liberal bourgeoisie and the labor aristocracy. In fact, this *political polarization* of the Democratic Party is already brewing and is manifesting itself, quite independently of the efforts of communists, around the two central questions that objectively concentrate the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the working class as a whole, and are the axis upon which the split within the working class also manifests itself—war and racism.

Today, it is unmistakably the political motion emanating from the Black community that most consistently sets the advanced political pole within the Democratic Party against war and racism. As a result, it holds out the best political possibility for unleashing, not only the revolutionary potential of the Black masses, but of the non-aristocratic working class mass as a whole. Widespread failure to recognize this on the left—or to fully grasp its significance—is due to the persistent racist blindspot which has long been a characteristic of the U.S. socialist movement and continues to prevent many from recognizing advanced political motion for the whole working class when labor in its “Black skin” leads it.

VII. Conclusion

“The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer.

“They merely express, in general terms, actual relations, springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes. . . .”²⁰

Neither revolutionary theory, nor (much less) revolutionary practice are the sole preserve of communists. However, the distinguishing role of communists—in the broad historical sense—is to strive to bring the science of historical and dialectical materialism to bear on the class struggle, illuminating in the process the underlying social relations and contradictions from which the concrete political struggles stem. Correct revolutionary theory eventually becomes the possession of the broader

Nevertheless, the former path cannot be ruled out in principle. While not strictly analogous, the struggle within the British Labor Party should be noted in this respect. In that struggle, left forces were able to win dominant influence in the party, leading the *right wing* to split the party. However, the essential point remains that even in the case of such an unlikelihood, the “Democratic Party” would be a *qualitatively* new party.

working class and revolutionary movements, adds new quality to the spontaneous struggle, and becomes a history making material force. If the communists prove successful, throughout the twists and turns of the class struggle, in the development and refinement of revolutionary theory, it will sooner than later become widely recognized by the non-communist masses—for many willingly and for some grudgingly. This is the essential component of the communist *vanguard relationship* to the working class struggle. However, if the communist movement neglects its theoretical work and one-sidedly reduces its role to simply being the “most resolute fighters” of the working class—then what often results is a profound distortion of the vanguard role of Marxism-Leninism.

Unfortunately the U.S. communist movement taken as a whole has sorely neglected its theoretical tasks for quite some time now. In fact, much of the theoretical field has been surrendered to the Marxist “academy” and social democracy (which is an extensively overlapping set). Due to the infantile leftism associated with the Maoism of the '70s and the deep-seated pragmatism of the CPUSA—the broader left does not consider the “Leninist movement” a serious intellectual force, much less a reference point for theoretical clarity and direction. As a result, much of the communists’ vanguard relation to the working class struggle has been vulgarized to the level of superior organizing skills, at best, or petty sectarian maneuvering, at worst. Of course, this has only served to fuel the pervasive and insidious anti-communism that riddles the U.S. left today.

The rectification of this situation facing the U.S. communist movement will be a difficult and painstaking task and the principal substance of our party building efforts spanning many years. It will require substantially raising the theoretical level and standards of the U.S. communist movement in the course of criticizing the theoretical inadequacies and opportunist distortions that presently characterize the dominant general line of our movement. Although this process will undoubtedly encompass, and be advanced by, the participation of many “independent” Marxist-Leninists—in the main it will increasingly be framed by the unity/struggle relationship and line polemic between the main organized force in the communist movement, the CPUSA, and the trend centered by the Line of March.

Therefore, while we are hopeful that the theoretical and political analysis advanced in this article will prove thought-provoking and helpful to many non-communists on the broader left, it is directed first and foremost to the Marxist-Leninists as part of this communist rectification effort. In our opinion the dominant class analysis, program, and strategy of U.S. communists remain shallow and seriously flawed in parts. Of particular importance is the imprecise and muddled analysis of the nature of racial oppression in the U.S., especially Black oppression, and its intersection with the system of class oppression.

These underlying theoretical issues get concentrated in the profoundly concrete political question—what is the role of the Black liberation struggle in forging the broader working class movement? So long as our revolutionary theory on this matter remains wanting, our practical intervention in this key arena of the class struggle will also remain relatively weak, ineffectual, and inconsistent.

