Malcolm X and black liberation

A MARXIST ANALYSIS BY

workers power



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MALC

"Malcolm X—Angel of Harlem" read the slogan on one black youth's leather jacket on the January Asylum Bill demo. Malcolm's famous slogan "By Any Means Necessary" adorns a best-selling T-shirt, along with a photograph of him with a high velocity rifle. Later this year Spike Lee's controversial film about the life of Malcolm X will hit the cinemas. For a generation of young blacks Malcolm X has entered popular mythology as a symbol of militant black resistance. But he remains misunderstood.

Overt black nationalists and anti-Semites like Louis Farrakhan claim Malcolm as their inspiration. Others praise Malcolm's attempt to combine black separatism with socialism. Some even claim he had become an "unconscious" revolutionary socialist before he was gunned down in 1965.

Who is right? What is the truth about Malcolm X? How can socialists, black separatists and even middle class black nationalists all claim to be his followers? ***Laura Watkins*** *explains.*

From black na to socialisn

THE POLITICS of Malcolm X can only be understood against the changing background of the anti-racist struggle in the USA. We have to understand how Malcolm himself underwent a rapid political evolution in the last two years of his life, as the struggle developed.

In the late 1940s and early 50s, when Malcolm became politically active, the racist system of segregation was already facing active opposition.

By 1946 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had 450,000 members in 1,073 branches. This was the main black political movement in the USA.

In the South, blacks faced apartheid style segregation and deep poverty. Against this background Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had come to the head of the desegregation struggle, initially around the Montgomery County bus boycotts of 1955 and 56.

King's movement, dominated by the church and wedded to peaceful and legal means, sought to use non-violence to extract piecemeal reforms from US capitalist society, despite being faced with a reign of terror from white supremacists, including lynch mobs and beatings.

Strand

But another strand of black organisation was developing, one which totally rejected white society, believing it could not be reformed. This was Elijah Muhammed's Nation of Islam, founded in Detroit in 1930.

Muhammed's strategy was unequivocally nationalist and separatist. He taught that white society and white people in general were inevitably racist, US blacks should separate and form their own nation. Muhammed called for a return to Africa, and stressed black Americans' international links with the peoples of the third world. But he also preached the possibility of a separate black territory in North America.

The strength and attraction of the Nation of Islam for many young black people was its emphasis on black pride. It taught that God was black, that whites were an inferior race, encouraged the establishment of black businesses, celebrated African civilisation etc.

As long as black people had not attained national independence, Muhammed's "Muslim Programme" demanded freedom, justice and equality of opportunity. It stated:

"As long as we are not allowed to establish a state or territory of our own, we demand not only equal justice under the laws of the United States, but equal employment opportunities now!"

Yet, as the Nation of Islam grew from a sect to a mass organisation in the 1950s this commitment to the struggle for equality within white society remained a dead letter. In practice the Black Muslims, as they were known, abstained from the actual struggle for desegregation and civil rights. Instead most of their resources were channelled into recruiting from amongst the poorest sections of the black working class and from the large black prison population.

Converts

One of their converts was Malcolm X, who had grown up as Malcolm Little, a petty crook in Harlem. On his release from prison in 1952 Malcolm became one of Muhammed's leading followers. His magnetic personality and popular speaking style allowed the Nation of Islam to reach out to new layers of students and youth. By the late 1950s Malcolm X had become, through lectures, articles and televised debates, an international symbol of revolutionary black nationalism.

But both Muhammed's black nationalism and King's reformist integrationism were being put to new tests as the struggle intensified.

By 1963 King was at the head of a powerful coalition of black organisations. Alongside groups like the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the NAACP and King's SCLC were mobilising hundreds of thousands in direct action to defy segregationism in the South, and increasingly the racism and state brutality faced by blacks in the northern cities. A March on Washington organised that year mobilised 250,000.

The civil rights movement was no longer simply a black protest movement. It had begun to win influence in white liberal circles and amongst organised white workers. At the same time it faced a vicious racist backlash, particularly in the South which, for thousands of youth, increasingly called into question non-violence as a strategy.

Yet the Nation of Islam remained on the sidelines. Muhammed repeatedly vetoed moves to get involved in civil rights activism. He even became embroiled in collusion with white-supremacist US fascists.

While hundreds of thousands were heeding the call to mass action by the civil rights movement the Black Muslims' revolutionary words remained only words.

In 1964 Malcolm X broke with the Nation of Islam, amidst much acrimony, and started a process of political rethinking which was to lead him to a much more radical, anti-capitalist formulation of his politics. It is a tribute to Malcolm X's political courage that he made not one but two political evolutions in his life. From small time hustler to national political leader, then from abstentionist black nationalism to an attempt to combine black separatism and socialism.

It was an evolution cut short when Black Muslim assassins, probably in collusion with the FBI, killed Malcolm, aged 40, on 21 February 1965.

His development away from the Nation of Islam had lasted less than two years. In this process Malcolm produced several reformulations of his political programme and philosophy and often made contradictory statements even within a single speech or interview.

This is what has allowed many differing strands within black nationalism and socialism to claim Malcolm X as their own. Even at their most developed point of evolution away from Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm's politics remain contradictory: not a fusion of the struggle for black liberation with socialism but a confusion, about both ends and means.■

MALCOLM X's split with Elijah Muhammed resulted from a combination of organisational, political and personal differences.

Malcolm was impatient to enter the mass movement, not in order to tail behind the pacifist leaders but to revolutionise the struggle. Muhammed wanted the Muslims to remain on the sidelines—a primarily religious sect with radical rhetoric.

In Los Angeles in April 1962, police shot seven unarmed Black Muslims, killing one. Sixteen Muslims were charged with criminal assault against the police. Malcolm X set about organising united actions against this outrage with the city's black integrationist leaders, and even appealed to whites for financial support. Muhammed quickly vetoed this, insisting on a purely legal defence campaign and no joint activity with non-Muslim blacks.

The inevitable split came in March 1964 and Malcolm announced he was setting up a new organisation, the Muslim Mosque Inc. But soon it became clear this was not just an organisational break.

George Breitman, Malcolm's biographer and a leader of the American Socialist Workers Party, divides Malcolm last years after the split into two phases. Firstly the "transition", from the split until Malcolm's return from a trip to Mecca in May 1964, and then the "final period" from June 1964 to his assassination.

Whilst there are clear political differences between Malcolm's statements in these two phases, to call only the first "transitional" is misleading. Right up to his death Malcolm's politics were changing and remained contradictory. Breitman wanted to defend Malcolm from critics who simply labelled him a black nationalist. But his analysis also fitted in with the SWP's belief that Malcolm in effect became an "unconscious" revolutionary socialist and internationalist.

Broken

Today, with black nationalism and separatism gaining popularity, it is important to emphasise that Malcolm, the cultural icon of black nationalism, had consciously *broken* with it by the time he died. But equally we should not idealise his later political philosophy, dressing it up as a form of Marxism, or claim it was an adequate guide to action for those who followed him.

Phil Frampton, writing in the British *Militant's* black paper *Panther* says:

"Those who killed him underlined the sanctity of his ideas. His death spawned the Black Panthers. They developed his ideas further, to the conclusion of a united black and white revolutionary struggle for socialism."

That judgement distorts the Panthers' actual politics (see WP 114) and is misleading about Malcolm X too. No real revolutionary Marxist should be sanctifying his ideas. Our task is to separate what was positive from what remained confused and mistaken.

Immediately after the break with Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm's project amounted to implementing all the secular and social aspects of the Nation of Islam programme:

"I still believe that Mr Muhammed's analysis of the problem is the most realistic and that his solution is the best one . . ." he told reporters. "But 22 million of our people who are still here in America need better food, clothing, housing education and jobs right now. Mr Muhammed's program does point us back homeward, but it also contains within it what we could and should be doing to help solve many of our own problems while we are still here."

Like many subsequent black nationalists and separatists, Muhammed's politics sounded radical when he talked about a return to Africa or a separate state for blacks in America, but he stumbled when it came to changing things within racist US imperialism. The question he had to confront was: how?

