A black and white illustration of a hand holding a folded letter. The letter is held by the thumb and index finger, with the rest of the hand visible. The letter is white and has the title 'A Letter to American Negroes' written on it in a cursive, handwritten style. The background is a dark, textured surface.

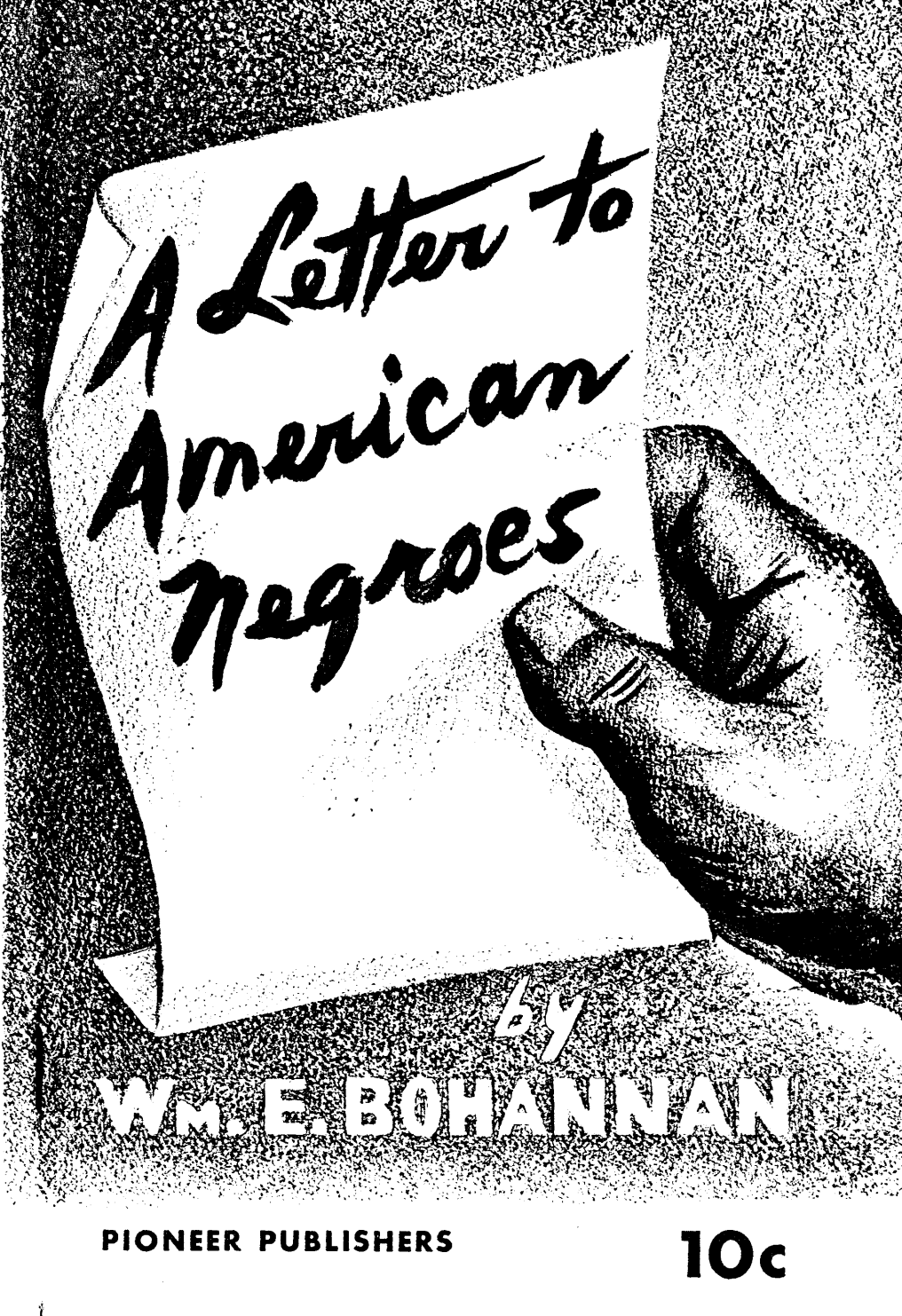
*A Letter to
American
Negroes*

by

W. M. E. BOHANNAN

PIONEER PUBLISHERS

10c

A high-contrast, black and white illustration of a hand holding a piece of paper. The paper is tilted and has the title 'A Letter to American Negroes' written in a cursive, handwritten style. The hand is shown from the side, with the thumb and index finger gripping the edge of the paper. The background is a dark, textured surface.

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Published for the

SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

by

PIONEER



PUBLISHERS

116 University Place

New York 3, N. Y.

September, 1948

About the Author



William E. Bohannon, author of this pamphlet, was born 35 years ago in Savannah, Georgia, and moved with his family to Newark, N. J., when he was five years old. He had to quit school at the age of 16 to help provide for his younger brothers. Since then, except when he was unemployed, he has earned his living as a worker, playing a prominent role as a member or officer in both CIO and AFL unions.

He is a member of the executive board of the Newark branch of the NAACP and was one of the organizers of the Newark unit of the March on Washington Movement. Looking for an alternative to the Jim Crow capitalist system, he joined the Socialist Workers Party in 1939.

In 1941 he was a candidate for the Newark City Commission and in 1946 he made his first campaign for Congress. In 1947, as candidate for delegate to the New Jersey Constitutional Convention, he received 5 per cent of the votes cast in Essex County. He is the SWP candidate for Congressman from the 11th District in New Jersey in the 1948 campaign.

I wish to thank George Breitman, Socialist Workers Party candidate for U. S. Senate from New Jersey, for the encouragement and help he gave me in preparing this pamphlet.

—William E. Bohannon

Set up, Printed and Bound by Union Labor

A Letter to American Negroes

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

In recent years there have been hundreds of books and articles describing the horrible Jim Crow conditions under which we are forced to live in this country. I don't intend to repeat those descriptions here. There is no need for me to do so when we are violently reminded about the Jim Crow system every time we turn around. Instead, I am going to discuss the reason for these conditions and the program to abolish them.