Having said this, the main political points of this extended analysis can be summarized as follows:

The fact that the *whole* U.S. working class stands in a common relationship of exploitation to the U.S. bourgeoisie in no way makes it a *homogeneous* class. The stratification and resulting differences in the social conditions of life give rise to vastly different world outlooks as well as contending, and often antagonistic, politics. Within the U.S. working class there is a substantial social base for opportunism—in particular for racist and patriotic, pro-imperialist politics. This social base resides primarily (but not only) in the upper, privileged strata of the proletariat bribed by imperialism. And although the size of the labor aristocracy expands and contracts according to the economic cycles and political shifts of the imperialist system, its principal political expressions, in the form of a social-imperialist trend and a labor wing of the cross-class white united front, will remain relatively *permanent features* of the U.S. proletariat right up through the revolutionary struggle for power. And even beyond that, into the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat (although hopefully for a relatively brief period)—the political expressions of the most reactionary and racist section of the working class will have to be suppressed, at times by force.

An understanding of this reality must inform and be central to the class analysis, program, and strategy for socialist revolution in the U.S. All attempts to conceptualize the core of the strategic revolutionary formation as being the *unified and homogeneous* working class is an exercise in theoretical obscurantism that serves to hide the material and historical reality of a fundamental split within the working class. The *whole* working class will *not* eventually arrive at an anti-imperialist and anti-racist consciousness. Quite the contrary, this class has in the past, and will continue to split time and again precisely on the two cutting edge issues of war and racism.

The labor aristocracy will arrive, quite spontaneously, at a thoroughly patriotic and racist set of politics and will marshal its influence and positioning within the trade union movement and, at this stage, in the Democratic Party to extend its reactionary world view and program deep within the mass of lower strata workers. In contrast, a truly revolutionary wing of the U.S. working class movement can emerge and be tested only through the most consistent and determined struggle against opportunism internal to the working class—in particular opposition to those who support the intertwining systems of imperialism and racism. The

natural social base for this leftward political motion is the unprotected mass of workers—many of whom remain *outside* the organized labor movement and intersect extensively with the minority communities.

The *historically concrete* role of the spontaneous Black liberation struggle in forging such a revolutionary formation within the U.S. working class cannot be grasped precisely without theoretically unraveling the complex overlay and intersection of racism with the class structure of U.S. society. The system of white supremacy is essentially a system of *racial oppression*—not of class oppression. To theoretically collapse these two together in a mechanical fashion creates confusion and prevents an accurate explanation of the complex social reality of racism. On the other hand, it is equally true that the pervasiveness and persistence of the system of racism throughout U.S. history cannot be explained apart from the compulsions of the dominant property relations of capital. Concretely, at every key juncture of the development of U.S. capitalism, the system of Black oppression has been *reinforced* and adjusted to meet the changing needs and conditions of U.S. capital.

In the twentieth century, racism has become the *principal* means by which imperialism stratifies the U.S. working class between the bribed and protect “bourgeoisified” strata and the lower strata—resulting in an almost completely white labor aristocracy and a disproportionately minority lower strata and lumpen underclass. Consequently, while being fundamentally orchestrated by the needs of capital, the defense of white privilege has a strong material basis *internal* to the working class itself. As a result, racism has become a centerpiece (along with patriotism) of the opportunist trend within the U.S. working class movement.

Given all of this, it should come as no surprise to the left that the Black liberation struggle today has emerged as the most advanced political expression of the interests of the lower strata mass of the working class. When it speaks *for itself*, it spontaneously articulates at the same time the objective needs and interests of the working class *as a whole*. And in the struggle for Black equality it confronts not only the bourgeoisie, but also the opportunist trend within the working class itself. As the Black liberation movement matures, it has entered the electoral arena and continues to become an increasingly serious force nationwide. This development is beginning to alter the political landscape substantially—and at the present stage of the working class movement, the main drama is being played out through and within the Democratic Party.

The natural impulse of the motion of Black politics is conspicuously towards opposition to all forms of racism and imperialist war and aggression, to mobilize its own forces as well as determine its friends and allies. To the extent this spontaneous process can become transformed through a more conscious and coherent program and strategy—it holds out great promise—promise of setting the main political axis for

distinguishing progressives from reactionaries in the whole society, as well as polarizing the working class movement more sharply on the key issues of war and racism. Such a polarization is key to identifying the truly class-conscious workers, and in particular to beginning to break up the white united front within the class by isolating the labor aristocracy. In short, it is only through such a dialectic that the working class struggle in the U.S. can reach a new level, politically and ideologically, in the decades ahead.

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