Malcolm had for years castigated white liberals for their duplicity and the white working class for its racism. He now had to face the problem of how to win black liberation in a society where white liberals ruled and white workers formed the majority.

When he launched the Muslim Mosque Inc. Malcolm declared:

"Whites can help us, but they can't join us. There can be no black-white unity until there is first some black unity. There can be no workers' solidarity until there is first some racial solidarity. We cannot think of uniting with others until we have first united among ourselves."

Popular

This "two stage" theory of black liberation is popular amongst black nationalists and separatists today. There is a kernel of truth in it: black people do need to organise themselves within the wider working class movement in order to defeat racism and fight for their own agenda. But the idea that a joint struggle between black and white workers had to be put off until after "black unity" was achieved proved no guide to action.

If "black unity" meant a separate black state, as it did for Muhammed, then black people would have a long time to wait. Uncle Sam had no intention of granting that state, and blacks themselves were dispersed as a minority amongst the northern industrial states of the USA.

If "black unity" meant a single

LM X

What strategy for black liberation?

WORKERS POWER stands for black liberation as an integral part of the working class struggle for socialism. The root cause of racism is the profit system and the imperialist system of exploitation and oppression it engenders.

As well as the black populations brought to Europe and America by slavery there are millions of immigrant workers in these countries. There are also indigenous peoples such as the Australian Aborigines, native Americans etc. All of these groups suffer a specific form of social oppression and generally super-exploitation as a result of systematic racism.

Imperialism, whilst creating an international world economy has proved unable to overcome the system of rival nation states that divides and strangles the potential of that world economy. Consequently nationalism, chauvinism, genocide and race hatred are more prevalent in this century than ever before.

That is why the struggle to eradicate racial oppression must go hand in hand with the struggle against capitalism itself. Only the working class can successfully and finally destroy capitalism. In Europe and the USA black people form a militant minority of that class. Therefore the road to black liberation cannot bypass the task of winning white workers to the struggle against racism.

But does this mean black people should not organise themselves, or that they should put off their own struggles until "after the revolution"?

No. Self-organisation is a vital weapon to empower black working class people. We fight for black caucuses in the unions and in all working class parties, including our own organisation. We fight to link up every element of black workers' self organisation into a black working class movement, a united front for action in which revolutionaries would fight for leadership.

Those who say black self-organisation "undermines workers' unity" are mistaken. It helps black people play a full part in the working class movement. If black people have to fight alone while no white workers, or only a minority, recognise the problems of racism, then that is better than "unity" at the price of passivity.

Black people need to organise now around a programme that starts from what is needed for defence against racist attack, immigration controls, job discrimination, police harassment, but points towards the ultimate solution: the removal of all the property from the hands of the profit-makers and putting it in the hands of the workers and their families.

With a clear, anti-capitalist programme of action black workers and youth can put to the test the self-appointed leaders of the black community. Who will fight consistently for the militant tactics needed to win? That is the question black people need to ask—not who talks the most militant, or who has the most influence with the white liberal and Labour establishment.

For all these reasons, revolutionary communists reject black nationalism, separatism and the all-class "autonomous" black movement.

But wherever black people are in struggle we will unite with all those prepared to carry out actions which take the struggle forward.

We reject the need for a separate black party. A black revolutionary party would have exactly the same strategic aim as an integrated one. Whilst the revolutionary party should do special forms of work amongst black people the only way black and white revolutionary workers are going to achieve their ultimate aim is in a common struggle under a common discipline, with black cadres as part of the leadership.

We urge all black revolutionaries to take their place in an integrated revolutionary workers' organisation. We say to every black person engaged in struggle: if you are sick of the Labour leaders' patronising racism, if you are fed up with being sold out by self-appointed community leaders, if you want an alternative to religious fundamentalism and to empty nationalist rhetoric—join Workers Power!■

tionalism ?



organisation, likewise it would not be achieved. The black integrationists and reformists like King and James Farmer recognised their white liberal allies feared Malcolm X, and therefore distanced themselves from him.

In fact, despite the repression meted out to them, the leadership of the civil rights movement represented an embryonic black middle class, even a nascent black bourgeoisie. It was this layer which would benefit most from President Johnson's reforms in the late 1960s, while for the masses there remained poverty and oppression. Prison and assassination were awaiting Malcolm's followers. The divergent strategies of reformist integrationism and militant struggle proved fundamentally incompatible.

Grappling with these problems, Malcolm evolved away from nationalism as a political principle. In March 1964 he had announced:

"Our political philosophy will be black nationalism. Our economic and social philosophy will be black nationalism."

But already he was using the term nationalism not to imply the struggle for a separate state but for black people's struggles to control their own lives and communities:

"The political philosophy of black nationalism means we must control the politics and politicians of our community. They must no longer take orders from outside forces. We will organise and sweep out of office all Negro politicians who are puppets of outside forces."

After Malcolm returned from a trip to Africa he changed that view. Describing a meeting with a white Algerian revolutionary nationalist Malcolm said:

"He showed me where I was alienating people who were true revolutionaries, dedicated to overthrowing the system of exploitation that exists on this earth by any means necessary. So I had to do a lot of thinking and reappraising of my definition of black nationalism. Can we sum up the solution to the problems confronting our people as black nationalism? And if you've noticed, I haven't been using the expression for several months." (16 January 1965)

However Malcolm remained a black separatist in the organisational sense. Though he collaborated with elements on the predominantly white left his project remained to build a black organisation to fight for black liberation.

After returning from Africa he posed this in a more international way. He founded the strictly secular Organisation of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) (he himself remained a Muslim to his death). But its aims were confused from the beginning. On the one hand he conceived it as an umbrella organisation which could unite all the civil rights and black nationalist groups. On the other hand Malcolm was obliged to build the OAAU as a separate political organisation which precisely challenged the programme and tactics of the King/Farmer integrationist leaders.

The statement of aims (June 1964) and programme of the OAAU (February 1965) contain Malcolm's most developed statements of his political analysis and strategy.

The central flaw of the programme is its failure to understand the causes of racism—capitalism and imperialism—from a class standpoint. Consequently it contains no strategy to remove these roots of racism.

Malcolm made a number of anti-capitalist statements towards the end of his life:

"There can be no freedom for our people under capitalism, and further you can't operate a capitalist system unless you are vulturistic; you have to suck someone else's blood to be a capitalist."

But Malcolm's programme was not overtly anti-capitalist.

The OAAU programme does expose the sham of US capitalism's "emancipation" of black people from slavery. The statement of aims identifies the "economic exploitation" of black people as "the most vicious form practiced on any people in America. It denounces poor housing, job discrimination and the high cost of living in the ghetto. But nowhere does it set itself against the whole system of wage slavery: the exploitation of the worker by the employer.

Consequently its solutions to the economic plight of black people are couched as a series of reforms to the capitalist system, and militant self-organised tactics to achieve them. The statement of aims proposes a housing self-improvement programme and a rent strike to win it. The only real economic demand in the section on "Economic Security" is for the establishment of a pool of black technicians, which would be available to the developing independent African countries, and provide work for black Americans:

"Thereby we will be developing an open market for the many skills we possess and at the same time we will be supplying Africa with the skills she can best use. This project will be one of mutual co-operation of benefit."

This is a form of utopian socialism, reliant on the capitalist "open market" to create some form of economic stability and livelihood for the black working class in the USA. It is naïve and inoperative as a strategy for economic liberation.

Like all utopian socialist programmes, Malcolm's emphasises education over class struggle. It outlines a series of reforms in education black people must fight for: control of 10% of all schools, the right to write the textbooks, etc. The OAAU wanted to develop a skilled black working class able to compete with whites for jobs, and a black population able to overcome ignorance as one of the chains that enslaved them.

But Malcolm's economic programme contains no orientation to the workplace, strike action, occupations and picket lines—even over the specific question of job segregation and discrimination. Still less is there any strategy for building unity in action with white workers.

If at an economic level the programme is totally inadequate and reformist, it does contain a revolutionary challenge to racist state violence. All of Malcolm's programmatic statements are clear on the right to black self-defence against racist attack.