Jim Crow is not a "natural" or "accidental" evil that grew up by itself, alone and without help. It had to be hatched, it had to be nursed, it had to be trained to carry out the dirty job it was intended for. All this was done by capitalism, the profit system, because it is economically and politically profitable to the employers to divide the white and colored workers so that they will be suspicious of each other and fight among themselves instead of uniting to fight against the employers who exploit both.

Lynch-law, discrimination and segregation are products of capitalism — just like unemployment, high prices and war — and to get rid of them we have to get rid of capitalism itself.

I know that many Negroes have not yet reached this conclusion about the need to abolish capitalism. But more and more of us, on the basis of our own experiences, are beginning to see through the lies that the capitalists spread about the nature of their system.

They can no longer fool us into believing that the government is impartial when we can see it promoting and upholding Jim Crowism in all parts of the world. They cannot convince us now that their wars are fought for democracy when they denied us the most elementary democratic rights even in the armed forces during the first two world wars and continue to deny them to us while they are preparing a third. And least of all can they keep us tied to the two-party system when before our very eyes both of the major parties are working together like a team in Congress to prevent the passage of any legislation in our interest.

Talk is cheap and promises are not worth more than a dime a dozen, especially in election years when everybody is competing for votes. We know that now, and we know also that talk must be compared with action and promises must be taken with a pound of salt.

Politics and Promises

The Democratic and Republican politicians have proved over and over again that they are long on promises and short on performance. Year after year they pledged that they would pass anti-lynching, anti-poll tax and FEPC bills, but every time they came into office they sold us down the river.

In fact, there is only one promise concerning the Negro people that they have fully carried out during the last 72 years. That was the promise they made each other in 1876 to cooperate in shackling the newly-emancipated Negroes with the chains of second-class citizenship.

