

1968 in the USA: From civil rights to Black Power

Mon, 03/11/2008 - 18:13

On 1 February 1960, an impulsive and practically unplanned act of bravery by four black college students sparked the great civil rights' revolt in the USA. The students went into a Woolworths store in Greensboro, North Carolina and then sat down at a lunch counter which was reserved for whites.

They were not served. A waitress asked them to leave and they courteously, but firmly, refused. Despite the fact that their actions were a direct challenge to the system of segregation, they encountered no force, no repression, and no arrests. One of the students, Franklin McCain later recalled:

"Now it came to me all of a sudden. 'Maybe they can't do anything to us. Maybe we can keep it up.'"

They stayed put until the store closed, then went back to the college and began to organise. The next day they built a bigger protest, the day after a bigger one still. By 4 February hundreds of students had been drawn in to the protest.

Sit-ins

The sit-ins spread throughout North Carolina. By mid-April every state in the South was affected by the movement which had drawn in 50,000 participants. The demonstrations and sit-ins were marked by dignity in the face of mounting repression, and by a pervasive attitude of restraint and refusal to be provoked. The Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced 'Snick') was created as the first attempt to give an organisational structure to the spontaneous revolt of black youth against segregation. In the years after its founding meeting in Raleigh on 16 April 1960, it was to become one of the most radical organisations in America.

The extreme dedication and bravery of the young militants was linked to the notion, derived from Martin Luther King, that white America would be shamed into granting equal rights by demonstrations of the "capacity of black people to suffer". Under the influence of a large delegation of Nashville students committed to Gandhian principles of nonviolence and to Christian pacifist ideals, SNCC adopted a code of conduct that included:

'Don't strike back or curse if abused... Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times... Report all serious incidents to your leader in a polite manner. Remember love and nonviolence.'

These principles embodied the innocence of the movement in its earliest stages. It was an innocence based on the acceptance that America really was "the land of the free". The leaders of the movement believed that white liberals in the USA, especially those within the Democratic Party, could be gently edged towards reform.

It was the Freedom Rides campaign that really brought SNCC to the centre of the revolt. In early 1961, SNCC, together with the Congress of Racial Equality, organised bus journeys across the South in which groups of black militants would attempt to use segregated eating facilities at bus terminals.

As the rides went on the activists suffered increasingly violent attacks from white racists, local authorities and police who were often linked with the Ku Klux Klan. In Armiston, Alabama, a bus was burnt out by racists and activists were beaten up by a vicious mob. By 21 May, disorder had reached such a pitch that martial law was declared in Montgomery.

Under enormous pressure, the Interstate Commerce Commission announced on 22 September that it would be prohibited to provide separate facilities for blacks and whites in bus and train terminals. Although many racist authorities ignored the regulation for as long as they could, the ruling had shown millions of blacks throughout America that defiance and struggle could win real results.

At the same time the extent of repression meted out to the black protesters exposed the weaknesses of pacifism in the movement. The freedom riders were not "left alone" when they acted. They were hounded and beaten. The authorities, including the white liberals amongst the Democrats, were not persuaded to carry out reforms. Whenever they did act it was because they were frightened into doing so by militant action and the threat of disorder.

The movement was growing up, and the innocent ideals of pacifism began to be questioned. As the struggle assumed truly mass proportions more and more radical youth were drawn in, and they were less inclined to be courteous to racist gun thugs or deferential to Democrat politicians who sat on their hands while the racists ran riot.

Many activists started to realise that self-defence was vital in the face of police and Klan brutality. But still the leaders were relying on protection from the Kennedy/Johnson wing of the Democrats.

The Democratic Party could see the value of additional votes from Southern blacks. But their aim was to "support" the movement in such a way as to divert it away from struggle. Kennedy suggested that SNCC should turn its attention to a drive to register black voters.

Although black people were entitled to vote, many had not registered, and faced obstruction, intimidation and violence from white authorities when they tried to do so. Kennedy thought that a peaceful voter registration campaign would be an alternative to the confrontational desegregationist battles that had wracked the South. His plan backfired because of the violent resistance of the racist authorities.