Sickened by a succession of racist murders and beatings, police attacks on peaceful marches and widespread repression against civil rights activists, Malcolm's outspoken support for black self-defence struck a chord with many young people at the time:

"In areas where the US government has shown itself unable and/or unwilling to bring to justice the racist oppressors, murderers, who kill innocent children and adults, the OAAU advocates that Afro-American people ensure ourselves that justice is done—whatever the price and *by any means necessary.*"

Naïvete

But even here Malcolm's programme fails to show how to link this defensive struggle with the offensive against the whole capitalist state machine. In fact the statement of aims betrays a startling innocence about the US constitution and various pan-national imperialist bodies. The OAAU was:

"... persuaded that the Charter of the United Nations, the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', the Constitution of the USA and the Bill of Rights are the principles in which we believe and these documents if put into practice represent the essence of mankind's hopes and good intentions."

All the democratic rights in the world are not enough to end the system of exploitation which starves Africa and reduces America's black ghettoes to killing fields. Nor are they enough to overcome the imperialist state machine that is supposed to embody and protect such rights. It is impossible for US imperialism to systematically uphold these fine declarations of "hopes and good intentions" because it is committed to defending private property and the bosses' profits which rely on this exploitation.

Myths

Once we remove the myths about Malcolm X his anti-capitalism has to be seen as a mixture of utopian and reformist socialism; his internationalism as a laudable desire to help the bourgeois nationalist revolutions in the third world, but not proletarian internationalism; his revolutionary opposition to state racism devoid of a strategic goal.

Unfortunately the left has failed to point this out. In particular George Breitman and the American SWP have spent the years since Malcolm's death peddling the myth that he was "a black nationalist plus a socialist", or at least in the process of becoming a socialist. Breitman argues that Malcolm was on the road to a "synthesis of black nationalism and socialism" and that others must complete it.

No. The best tribute to Malcolm X we can pay today is to complete the break Malcolm was making with nationalism and separatism, not dress up the confusion as a "synthesis".

It is the duty of every Marxist to point this out in order to win new fighters for revolutionary socialism—the only consistent strategy for black liberation.■

MALCOLM X

Socialism and black nationalism

Colin Lloyd reviews *Malcolm X; Socialism and Black Nationalism* by Kevin Ovenden, Bookmarks 1992

THE CULT of Malcolm X is reaching fever pitch. The release date of Spike Lee's long awaited film about the black leader is approaching. Malcolm's image is emblazoned on the baseball caps and t-shirts of hundreds of black and white youth.

Everybody from Al Sharpton to orthodox muslim god-squadders claim to stand in the tradition of Malcolm-X. But nobody can agree on what that tradition is.

Clearly a Marxist account of Malcolm's life and politics is long overdue. This is what Kevin Ovenden sets out to do in his recent book. As a basic Marxist account of Malcolm's life it is useful. But the weaknesses of the book reflect the politics of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which Ovenden is a member of.

Malcolm X grew up in the ghetto wanting to be a lawyer. Denied this by the racist education system, he became a small time crook and wound up in Uncle Sam's racist penal system. There he was recruited by the black muslims of the Nation of Islam. After finishing his sentence Malcolm rose to prominence as the right hand man of the muslims' leader Elijah Muhammad.

Oppressed

The muslims advocated radical, religious black nationalism. They set out to organise the most oppressed amongst the black working class—the jail population and the ghetto youth. Their movement grew into a mass force parallel with, but opposed to, the "integrationist" reform movement led by Martin Luther King.

In the early 1960s Malcolm had become enemy number one for white racism in America, because of his uncompromising advocacy of black separatism and armed resistance to racism, summed up in the slogan "By any means necessary". But his commitment to a revolutionary struggle against racism also brought him up against the limits of the Nation of Islam, which told its supporters to abstain from the growing "non-violent" mass demonstrations of black workers. This, and a personal dispute, propelled Malcolm out of the Nation of Islam in 1964, and into an intense period of political rethinking, cut short only one year later by his assassination on 21 February 1965.

Influenced

During his last year Malcolm came into contact with the anti-imperialist petit bourgeois nationalism of African liberation fighters, orthodox Sunni Islam, Stalinist "socialism" and even centrist Trotskyism. He was influenced by all of these ideologies, and his speeches and writings in 1964-65 reflect a confused but valiant attempt to supersede black nationalism with a revolutionary synthesis of black self reliance and reformist utopian socialism. (For a fuller account of Malcolm's life and politics see *Workers Power* 151, February 1992)

Kevin Ovenden's account of these events is both accurate and informative. Unlike other potted biographies it attempts to situate Malcolm's political evolution within national and international developments in politics and economics. It uses quotations from Malcolm's writings and those of his opponents to spell out the key issues within the black movement of the time.

In its critique of Malcolm's later political development however, the book is neither detailed nor perceptive enough. Ovenden asserts that Malcolm was not a socialist. He backs this up with a quote where Malcolm speaks against workers' solidarity as an illusion, but then admits that later Malcolm made explicitly anti-capitalist statements.

Strangely that is where the brief section "Socialist or nationalist" ends. There is no attempt to grapple with the wrong but influential argument that Malcolm was an "unconscious revolutionary" pioneered by the centrist Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party of the United States (no relation to its British namesake). There is no critique of Malcolm's explicit programme, drawn up for the Organisation of Afro American Unity (OAAU) which he founded after his break with Elijah Mohammad.

It is easy to see the reason for these omissions. The British SWP cannot see the point of political programmes. Every year they are given a lecture by their guru, Tony Cliff, who tells them "I'd rather have a machine gun than a blueprint for a machine gun"—that is, political programmes are useless. It is not surprising that Ovenden doesn't bother to analyse Malcolm's programme.

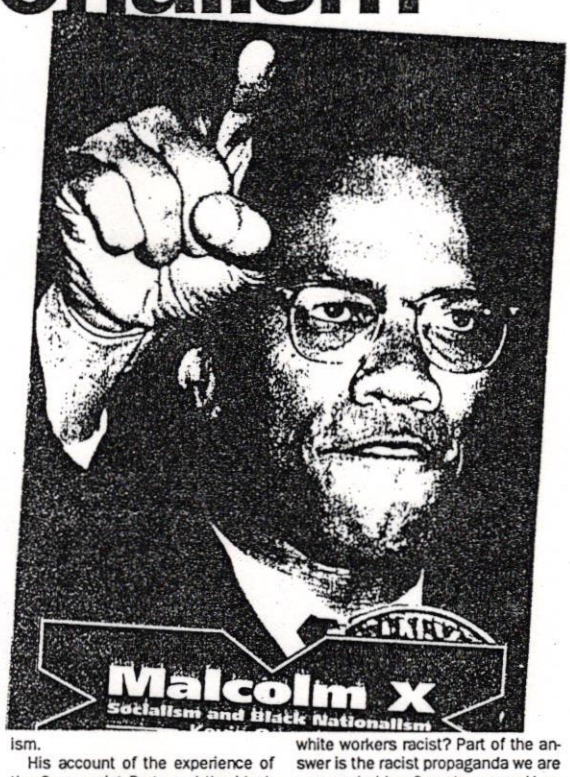
Explicit

If he did, he would have been able to prove how the explicit anti-capitalism of Malcolm's later speeches is not adequately translated into political strategy.

Malcolm's call for organised black self defence squads is very close to the transitional demands fought for by real Trotskyists—something incidentally the British SWP alsways refuses to fight for. On the other hand his solution to black poverty was a utopian and reformist social programme involving the training of skilled black workers and the creation of a parallel black economy servicing the needs of Africa.

It is not enough to say "Malcolm was not a socialist". It is far more accurate to say his socialism was reformist and that it was mixed up with black separatism plus revolutionary tactics on black self-defence.

The second part of Ovenden's book concerns the legacy of Malcolm X, the black movements which followed his death. Again, as a potted history it is not bad, explaining and contextualising the rise of the Panthers, Black Power and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). However, Ovenden is particularly weak wherever he has to deal with revolutionary Marxism and centrism's attempts to relate to black-nationalism.