That is why so many Negroes, like so many whites, are looking for a new party this year. The question is: What kind of party? What kind of party will satisfy our needs and our aspirations for equality? To find the answer, we should first study some aspects of our past history and of the present society in which we live.

We Negroes have contributed more than our share of sweat and blood to the building of this country. Being oppressed ourselves and having no desire to oppress anyone else, we have always been fighters for the freedom of others as well as ourselves. Our forefathers gave their lives to win American independence from Britain; they played a decisive part in smashing the system of slavery; and in our own time nobody has been more active or dependable than we have been in the big strikes and organizing campaigns led by the CIO.

No one can seriously deny the impact our struggles have had on the development of this country, and no one can honestly deny that these struggles helped to make this country a better place to live in for the great majority of the people. And now we have built powerful organizations of our own, and are determined to keep fighting until we have battered down the walls of inequality or have fallen in the attempt.

But despite the great contributions to the welfare of all the working people which we have made by our independent strug-

gles for Negro rights, we have always had to bear in mind that we are a minority, representing one-tenth of the population, and that therefore we are unable to change society by ourselves alone.

In order to reach our goal, we need allies. These we can find only among the white population, among those who have the same general interests and the same enemies that we have.

The story of our first emancipation—from chattel slavery—provides a memorable example of how such an alliance was successfully achieved.

Lessons of the Civil War

The Negro people were ready for the Civil War long before it broke out; they amply showed their readiness to fight against slavery by the insurrections they made in the South, by the organization of the Underground Railway and by the support they gave the Abolition movement.

While these struggles stimulated anti-slavery sentiment and helped to prepare the way for the "irrepressible conflict," the final victory against slavery could not be achieved until a considerable section of the white population was drawn actively into the fight on our side. That process was hastened and made inevitable by the fact that American society before the Civil War was divided into different classes, with different economic and political interests and aims.

Despite differences between them, however, the rising capitalist class, the working class in the cities and the farmers all had a stake in a common fight against the slaveholding class, which held political dominance in Washington as well as in the South and wanted to extend slavery and limit the democratic rights of the whole country. This split in the white population made it possible for the Negroes to secure an alliance with the other anti-slavery elements, who organized a new and radical party, the Republicans, which came to power in Washington a short six years after it was launched. When the slaveholders answered the Republican victory with an armed rebellion, the anti-slavery alliance sent the slave system crashing down to extinction.

Today America is just as sharply divided by class struggles as it was on the eve of the Civil War, and it is heading for struggles just as fundamental, and changes just as radical, as those that took place in the middle of the 19th century.

At that time the capitalist class was a progressive force—expanding production and thus making possible the further growth of the country, accepting or tolerating the extension of certain democratic rights, participating in the revolutionary movement against the slaveholders.

But those days are gone forever. Now the ruling capitalist class has monopolized the means of production, and prefers to unloose on the people disastrous depressions and inflation rather than permit any interference with the profit system. Now the capitalists attack and undermine democratic rights, not only of Negroes but of the great majority of the people. Now the capitalists are the most brutal opponents of all radical ideas and movements, and are preparing to set up a military-police dictatorship in order to maintain their rule and profits.

But the capitalists are only a tiny minority of the population, and their rule is being challenged by another powerful force, the working class. The workers represent the overwhelming majority, they are well organized and have repeatedly shown that they possess great militancy and initiative.

The Class Struggle Today

These two classes are locked in a struggle whose outcome will decide if we are to live in a state of permanent peace or a state of permanent war; if the national income is to be used for the benefit of the people who produce it or of parasites who produce nothing; if mankind is to live in harmony and equality or is to remain divided in the relationship of master and slave.

In short, either the working people will take power and establish a Workers and Farmers Government or the capitalists will drag us all down to barbarism and ruin.