In McComb the efforts to register black voters led to persistent arrests of SNCC staff members, including the imprisonment of project leader Bob Moses for 90 days. Moses was beaten up by the sheriff's cousin, who was acquitted by an all-white jury. Then Herbert Lee, who had been assisting the project, was shot dead in cold blood. Witnesses were threatened and beaten by the police, one being tracked down and killed literally years later.

The fact that the Democratic Party and the federal government failed to uphold the constitutional rights of the blacks or protect them in the face of thuggery hardened the attitude of many SNCC activists towards the Democrats. In May 1962, when four activists were arrested on a demonstration on federal property, SNCC sent a telegram to Robert Kennedy saying that if the government couldn't protect their rights on such property then, "you must be considered a party to these violations of our constitutionally guaranteed civil rights." Charles Sherrod, an SNCC field activist, was even more blunt. He declared that 'if we are murdered in our attempts, our blood will be on your hands.'

Attempts to reform the Democratic Party also proved impossible. In August 1964 the SNCC-promoted Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party tried to defeat the all-white delegation to the Democratic National Convention, aiming to secure the delegation and weaken the hand of the racist ?Dixiecrats - representing

white landowning interests - that ran the party in the south.

This achieved nothing in practical terms. The Democrats were, and remain, open and unflinching representatives of the capitalist ruling class, and in the South the historic party of the slave owners, up to their necks in Jim Crow and segregation.

Illusions in the Democrats were becoming self-defeating in the struggle for black rights. Even so, the leadership of the movement, even some of the most radical elements, were reluctant to abandon what they saw as their only hope of winning government support for their pacifist campaign.

The famous march on Washington was led by Martin Luther King in August 1963. Millions have heard and been moved by the vision of a society free from racism that he expressed in his historic speech that day. But there was another speech planned which was never made. SNCCs John Lewis drafted a declaration which rejected Kennedy's proposed civil rights bill as inadequate, as failing to protect people who were actively claiming and fighting for their rights in the South.

Lewis planned to tell the 250,000 people at the Washington rally:

"I want to know, which side is the federal government on?"

He intended to declare:

"...the revolution is at hand and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery."

Though Lewis remained committed to non-violence, he wrote:

"We will not wait for the President, the Justice Department, nor Congress, but will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power, outside of any national structure, that could and would assure us of victory."

He showed the speech to other civil rights leaders first. They told him to change it, because otherwise the Archbishop of Washington would not appear on the platform! Reluctantly Lewis agreed, and a committee was set up to modify his declaration. But on the day Lewis still launched into a bitter attack on the Democrats and the Republicans, and in doing so drew direct attention to a key weakness of the mass struggle against segregation and all forms of racism in the USA, a weakness that persists to this day:

"Where is our party? Where is the political party that will make it unnecessary to have marches on Washington?"

Anger

Many SNCC workers, who had built the delegations to the march from the South, deeply resented the moderate slogans of the march, and the petty restrictions imposed by its organisers, such as the strict control of slogans on placards and banners. Gradually a new radicalism was beginning to permeate the younger, grass roots civil rights campaigners.

SNCC workers started to discuss and consider more favourably ideas of organised self-defence of black communities, as well as openly investigating pan-Africanist and socialistic ideas. A number of members of the SNCC staff were also members of Students for a Democratic Society, which was to become one of the main "New Left" organisations that flourished during the radicalisation of youth at the time of the Vietnam War.

By 1964 Stokely Carmichael was emerging as a leader of the radical wing of the movement. His emphasis shifted from pacifist pleading to demanding the nationalisation of the top corporations and the breaking up of large landed estates. He wanted to see "more than 100 people control over 60 per cent of the industry". At the same time he began encouraging SNCC staff to "stop taking a defensive stand on communism." SNCC leaders began an African tour where they met, among others, Malcolm X and discussed collaboration with his newly formed Organisation of Afro-American Unity.

Vietnam

In early 1965 events took a sharper turn. Attempts to organise a mass march from Selma to Montgomery met with sustained police attack and barricades. On 10 March, Martin Luther King, at the head of a demonstration, angered local residents and SNCC staff by unilaterally deciding to call off the march, turn around and go back.