His account of the experience of the Communist Party and the black struggle completely leaves out the so called "Third Period" of international Stalinism. During the years 1928-33 the Comintern adopted an ultra-left policy internationally. In the USA this led them to a specific orientation to black workers, and to espouse the demand for national self-determination for blacks in the USA.

The CP's line prompted a debate within American Trotskyism, which Leon Trotsky himself participated in, arguing for the right of self-determination up to the formation of a separate black state if the black population desired this. The conditions which Trotsky envisaged for such a struggle were being rapidly undermined during the 1930s, with the migration of southern blacks to the industrial northern cities of the USA. But it was not out of the question for Trotsky to consider the possibility of revolutionaries having to support such a national struggle by blacks in the USA, even if they did not themselves advocate it as a solution.

Ovenden's failure to deal with the Marxist debates on black nationalism is not accidental. It reveals the SWP's own failure to develop a political strategy to combat racism and achieve black liberation.

The third and final part of his book is an exposition of the British SWP's explanation of racism. It is the weakest section and the one genuine fighters for black liberation and socialism should focus their arguments against in Ovenden's coming speaking tour.

Ovenden correctly sets out to show that it is not in the interest of the white working class to be racist. But the interests of workers are defined as narrowly economic: racism drives down wage levels we are told, by dividing black and white. So why are white workers racist? Part of the answer is the racist propaganda we are surrounded by, Ovenden says. However:

"Racism can lodge in the minds of workers because it appears to correspond to *one part* of their experience of living under capitalism—the compulsion to compete in order to get by. As Karl Marx explained, competition invades all aspects of society, and 'separates individuals from one another, not only the bourgeois but still more the workers'. . . For the white worker living on a run down housing estate it can seem the solution is to take housing from black people. Racism can appear to make sense." (p75)

But another part of the workers' experience under capitalism counteracts racism: the experience of collective struggle in the workplace:

"The more workers succeed in uniting and fighting, the less relevant seem the individualism and ideas of competition which stoke racism".

This is a crass, one sided explanation, thoroughly imbued with the British SWP's central method, which revolutionary Marxists label *economism*.

Economism reduces the class struggle to the struggle in the workplace over basic economic goals. It presumes that the basic economic interests of the working class spontaneously lead to the achievement of class unity and a revolutionary consciousness, to the overcoming of racism, sexism and anti-gay bigotry, and to overcoming reformist legalism.

This is not the same as saying "workers learn in struggle". No Marxist would deny that. But economism means belittling the role of a conscious vanguard, of a clear political programme, of revolutionary transitional forms of organisation.

Using only the SWP's economism to guide him Ovenden comes up with a very inadequate explanation of racism. Clearly he doesn't want to locate racism simply in the realm of ideas. That would lead directly to the reformist schema of "race awareness training" as the solution to oppression, which the SWP rightly opposes. But locating the material roots of racism in the competition capitalism engenders amongst individual workers does not tell the whole story.

To put it simply; why, when they are indulging in this individualism and competition, do the white workers on a council estate turn against black people more than against each other? Nothing in the economics of individual competition dictate it. It has to be rooted in some other material structure. Ovenden cannot explain this.

For revolutionary Marxists it is rooted in the existence of capitalist imperialism, the degenerate form of capitalism that developed in the twentieth century. Imperialism created a world economy, an international labour market, and at the same time massively intensified the competition between capitalist nations, giving rise to virulent and exclusive modern nationalism.

Imperialism

Racism's economic advantages for the bosses go far beyond "divide and rule". Through the profits generated by plundering the globe imperialism is able to create a labour aristocracy of relatively privileged workers. At the same time it is able to utilise black workers as part of the "reserve army of labour"—super exploited workers with few rights.

We do not have to subscribe to the Maoist theory that all western white workers are labour aristocrats to see that a layer of white workers is tied through ideology and short term material interest to the racist state. But this is how the SWP caricatures the "labour aristocracy theory of racism" (see for example Alex Callinicos' "Race and Class" in *IS55*, Summer 1992).

Yet imperialism figures nowhere in Ovenden's account of racism: it is purely rooted in the existence of working class individualism.

The political consequences of the SWP's economistic theory of the causes of racism are its simplistic recipes for overcoming it. Taken at face value, once workers overcome individualism they should overcome racism. But that does not explain the existence of racism amongst organised workers.

Spontaneously

And whilst struggle is the best place to overcome racism it is facile to suggest that it is overcome spontaneously "the more workers unite and fight". That is why the SWP's principal slogan against racism, "black and white unite and fight", on its own, is useless in the fight against racism and is rightly scorned by most black activists.

It is one thing for black and white workers to be standing together on the picket lines at Dagenham. It would be another thing altogether to suggest that this once and for all kills off the racism of the white workers.

Ovenden's book and speaking tour will no doubt spark off a furore amongst the self-appointed heirs of Malcolm X: the Stalinist black separatists of the Black Unity and Freedom Party, the middle class black leaders of ARA, and orthodox black muslims will no doubt hotly dispute the SWP's right to hold meetings on Malcolm X.

We will defend not only their right to do so but the general thrust of the socialist critique of Malcolm X that Ovenden's book contains. But we remain implacable opponents of the SWP's centrism and economism, both vividly illustrated in the book's analysis of racism and recipe for destroying it.■

BLACK STRUGGLE IN TH

*In the 1960s the struggle for black civil rights rocked US capitalism to its found limitations of both reformism and separatism—the political strategies which c black struggle in Britain today. **Laura Williams** and **Colin Lloyd** trace the roots USA and the development of the struggle against it: from non-violence to arm*

From civil to black p

IN THE mid 1950s the US economy was booming. Yet despite their formal legal rights and the Fair Employment laws enacted during the war blacks had little share of the boom. In the northern cities they remained amongst the poorest workers; in the south Jim Crow laws and segregation ruled as they had done since the 1880s.

The great upsurge of US labour after the war had been curbed by anti-union laws. Black workers had to struggle against the racism of the union bureaucrats and large sections of white workers to make their voices heard. In this situation it was the bourgeois reformist and church organisations which came to the fore in the first wave of the post war black struggle.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) fought a series of test cases in the courts against the southern Jim Crow laws. The 1954 Brown vs Board of Education ruling, which outlawed segregation in schools, was the first victory in this campaign. It sparked both a racist backlash and fifteen years of mass struggle which were to rock US capitalism to its foundations.

In December 1955 the NAACP launched a boycott of the racist bus service in Montgomery, Alabama. Here blacks had to enter buses separately, sit separately and give up their seats to white people.

In the mass demonstrations and repression that preceded the Supreme Court victory in November 1956 Martin Luther King came to the fore as the main black reformist leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

A college trained Baptist minister, King advocated Gandhi's strategy of non-violent protest action in the face of police brutality and racist murder. He helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) which in the aftermath of the Montgomery boycott led boycotts all over the southern states.

The mass popularity of King's strategy of non-violence was due to the fact that, in this period, it appeared to work. Against the most glaring injustices of segregation US imperialism was prepared to use its legal and military apparatus. But this "defence" of the blacks had very real limits. Where black revolt threatened to go beyond non-violence the state apparatus was quickly directed against it.

In 1957 two black boys aged seven and nine were convicted of raping a white girl in Monroe, North Carolina. She had kissed one of them on the cheek. For this they got fourteen years jail.

Robert Williams organised a defence campaign which forced the courts to release the boys. Then he led a working class based branch of the NAACP in a mass campaign of direct action against the segregated library and swimming pool. In response the police and Klan launched a racist terror campaign against Monroe's black ghetto.

An ex-serviceman, Williams then used the cover of a local rifle club to build an armed black militia which successfully routed the racists. He spelled out the lesson, as true today as then:

"The racist whites consider themselves superior beings, therefore they are not willing to exchange their superior lives for inferior ones. They are most vicious and violent when they can practice violence with impunity".

Unfortunately it was a lesson learned very slowly by black workers over the next decade. But US imperialism was not slow to realise the implications. The FBI framed Williams. He fled underground and eventually to exile in Cuba.