The Negro people, most of whom are workers themselves, have everything to gain from the victory of the working class in this struggle. For the same reason that a capitalist government accepts and encourages race prejudice, a Workers and Farmers Government will have to combat and destroy it.

A Workers and Farmers Government will replace the capitalist system with a socialist form of society in which industry will be owned by the people and run for them. By eliminating the profit motive and depriving the capitalists of the power to poison and corrupt the minds of the population, it will do away forever with all forms of Jim Crow theory and practice.

This will not happen merely because somebody promises it

or because somebody's conscience hurts. Basically it is not a question of morals or a desire for justice—it is a political question with deep economic roots, it is a measure the government of the workers will have to take in self-defense.

As Karl Marx put it, "Labor with a white skin cannot be free where labor with a black skin is branded."

Socialism is impossible without the unity and solidarity of the workers of all races. That is why Negroes can have confidence that a Workers and Farmers Government will not repeat the betrayals which we have suffered so many times in the past.

A Workers and Farmers Government

How are we going to achieve a change of such great magnitude—a change that will represent a revolution in every sphere of life? The answer is: The same way that the capitalists came to power—that is, through organization and action, above all, political action.

We who are exploited and oppressed by capitalism are in the majority. Nothing can stop us from having our way once we get together and decide what we want and go after it in a determined fashion. The capitalists are able to hold power because they are organized politically, having not merely one but several parties controlled by them and devoted to their interests. We workers, we Negroes, need a party of our own too.

The foundations of such a party already exist. All we have to do is get together the trade unions and Negro organizations and go into politics on an independent and permanent basis. The result would be an independent Labor Party, controlled by the working people, running workers both white and Negro as candidates for office, and aiming at the establishment of a Workers and Farmers Government. Equipped with a fighting program, such a party would quickly win the allegiance of most Americans.

Needless to stress, the capitalists will fight against such a party tooth and nail. Already they and their stooges—the weak-kneed, capitalist-minded individuals now in the leadership of most trade unions and Negro organizations—are using all their influence to prevent its formation. Nor will the capitalists hesitate to use fraud and intimidation and violence to keep a Labor Party from coming to power.

But once the workers start moving, no force on earth will be able to stop them, and they will firmly put the bosses in their

place, just as was done with the slaveholders when they refused to accept the will of the majority.

The Socialist Workers Party

What I have written above is a brief outline of the ideas and principles of the Socialist Workers Party, whose members are often called Trotskyists. It was born 20 years ago when a number

"First Class Citizenship"



FARRELL DOBBS
for President

Along with inflation, the immediate issue of the day is civil rights — particularly the fight to win first-class citizenship for the Negro people. For 16 years the Democratic administration has sabotaged every move to end Jim Crow discrimination and segregation. Now, three months before the elections, Truman attempts a grandstand play for the Negro vote.

He issued two executive orders purporting to end discrimination in government departments and the armed forces. Everyone can see the fraud in these orders. The order on the armed forces is silent about the key issue — segregation. The real meaning of this order is — segregation remains!

If inflation is to be curbed, if the Jim Crow system is to be destroyed root and branch, it will be done only by the mobilization of the working people of all races, united in mass action behind their own program. That is the cause for which my party and I speak.

—From an article in *The Militant*,
Aug. 2, 1948, by Farrell Dobbs,
Presidential candidate of the
Socialist Workers Party

of members of the Communist Party were expelled because they rebelled against the policies of Stalin and his fellow-bureaucrats and warned that Stalinism would betray the interests of the workers in Russia and elsewhere.

These warnings turned out to be fully justified. The Stalinists were and are concerned only with defending the privileges of the bureaucrats in Russia. To do so, they have repeatedly sold out the interests of the masses. One example was Stalin's sale of oil to Mussolini while the fascist gangsters were invading Ethiopia. Another was their behavior in this country in World War II

when in return for Roosevelt's lend-lease to Russia they broke strikes and tried to convince the Negroes they should postpone or abandon their fight for equal rights.