The mainstream black movement now focused its attention on the goal of a Civil Rights Bill. It launched mass voter registration campaigns in the south. In some counties there was not a single black voter despite a black population in the South of 78%. The Jim Crow laws, had simply disenfranchised countless black people.

This was the period too of the "freedom rides" on segregated buses, and the sit-ins at segregated restaurants. As the movement gathered strength a younger leadership emerged from amongst the black and white college students drafted down into the south to organise the action. The Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), led by Stokely Carmichael, came to the fore. It stretched the idea of non-violence to the limits, organising hundreds of people in direct action, confronting the police, suffering beatings and murder in the fight to organise southern blacks.



Memphis sanitation strike 1968

Trade unions

At the same time the movement was making itself heard within the trade unions. The AFL and CIO had amalgamated in 1955 on an anti-segregationist policy. But in reality it failed to lead a single fight against employment discrimination, failed to conduct a campaign to recruit black workers and tolerated "Jim Crow locals"; separate black and white branches in southern towns.

In 1960 black trade unionists founded the Negro American Labour Council (NALC) to fight within the AFL-CIO for anti-racist action. Under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, the only black on the AFL-CIO executive, it remained within the bounds of his reformist trade unionism. Yet it was attacked by the bureaucracy. It reflected the mood of black workers when it called for a "March on Washington" modelled on the aborted 1941 planned march.

King, who had evolved more and more to a social reformist position under the impact of struggle, threw the weight of the SCLC behind the march. King and Randolph agreed that it should demand the enactment of the Civil Rights Bill and added a fair employment clause to the Bill.

Despite condemnation from the AFL-CIO the March attracted 250,000 in August 1963 where King delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech. Within a year the Bill was law. But black liberation was a long way from being won.

In Selma, Alabama in 1965 a voter registration drive was met with murderous repression from the local sheriff. He called in the National Guard. Two activists were killed and hundreds jailed. In response came the militant Selma to Montgomery march which united not only the existing forces but also drew in the official trade union movement. The marchers won a new Voter Registration Act, finally granting the right of blacks to vote, more than a century after the abolition of slavery.

What was the nature of these victories? Certainly they were the most radical civil rights laws ever enacted in the USA. The Civil Rights Act guaranteed voting rights, equal access to education, and no employment discrimination. It would be wrong to think, however, that the racist US ruling class had gone daft or that the "liberal" Kennedy/Johnson administrations were committed to eradicating racism.

In fact the reforms coincided with the project of the leaders of the US bosses. They were being dragged deeper and deeper into the Vietnam War and realised that black people would constitute a formidable second front if they continued to be denied simple democratic rights. But events immediately revealed the limits of bourgeois reforms. They showed that no measure of legal equality and civil rights within capitalism can overcome the oppression and super-exploitation suffered daily by the mass of black workers.

No sooner had the Act been passed than Watts, the Los Angeles black ghetto erupted. None of the civil rights legislation, nor the

Roots of black oppression

THE ROOTS of black oppression in the USA lie in the experience of slavery

Slave labour in the Caribbean and North America was one of the ways the early capitalists gathered enough wealth to set the capitalist system on its feet. Marxists call this "primitive accumulation" because its methods (piracy, slavery, land grabbing, hoarding) were not the normal way of making profits once capitalism was a fully fledged and dominant system.

In this early period slaves from West Africa were captured, branded, herded into suffocating slave-ships, "broker" in a three year "seasoning" period, then set to a lifetime's work on sugar and tobacco plantations. Bought and sold, raped and murdered at the will of their masters, fifteen to twenty million Africans suffered this fate between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

When the American capitalists made a revolution against British rule they did it under the banners of freedom and democracy. But this was not to extend to blacks, despite their support for the Independence struggle.

Under the US constitution black people were regarded as only "three-fifths human". Slavery remained in the southern states. Here a mass slave labour force was needed to work the cotton plantations which had sprung up to service the European and North American industrial revolution.

Backward

But the success of the southern landowners in squeezing profits from the blood and sweat of slaves backfired. It left a whole sector of America economically backward, a drag on the northern industrialists and the small settler farmers in the west. When the northern and western states entered a civil war against the southern Confederacy of slave-owning states it was to free American capitalism from its fetters. It was not a war against slavery.

Despite masses of escaped slaves flocking to join the Union armies the northern capitalists did their best to keep them out. Only in 1863, two years after the war had started, did Lincoln proclaim the emancipation of slaves and begin recruitment into the army. Even then blacks were paid only half as much as white soldiers, and the measure was prompted by the need to break the deadlock in the war and prepare the ground for a northern advance.

Freed and given citizenship and the vote, but without land or money; this was the position of black people after the American Civil War. During the "reconstruction" of the south black people were given various rights and encouraged to become sharecropping farmers. Through this the most radical bourgeois politicians in the north hoped to destroy the economic strength of the southern plantation owners.

But by the 1880s it was clear that, like the War of Independence, the Civil War had done little to alleviate the plight of black people. Faced with the massive economic power of the south, the northern capitalists gave the southern states the right to control their own affairs. As the USA developed into a modern imperialist country it unleashed a wave of state racism against southern blacks. In 1883 the Civil Rights Act was revoked by the Supreme Court.

The southern states introduced vicious apartheid laws known as "Jim Crow". Blacks were forcibly segregated in every sphere; laundries, trains, libraries and housing neighbourhoods. The Jim Crow laws were enforced by lynchings organised by the local sheriffs with the Ku Klux Klan, an organisation that developed more and more into a fascist outfit during the twentieth century.

They ensured blacks could not exercise their right to vote. At the same time the "free" black farmers were systematically ruined by sharecropping. Twenty-five years after the abolition of slavery most blacks in the south were slaves to their own debts.

All over the world racism spread virulently at the end of the nineteenthth century. Racism is rooted in the emergence of bourgeois nations. It reached its highpoint in the imperialist epoch when the division of the world into competing nation states became more and more at odds with the existence of an international economy and labour market. The imperialist heartlands became a living hell for those people designated inferior or alien "races" by the reactionary national chauvinism of the capitalists.

Yet the twentieth century also opened up the potential road to freedom for US blacks. The whole history of black slavery had also been a history of slave revolt. Gabriel Prosser (1800), Denmark Vesey (1822) and Nat Turner (1833) organised successive attempts at mass armed insurrection against the white slave-owners. All were executed when their inevitably isolated revolts were crushed or betrayed. The imperialist epoch, which had enshrined racial oppression in "democratic" America also created a black and white working class which could overthrow imperialism and racial oppression altogether.

Proletarians

Between the 1900s and the end of World War Two millions of blacks were drawn into the cities and industries of the northern states. No longer share-cropping farmers but black proletarians, they brought a tradition of resistance and revolt into the economic struggles of the unskilled workers.

World War Two gave a massive impetus to the flow of black workers into the cities and the strategic industries. Despite racism a fighting unity in the workplace developed. So did the anger of black workers and soldiers conscripted to fight a war for "democracy" when so little "democracy" applied to millions of US blacks.

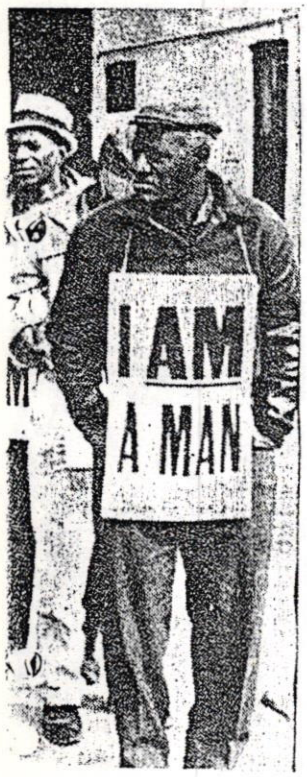
A. Philip Randolph threw his union, the largely black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, into a mass agitation against Jim Crow, racism in the American Federation of Labour(AFL) and segregation in the army and defence industries. Faced with a threatened "March on Washington" by thousands of black workers in 1941 President Roosevelt enacted a whole series of anti-discrimination measures, including a Fair Employment Committee.

This legal reform set the scene for the mass struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. The black proletariat had demonstrated its presence and its fighting spirit. It had put on the agenda not just revolt, but black liberation.

USA

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paper anti-racism of the AFL-CIO had seriously alleviated the daily misery and poverty of the black ghetto. In 1967 there were similar uprisings in Detroit, Newark and Cleveland. They revealed the need for class action against poverty and job discrimination, and for a strategy that went beyond democratic reform of the capitalist system, to its overthrow.

The Memphis sanitation workers' strike of 1968, during which Martin Luther King was assassinated, was just one of a wave of strikes by black workers against poor pay, bad conditions and racist discrimination in employment. Everywhere the class question was coming to the fore, posing an acute crisis of direction amongst the radicals who had united in the early sixties to win the Civil Rights Act. The failure of the Act to destroy racism inevitably led to the fragmentation of the black movement itself.

On the one hand, King's reformist followers embraced the opportunity of integration into bourgeois society for a privileged elite of black bourgeois and professionals. Symbolised by Jesse Jackson they evolved an outright strategy of bourgeois integrationism, collaborating with the bosses to create the "great society". Today they have become mayors and governors of important state machines in America, sitting atop a dungheap of corruption, police racism and abject poverty.

Tragically the radical opposition to these sell-outs was ensnared by various forms of separatism and black nationalism. The black radicals, understandably suspicious of the racist traditions and practice of the unions, were unable to develop a class strategy to combat and defeat their oppression.

Revolutionary communists, whilst opposing nationalism, support the right of self-determination, up to and including secession, for oppressed nations. Thus throughout the 1940s and 1950s Marxists supported the national liberation struggles in Africa and Asia which became the inspiration for US black nationalism.

But black people in the USA did not develop a national consciousness embodied in a struggle for a black nation. From the second Comintern Congress in 1920 to the mid-thirties the communist movement debated whether or not US blacks were in the process of achieving national consciousness.

In its ultra-left period (1929-33) the US Communist Party called for a separate black state in the southern USA where black people were the overwhelming majority. Trotsky, whilst rejecting this call, argued that if material conditions of oppression produced a mass national consciousness amongst black people, Marxists would be bound to support their right of self-determination.

Throughout the whole inter-war period however, material conditions had done the opposite. Mass migration, proletarianisation and integration had firmly bound the fate of America's twenty million blacks with the struggle of the whole US working class for socialism.

Acute crisis and social upheaval might change this, and once again, pose the national question for the black people of the USA. Today, however, it would be wrong and dangerous to equate the struggle for black liberation with the struggle for black self-determination.

Despite their heroism the story of the black radicals of the late 1960s is an object lesson in the uselessness of separatism as a strategy for the racially oppressed.

During the pre-1964 period Black Nationalism had been represented chiefly by Elijah Muhammad's "Nation of Islam". Muhammad combined the call for a separate black nation in the USA and fierce anti-communist rhetoric with a radical rejection of the integrationist project. He was a firm supporter of black capitalism.

One of the Nation's most radical leaders, Malcolm X, broke with Muhammad in 1964 and embraced an ever more radical view of the need for direct action and armed self-organisation. Against King's strategy of lobbying the bourgeoisie and mobilising black trade unionists to pressure them, Malcolm X argued:

"Any time you find somebody today who's afraid of the word revolution, get him out of your way. He's living in the wrong era ... He hasn't awakened yet. This is the era of revolution."

Essentially a revolutionary nationalist, Malcolm evolved more and more towards the idea of class struggle and the overthrow of capitalism. After visiting Ghana and Algeria he began a critique of black nationalism that was cut short by his assassination in 1965.

Under Stokely Carmichael's leadership the SNCC too embraced black nationalism, formulating the Black Power slogan in 1966. But what did Black Power mean? To many it summed up the positive expression of power felt by black workers and youth as they took on the bosses and the police. Not integration into Uncle Sam's USA, with its gathering war effort in Vietnam and its endemic racism, but rejection of the whole system.

To Carmichael and his followers, however, it meant separating the black struggle from white society as a whole, rejecting the white workers as allies, making the class struggle subordinate to the black national struggle, and totally ignoring the struggles of the oppressed within the black population. "The only position for women in the SNCC" said Carmichael, "is prone". Not only the white student anti-racists but many black women were driven out of the SNCC in the late 1960s, thus ensuring its collapse.

The Black Panthers emerged in 1966. Unlike the SNCC they tried to root themselves firmly within the black working class, if not in the factory then in the ghetto communities. They took up Malcolm X's slogan; "By any means necessary" and found the means in armed resistance to police racism. They quickly gained popularity amongst the exploited and oppressed black communities through their audacious armed actions combined with welfare and self-help projects. But in replacing Martin Luther King's non-violence with a strategy of isolated armed struggle they sowed the seeds of their own defeat.

Murdered

In response to the growth and effectiveness of the Panthers the FBI organised a massive "Counter Intelligence Program". One by one the Panthers were murdered or framed by the US state. Many heroic fighters are in US jails, still resisting, torture and solitary confinement. Having failed to organise the black masses independently, or to look for links with black and white workers in the factories—despite their socialist rhetoric—the Panthers were crushed just as effectively as the slave owners crushed the revolts of the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile in the Detroit car plants a series of black rank and file groups emerged, called "Revolutionary Union Movements". Nationalist in inspiration the RUMs, eventually organised as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW). But they adopted wildcat strike action as their main tactic. They shut down the plants repeatedly in 1969 over equal pay, job discrimination and representation in the United Auto Workers union.

Again, despite embracing one element of a strategy against bourgeois integrationism, this movement was crippled by its separatist politics. Many white rank and file workers supported their demands and actions. But they were excluded from the LRBW and the League's leadership saw no place for them within the struggle for black liberation.

At the crucial moments the employers were able to pick off strike leaders with the union's help. Without a fight alongside white rank and file workers to take control of the UAW from the bureaucrats the LRBW was soon marginalised in the factories.

These experiences highlighted that just as nationalism had become obsolete so had its organisational concomitant, a separate black political party. The US working class needs a workers' party that encompasses all sections and that, as part of its general revolutionary programme, inscribes the fight for black liberation on its banner. While special organisations, and even black proletarian movements and united fronts, may prove essential in the course of the struggle, a separate party will be a diversion and an obstacle.

By the early 1970s the period of radical black struggle was over. With the vanguard victimised, jailed or murdered the door was open for all kinds of charlatans to posture as self appointed leaders. Do-nothing cultural nationalists vied with pro-Democratic Party integrationists in the rhetoric of struggle. But the struggle itself had been defeated and derailed.

The struggle came up against the limits of what capitalism would grant peacefully. Neither integrationists nor revolutionary separatists could chart a way forward. The integrationism of the Jacksons and the Andrew Youngs remained bourgeois integrationism. It offered nothing to the mass of black workers and poor except a few crumbs from the table of the newly rich and "integrated" black bosses. The separatists managed to separate the most radical black fighters from the only force in society that can bring about an end to black oppression; the working class.

Between 1954 and 1970 the black struggle in the USA encompassed everything from cross-class, peaceful protest and pleading with the President to armed insurrection and mass unofficial strike action. By mobilising hundreds of thousands at the height of America's boom and the Cold War it demonstrated that the specially oppressed can play a leading role in the class struggle.

It demonstrated the bankruptcy of all forms of separatism for the militant fighters amongst the racially oppressed. It showed the need and possibility of revolutionary unity between black and white workers. Most of all it demonstrated the need for a party and programme that unites the struggles of the oppressed with the fight against the capitalist system. For it is that system which is the source of their oppression and there is no road to black liberation in the USA other than through working class power.

In future articles we will look at the position of the US left on the black struggle and examine the legacy of defeat in the 1970s

BOBBY SEALE
Seize The Time

Mark Harrison reviews
Seize The Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P Newton by Bobby Seale, Black Classic Press, Baltimore, 1991, Price: £10.50

BOBBY SEALE was a founder and key leader of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The party, which later became just the Black Panther Party, was founded by Seale and Huey Newton in October 1966.