Sometimes the Stalinists talk radical, sometimes they talk conservative. But at all times their interest in Negro and labor struggles is limited to exploiting them for the benefit of the Russian bureaucrats.

While the Socialist Workers Party has grown considerably in membership and influence since it was started, we are still a relatively small organization today. As the Negro people know,

"Your Plight and Your Struggle"

Tonight I want to end with a message to one particular section of our people — the most oppressed, the most exploited, the most humiliated in the United States. I am speaking directly to the Negro men and women in this country who live in the Deep South.



GRACE CARLSON
for Vice-President

The Socialist Workers Party has members of all races and nationalities in its ranks. We want you to know, brothers and sisters, that for us there can be no talk of freedom in the United States until you are free. We of the Socialist Workers Party know how you suffer. We know the heroic struggles you have to wage every day, every hour, every minute of your lives. Even though so many of you are deprived of the right to vote for us in this election, we would like to hear from you. Write to us. Tell us about your problems — your struggles, and your suffering. I pledge myself to bring your plight before the American people as a symbol of capitalist oppression, your struggle as the symbol of the road to freedom.

—From a speech delivered over the national hook-up of the American Broadcasting Company, July 2, 1948, by Grace Carlson, Vice-Presidential candidate of the Socialist Workers Party

it is not pleasant to be in a minority; we don't like it either and we are working day and night to win the support of the majority. However, we don't become discouraged about being in a minority, because we know that our ideas represent the truth and will

become accepted by a majority of the people when they realize that only socialism will satisfy their needs.

It is worthwhile to remember that the Abolitionists had a hard time in 1830 when they organized to free the slaves, and that they were a small and persecuted minority for many years. But they stuck to their principles and 30 years after they began their work a majority of Americans not only accepted their main ideas but fought to defend them.

Our party also has stood the test of adversity and resisted the pressure of capitalism and has never once betrayed its revolutionary principles. We boldly declared that World War II was a war not for democracy but for profits, and urged the working people to continue their independent struggles despite the war. Eighteen of our leaders were railroaded to jail for telling the truth about the war, but we never retreated an inch. The going is still tough, but our activities among the workers have won respect for our party as a consistent fighter for labor and Negro rights in fair times and foul, and as the boldest champion of a labor-Negro alliance.

Numerous cases in which the SWP played a leading role—like the successful fight to save the life of James Hickman in Chicago, the exposure of the Ku Klux Klan arson murder of O'Day Short in Fontana, California, the campaign to smash police brutality in the case of the Ferguson brothers who were shot to death in Freeport, N. Y.—proved in action that we practice what we preach. As a result of such activities, our influence is widening all the time.

This year, for the first time, we are running a presidential campaign and our message of liberation through a Workers and Farmers Government is reaching hundreds of thousands who never heard of us before.

While expressing sympathy for our views, some of the people we have reached in this campaign have asked: "Why are you running a presidential candidate instead of supporting Henry Wallace? What is the difference between your party and his? Why don't you all get together?" And some Negroes have said: "I am interested in casting my vote against Jim Crow. Why should I vote for your party when I can vote for the Wallace party which also speaks against Jim Crow and promises to bring about equality?"

These are vitally important questions, deserving serious discussion and frank answers.

Many people unquestionably will vote for Wallace this year because he has a reputation as a liberal, among other things on the Negro question. But if you take a close look at his record, you will discover that he got this reputation in the cheapest possible manner—by talk and not by action.

The Record of Henry Wallace

Some people say, "Well, at least his talk sounds good, so let's give him a try." But after all, Henry Wallace is not a newcomer in the political field; he's already had a good many years of testing and trial—in high office too. And his performance during 14 years in Washington was nothing to cheer about.

Wallace did nothing to alter the discriminatory practices in the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce when he headed them, and he never uttered a word of protest as Vice-President when the Roosevelt-Wallace administration during the recent war set up the largest Jim Crow army in history and through this army exported Jim Crow all over the world. That's why his present fine-sounding declarations against Jim Crow, when he is *out* of office, have a hollow and phony ring. When you come to think about it, the Trumans and Deweys also know how to make promises and gestures to Negro voters, but that doesn't prove they are our friends, does it?

"Anyhow," we are told, "Wallace has broken with the Jim Crow Democratic Party, and that's all to the good." But why did Wallace separate from the Democrats whom he served faithfully for so many years? It certainly wasn't over such issues as Jim Crow and government strikebreaking.

The break came over foreign policy—over the issues of Russia and war. The bi-partisan war-mongers think that the way for American capitalism to control the world is through a get-tough policy with Russia. Wallace on the other hand believes that at the present time such a get-tough policy is harmful to American capitalist interests, which he thinks can be served better through a policy of offering Stalin another deal to divide the world.

It was not until *after* Truman kicked Wallace out of the administration that Wallace "broke" with the Democrats and set out to mobilize pressure for a change in foreign policy by making all kinds of promises to labor and the Negro people. And since his differences with the Democrats on foreign policy are only over tactics, and not over principles, there is always the possibility that Wallace and the Democrats may get together again

within the same party. Anyhow, the Jim Crow question wouldn't prevent it.

Foreign policy of course has a strong bearing on the fight for democratic rights, and Negroes are vitally concerned about that too. But even on the war issue, which he emphasizes so strongly, Wallace cannot be trusted for a minute.

He said he was opposed to U.S. entry into World War II, but after the U.S. did enter he became the country's loudest and most zealous recruiting sergeant. Nowadays this self-styled humanitarian denounces atomic warfare, but during the war he was a member of the government board in charge of developing the atomic bomb, and a cat seemed to have got hold of his tongue when the bomb was used to snuff out hundreds of thousands of Japanese lives.

How will Wallace behave when the war guns begin firing again? We don't have to speculate on that because he has already given his answer. In an interview he told a newspaperman that "certainly" he would support the next war and would even withdraw his own candidacy if the war began before election day. (*New York Times*, April 25, 1948.)

What is the word to describe a man who talks against war until it begins and then turns around and supports the very evil he was denouncing? Faker is the mildest word for such treachery.

And as a supporter of the war he undoubtedly will advise Negroes to soften down or give up their fight for equal rights on the ground that a vigorous prosecution of this fight will hamper the "war effort."

Another "New Deal" Sellout

What kind of party is Wallace trying to build? It certainly is not an independent Labor Party, because what distinguishes a Labor Party is that it is controlled by the labor movement, and that isn't the case with the Progressive Party, which is dominated by a bunch of former Washington bureaucrats plus the Stalinists. The truth is that Wallace wants to construct a new version of the New Deal party. The New Deal was long on liberal talk, but its main aim and function was to preserve the decaying capitalist system. It couldn't and didn't solve the problem of unemployment in the depression, and it dragged the country into war.

Negroes never got a single concession from the New Deal except when they fought for it. Roosevelt always assumed credit

for the FEPC, but it is common knowledge that the only reason he granted it was because Negroes organized under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph and threatened to embarrass the war program by a march on Washington if he did not come across. Despite all the liberal flimflam, Jim Crow was more firmly seated in the saddle in Washington when Roosevelt died than when he entered office.

Wallace, the millionaire businessman, really means it when he says: "I look on myself as the best friend capitalism has in the United States today." (Speech in Portland, Oregon, May 24, 1948.) He has started a new party, but he clings to his old brand of politics—capitalist politics. He uses radical phraseology because he knows that many people are looking for a radical solution to their problems, but like Truman and Dewey he will fight to the last ditch to preserve the capitalist system which is responsible for those problems.

Knowing that capitalism is becoming more and more discredited, Wallace says that what he stands for is "progressive capitalism." But "progressive capitalism" is a flagrant contradiction in terms. As I tried to explain in discussing the Civil War period, capitalism once played a progressive role but now it has turned into a wholly reactionary system.