This book, written by Bobby while he was a political prisoner, is a vivid account of the Panthers' formation and subsequent struggles. It is brilliant.

Huey and Bobby grew up in the black ghetto of Oakland, a working class city in the Bay Area of California. The book brings that ghetto to life, exposing the poverty and police brutality that black people faced. It reveals the spirit of resistance to oppression that shaped the Panthers' politics and led to their popularity amongst the masses.

Enemy

Influenced by the teachings of Malcolm X, Huey and Bobby quickly broke with the "cultural nationalists". The nationalists looked back to Africa for their inspiration and saw all whites, irrespective of their class position, as the enemy. The Panthers saw through the nationalists' attempts to disguise the conflict of interests between black capitalists and the black poor behind the camouflage of African dress. Seale writes:

"Huey would explain many times that if a black businessman is charging you the same prices or higher, even higher prices than exploiting white businessmen, then he himself ain't nothing but an exploiter. So why should black people go for this kind of system?"

As the Panthers developed they collaborated with white-dominated organisations. They organised inside the unions, building Panther caucuses. Their lawyer, Charles R Garry, dubbed the "Lenin of the court room" by Seale, was white.

Not one of these actions compromised their struggle against racism and for black liberation. In contrast, as Seale explains, the separatists on a number of occasions seriously damaged the struggle by collaborating with black cops employed by the racist state.

While the separatists and posers talked Huey and Bobby decided to act. After failing to win over the separatists in Merritt College Soul Students Advisory Council to taking up arms and building in the community Huey denounced them:

"We don't have time for you. You're jiving in these colleges. You're hiding behind the ivory-walled towers in the college, and you're shucking and you're jiving."

The Panthers' foundation was the direct consequence of this split with cultural nationalism and separatism.

Patrols

The Panthers' first principle was armed black self-defence. By the brilliant exploitation of the US constitution and California state laws on the right to bear arms, the Black Panthers began to conduct armed patrols of the Oakland ghetto.

The technique was simple. So long as guns were on display and not pointing at anyone the Panthers could legally ride the streets armed to the teeth. And they did—tailing cop cars wherever they went. Of course the police tried to put a stop to this. They hadn't counted on Huey's knowledge of the gun laws.

Time and again the police were faced down by Panthers with pistols and shotguns. Every time the police tried to take the guns from them Huey Newton quoted the constitution at them, leaving them baffled. Every time the police threatened the Panthers, each one of them would click a bullet into the firing chamber and quote the law on the right to self-defence if attacked.

The effect of these patrols on the black community was electric, and after a number of major confrontations the ranks of the party began to swell. Demonstrations and rallies against police harassment or in support of black rights were flanked by armed Panthers. The police stood by, helpless to do anything other than bitterly complain that "the niggers were twisting the Constitution round".

The Panthers put Malcolm X's message, "by any means necessary" into practice. But they combined their armed self-defence programme with a range of political activities that won them mass support beyond Oakland. With Eldridge Cleaver as their "Minister for Information" they produced a regular paper and built a nationwide organisation.

They initiated united fronts against fascists and ran in elections. They developed a community programme based on satisfying the immediate needs of the poor of the ghetto—breakfasts for children, free health clinics, free education centres that taught black history. They conscientiously purged criminals and opportunists—"jackanapes"—from their ranks.

While all of these activities demarcated the Panthers from the reformist wing of the black movement, led by Martin Luther King, and earned them the trust of black communities across the USA, the Black Panther Party failed as a political organisation. The heroism and determination of the Panthers could not substitute for a clear revolutionary strategy.



Bobby Seale 1966

Throughout their existence the Panthers remained unclear on their strategic goals. The programme, drafted by Newton and Seale, consisted of ten points, divided into "what we want" and "what we believe" sections. Its concept of "freedom" for black people to determine their own destiny went no further than a call for a "United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of the black people as to their national destiny."

This demand conceded to the separatists and nationalists the existence of a black nation. It hampered the ability of the Panthers to develop a fully fledged class strategy for black liberation in the USA, for it left as a possibility a purely national solution. And when the Panthers were pressed to give a concrete form to this potential national solution, they ended up by projecting the utopian idea of a nation based on the disparate urban black ghettos.

In turn, flowing from the idea of the US black population as a series of communities constituting a nation, the Panthers increasingly turned to concepts of community control—of the police, of education, of industry.

These nationalist and communitarian projects, premised on the idea of nationally separated communities, flatly contradicted the Panthers' occasional calls for socialism and workers' control.

Underpinning these confused programmatic goals was the influence of Stalinism. When the Panthers started out they got money for guns by selling Mao's "Red Book" at a profit to the "radical leftists" on the Berkeley university campus. But Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Castro and Guevara all began to exert considerable influence on the thinking of Huey and Bobby. They embraced the Stalinist "stages theory" of revolution: first black liberation, then socialism.

In the fight against the "fascist" US state the primary task was to unify the lumpenproletariat of the ghetto. Only after that would the struggle for socialism become possible. The lumpenproletariat were seen as the decisive force for social change. And the method for change most suitable to this class was the armed struggle in the ghetto.

Various declarations from Huey Newton contradicted this strategy. But they remained declarations. He called for a general revolution in the "white mother-country", but developed a practice exclusively based on the struggle in the black ghettos.

Stalinism also influenced the organisation of the Black Panther Party. Franz Fanon's teachings on guerilla war were decisive in Huey and Bobby's thinking. The two of them set up the Panthers and became Minister of Defence and Chairman respectively. With more recruits they established other posts, but the organisation remained elitist and undemocratic. Huey became a cult figure whose own thoughts were rarely questioned by the rank and file.

None of this detracts from the place of honour that the Black Panthers have in the history of the black liberation struggle. It merely explains that they failed to develop a political strategy that could ultimately defeat the US imperialist state.

Revenge

That state took vicious revenge on the young black militants who had used the gun laws to defy its racist police and their brutalisation of the black communities. A massive FBI operation, the Counter Intelligence Programme, was launched against the Panthers. Key militants were shot dead in deliberately provoked shoot-outs with the police.

Huey Newton was wounded in one such shoot-out and, in defiance of all the evidence, was incarcerated for murder.

Bobby Seale was framed and shipped to Chicago where, when he tried to defend himself in court, the judge ordered that he be chained to a chair and gagged throughout the trial.

Faced with this persecution the Panthers stood firm. To this day some of their members rot in US prisons. Bobby Seale's book is a tribute to these class war prisoners, to black liberation fighters who gave their lives for a noble struggle.

Today's generation of black militants can learn from the mistakes of the Panthers. Black self defence can be a starting point, and is a vital element of the struggle. But it has to be fought for as part of a programme to link the everyday struggles of black workers and youth to the overthrow of the capitalist system.

Black self organisation has to be class based and take place within the wider working class movement. Thus, while revolutionary Marxists support black caucuses in the workers' movement and in certain conditions even advocate a working class black movement, we do not advocate the setting up of a separate black political party. We fight for black workers and youth to take their place in the leadership of integrated revolutionary workers' organisations.

But as well as learning from the Panthers' mistakes today's youth must also learn the spirit of heroism and the will to act that permeated the Black Panther Party if they want to bring the ideas of socialism and black liberation to life.■

PANTHER UK
Repeating the Mistakes

PANTHER UK, an independent black organisation allied to Militant, is the main organisation distributing Bobby Seale's book in Britain. The problem is that Panther UK seems to have learned nothing from the mistakes of the original Panthers, and is set to repeat them.

The emergence of a black organisation allied to Militant may strike some working class activists as odd. Wasn't this the organisation which opposed Black Sections in the Labour Party on the grounds that it would split the working class?

Looked at closely however, Militant's Panther venture fits in with its newly reconstructed brand of centrism—that is, politics which constantly waver between reform and revolution.

Militant's centrism used to focus on one unifying schema: the transformation of Labour into a "blunt instrument" for socialist change, the peaceful transformation of society through a socialist Labour government backed up by the workers' organisations. This represented a strategic accommodation to reformism.