To talk about "progressive capitalism" in 1948 is as ridiculous as it would have been to talk about "progressive slavery" in 1860.

It is just as impossible for capitalism to be progressive today as it is for Jim Crow to be progressive. You can't eat your cake and have it too; you can't keep capitalism and get progress; you can't have capitalism without race prejudice any more than you can have capitalism without depressions and wars.

For the time being it may not be very popular to tell the truth about Wallace to some people, but the Socialist Workers Party would rather lose votes by telling the truth than get votes by hiding it. And this is the truth: Henry Wallace is another capitalist medicine-man peddling quack "cures" that dope the patient but can only prevent his recovery.

Because Wallace wants to preserve the economic and political cause of Jim Crow, he is *using* the Negro issue in this election just as capitalist politicians have used it in the past, and he will sell out the Negroes in the same way that they have been betrayed so many times by the Democrats, Republicans and Stalinists.

That is why the Socialist Workers Party is opposed to Wallace

and why the Negro people should place no confidence in him and his program.

What Our Party Offers

Brothers and sisters! If you are burning with resentment against injustice and want to change things so that our children can grow up in a decent world, your place is with us in the Socialist Workers Party.

As you can see for yourselves, our party is not like the others. We have nothing in common with the politicians who come around spouting promises about what *they* will do for *you* if you

"Unite the Workers of All Races!"



Smash the Jim Crow system! Full economic, political and social equality for the Negro people and other minorities! Pass and enforce legislation to punish lynching, abolish the poll tax, establish a Fair Employment Practices Committee with power to root out discriminatory practices, eliminate segregation wherever it exists!

Unite the workers of all races for the common struggle against their exploiters!

—From the 1948 Election Platform
of the Socialist Workers Party

vote for them. We warn you now: Nobody is going to hand you anything on a platter. We never got anything without fighting for it in the past, and we won't now either.

What the Socialist Workers Party has to offer you is not vote-catching promises but a program that teaches the workers of all races what they can do for themselves when they organize and use their political power. And there is nothing in the world more necessary and precious than that.

There are those who will tell you that voting for the Socialist Workers Party is wasting your vote because the SWP cannot possibly win in 1948. Such an argument is false to the core. The way to waste your vote is by giving it to a candidate who is openly or secretly a friend of the Jim Crow system, whether he can win or not. The way to use your vote most effectively is to cast it for

the candidate who stands for the program you want to see put in action, whether he can win this time or not.

There is no value in a winning vote that only serves to keep you in chains. And there is the greatest value in a vote that registers a forceful protest against capitalist oppression and serves warning on the ruling class that you will not rest until you have gained what is rightfully yours.

There are also those who will tell you that our program is impractical and impossible. But the really impractical people are the ones who think that you can get better conditions without getting right down to the root of our troubles and fixing things in a fundamental and permanent way.

A hundred years ago there were many people who said that the slave system was here to stay, that it was impractical to even think about abolishing it and that the smartest thing to do was

***Vote for Dobbs and Carlson!
For a Workers & Farmers Government!***

to try to get along with slavery while trying to patch things up as much as possible. But they soon learned from their own experience with slavery that they were wrong. Experience with capitalism will produce the same result in our time, and will teach the people that their fate really lies in their own hands.

We don't ask you to accept what we say just because we say it. Only a fool would do that. But we do ask you to think and see for yourselves.

We ask you to watch us and our activities and to find out if we practice what we preach, inside our party as well as outside. We ask you to read our literature, to attend our meetings and classes, to hold discussions with our comrades, and to compare our program with that of the other parties. If you do that, we are confident that sooner or later you will come into our ranks and join us in the noble task of building a new world on socialist foundations.

To strike a blow against the Jim Crow capitalist system in 1948, vote for the candidates of the Socialist Workers Party!

To smash the Jim Crow system altogether, join with the Socialist Workers Party in creating a Workers and Farmers Government!

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