With that schema in ruins Militant is constructing another one, based on a strategic accommodation to various movements—feminism within CADV, Scottish nationalism with Scottish Militant Labour, and black separatism with Panther.

Panther UK has promoted Bobby Seale and the original Panthers uncritically, as a model for black youth in Britain to follow today. At the same time its programme is a classic "maximum-minimum" programme, with the socialist goal divorced from the demands of everyday struggle.

This was the method when all demands were addressed to the mythical "socialist Labour government". But applied to the programme for black liberation it not only leaves the final goal divorced from the struggle: it leaves the programme for black liberation divorced from the programme for working class power as a whole.

Nowhere in Panther's programme is the question of united struggle with white workers addressed. Nowhere is the place of the black struggle within the struggle for socialism concretely explained. The place of Panther itself within the workers' movement is not explained either.

In the old days readers of Militant were meant to get the impression that the tendency was a left wing version of Labourism. Today readers of Panther can only come away with the impression that Panther is a left wing version of black nationalism.

Yet, as the whole history of the original Panthers shows, it was not the shortage of socialist rhetoric that was the problem. It was the lack of a complete break with black separatism and nationalism, lack of a concrete strategy to link black self-defence with the struggle of the whole working class against capitalism.

Today Panther UK is repeating the mistakes of Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Militant members and supporters should demand a serious account of the trajectory of Panther UK, and reject the centrism embodied in its programme.■

DRUGS, GUNS, GANGLAND KILLINGS . . .

Fighting the inner city blues

BY BEN WILLIAMSON

FOURTEEN YEAR old Benji Stanley was shot three times with a single barrelled pump action shotgun, once in the leg, then again in the upper chest. As he lay helpless on the floor he was finally blasted fatally through his heart. His masked assailants sped off in a silver coloured car as people on the street looked on in shock and fear.

You could be forgiven for mistaking this for a scene out of *Boyz 'n the Hood* or *New Jack City*. Tragically this was not a hyped up film, but real life in January outside a West Indian takeaway near the notorious Alexander Park Estate, Moss Side. Shootings are not an uncommon occurrence in Moss Side, one of Manchester's most impoverished inner-city areas, where 80% of black youth have no job or any prospects of getting one.

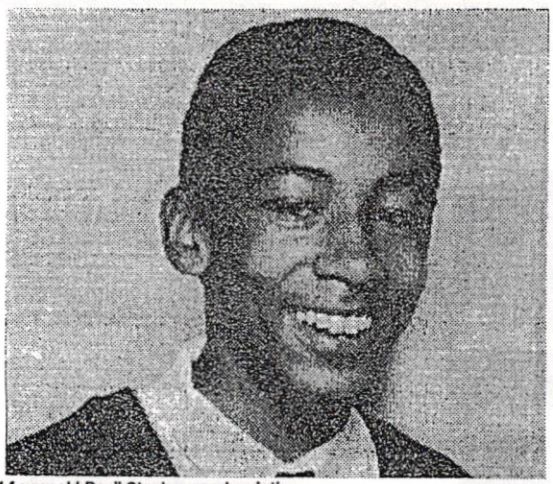
Stigma

Employers operate a "post-code prejudice" against Moss Side residents—which means you are doubly stigmatised as undesirable if you are black and from Moss Side. The plight of the unemployed here is made even worse by the near total lack of recreational facilities and the overall grimness of housing estates that receive next to no maintenance from the city council.

It is in this climate that the shark drug bosses are able to breed a whole culture of "business chains" servicing hopeless addicts and bored teenagers at exorbitant prices. Many of them are then forced to steal and mug to sustain their habits. Youngsters aged ten and upwards are in the employ of the main dealers. Tempted by large amounts of money and prestige, the kids act as couriers by trafficking large quantities of hash, "E's", smack, coke and crack across the estate. Riding on their mountain bikes they are inconspicuous and are able to transport the drugs through the back streets quicker than anyone in a car.

Practically everyone in Moss Side, save the police, knows or knows of someone who knows who the gangsters are. They hardly conceal themselves, going around as they do in flash cars and flash clothes, with the inevitable portaphones in hand ready to call out to a big buyer or seller at a minute's notice to negotiate an order.

No wonder, then, that few locals believe police claims that Benji's killing was a result of a dispute over a stolen mountain bike. While Benji's mum is understandably desperate to try to distance him from involvement in drugs, it would seem that the police are putting this forward as a possible motive as an attempt to cover up their total inability and unwillingness to confront the drug bosses. The local press has run stories with quotes from a wide range of community leaders all saying the same thing—"people trust the police less than they do the dealers". This is no surprise—the police are no friends of the local community. The police harass local youths and families who have no connection with the dealers at the top, being suspects in the police's eyes because they are black. Local Asians are ignored by police when their shops are stoned by racists or even when they are physically attacked.



14 year old Benji Stanley, murder victim

We need to police our own communities—we know who the dealers are—we are the only ones who can collectively confront them

The police have promised protection for anyone coming forward with information about the murder, but no-one trusts a force who have in the past only made a few tokenistic busts on small fry middle level dealers. One of their suggested tactics of setting up a special unit on mountain bikes to apprehend the couriers would be laughable were it not so pathetically inadequate. They are incapable of getting to grips with the real racketeers.

Inadequate

Meanwhile the council is planning to spend £6 million on run-down estates in south Manchester to provide security systems for houses and to clear up the litter and rubbish on the streets. This is totally inadequate—an attempt to put a plaster over a gaping wound.

Moss Side is typical of hundreds of inner city areas across Britain; in the capitalist society we live in the poor and oppressed in the big cities are kept in the ghetto, sectioned off from more "respectable" areas and ground down by poverty and state harassment. In these areas there can never be any "effective policing" by the state. The problems we face are caused by capitalism and its state. The problems will never go away unless tackled with working class answers. There needs to be a massive programme of public works, with people from the community employed for the community to build decent houses, to build and run playgrounds, skate parks, youth and social clubs and sports centres.

Women, as single parents, unemployed or part time workers are isolated on these estates with few opportunities to take part in social life or recreation. Women need access to secure jobs with good wages, and decent benefits for times when they can't work. Providing creches and nurseries, free for parents to use and controlled by the parents and workers in them would free women from the burden of perpetual childcare.

Improving housing and facilities cannot be left to the councils whose first priority is to make their books balance for the bankers and bosses—local residents and council workers should decide plans for housing, and recreation facilities and demand funding from the government.

Profits

While drugs remain illegal, dealers will always be able to make extortionate profits from the pockets of those who can ill afford them by selling impure drugs, adulterated with crap like strychnine, chalk, talcum powder and sand. In depressed communities drugs are a reality that will not go away. Youth faced with overwhelming inner-city blues can escape for a while by getting out of their heads.

The answer to this is not to hunt down and turn all these kids into criminals, but to make the supply of drugs legal—this would pull the rug from underneath the drug bosses. It would mean regulation of the supply and quality of drugs would be taken out of the hands of the profiteering gangsters. The supply of drugs could be accompanied by better services and support for those with drug related problems. It would stop addicts stealing from their own class and killing themselves off.

The community must come together now to drive the drug bosses and their evil ilk out. We need to police our own communities—we know who the dealers are—we are the only ones who can collectively confront them. To this end we need to set up community defence squads. We cannot rely on the police; they are the major perpetrators of violence against our communities rather than our protectors. Local defence squads need to be based on community organisations on the estates, including youth, women's and black organisations. These groups should link up to organise armed defence—pacifist "neighbourhood watch" schemes are useless against armed racketeers and police—but at the same time take up a political struggle to transform the lives of people on the estates through links with the organised workers locally.

Defence

To provide effective local defence the gun laws must be reformed to allow working class people to carry guns. In the sixties Bobby Seale, Huey P Newton and the Panthers were able to close down the drug racketeers in many impoverished inner-city black ghettos, but only by exploiting the liberal American gun laws and by organising themselves into disciplined squads and confronting the police.

We need to learn from such lessons of what can be achieved by working class people. Such aims and actions will not be easily realised, but with the strength, decency and solidarity local inner-city communities are forced to engender—through struggle together—we can beat the inner-city blues. ■

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