But SNCC, under the leadership of the militant activist Jim Forman, seized the opportunity to challenge the leadership of King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference over the mobilisation. He argued firmly for building the demos and not flinching from confrontation with the police. As Forman put it, "If we can't sit at the table of democracy, we'll knock the fucking legs off."

Out of the work around the Selma marches the next year, Carmichael fronted a campaign to build an independent political organisation in the rural area between Selma and Montgomery, the Lowndes County Freedom Organisation. It adopted the emblem of a snarling black panther, and soon called itself the Black Panther Party. According to one historian of the movement, Clayborne Carson, it was not at first intended to be an exclusively black organisation, but became so because no whites wanted to join it. It provided the model for the future organisation of the Black Panther Party for Self Defence of Bobby Seale and Huey P Newton.

Also in 1965, SNCC took the highly political step of speaking out against the war being pursued by the USA in Vietnam. A statement was already in the process of being prepared when SNCC were spurred to speak out by the death of Sammy Younge, a 21-year old veteran of the US Navy who was shot to death while trying to use a whites-only restroom at a filling station. The SNCC statement exposed US hypocrisy and explicitly linked racism in the South to imperialism overseas. A furious witch-hunt against SNCC ensued.

As an expression of the increased radicalism of the SNCC staff and volunteers, Stokely Carmichael challenged John Lewis for the position of Chair of SNCC in 1966.

Born in the West Indies, Carmichael had family and personal connections with black members of the Communist Party of the USA. When he joined the Nonviolent Action Group and then the full time SNCC staff in 1964, he brought with him both secularism and an emphasis on economic and social issues. By 1966 he was becoming heavily influenced by ideas of black consciousness, of pride in blackness, the positive promotion of black culture and the construction of black institutions. He insisted, in response to attacks from liberals against this approach, that his position was "? not anti-white. When you build your own house, it doesn't mean you tear down the house across the street."

But it was not until the events surrounding the Mississippi march of 1966 that this orientation began to take shape, when the new slogan of Black Power was to sweep the USA.

In June 1966 James Meredith began a solo walk across Mississippi as a demonstration of the right of black people to live without threats and fear of violence. He was shot three times and hospitalised.

Martin Luther King, Congress of Racial Equality leader Floyd McKissick and Stokely Carmichael joined forces to lead a protest march that would also boost local voter registration efforts. King viewed the march in much the same way he viewed the whole campaign - a strictly peaceful protest. But SNCC was adopting a more militant stance than before.

Sick of years of beatings, shootings and arrests, Carmichael argued that an organisation called the Deacons of Defence provide armed protection for the march. At mass rallies across Mississippi, Carmichael spoke against the nonviolence line being pursued by King, and condemned the federal government for failing to provide any real protection against racist terror. In Leflore County Carmichael told a meeting of hundreds after he had been detained in jail:

"This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested. I ain't going to jail no more ? What we gonna start saying now is 'black power'."

What did Black Power mean? To many SNCC workers and poor blacks, from Mississippi to the ghettos of the big cities, it meant an end to compromise, to nonviolence, to reliance on white liberals. Rank and file SNCC workers had seen the consequences of reliance on the support of liberal whites in failed attempts to get the Northern Democrats and the administration in Washington to act in their support.

The liberals expected a political pay-off for their support: the renunciation of the right to self-defence (something no liberal ever demanded of whites), the censoring of Lewis' speech to the Washington rally in 1963 and King's attempt to get SNCC to call off a demonstration on the Vietnam question in August 1966. As Carmichael explained:

"We will not accept someone who comes to us and says: 'If you do X, Y and Z, then I'll help you.'"

This refusal to tie the movement's hands in return for the illusory support of fair-weather bourgeois allies was a real political step forward.

But the idea of Black Power, as Carmichael came to theorise it in his book of that name, co-authored with Charles V. Hamilton, also contained serious ambiguities. When Carmichael wrote of the need for black consciousness and self-identification as a vital first step, that "only when black people fully develop this sense of community, of themselves, can they begin to deal effectively with the problems of racism in this country", he was not just speaking of the justified need to develop pride and confidence in black culture.

Class

He invested Black Power with another wrong and dangerous meaning. He was advancing the principle of black unity, irrespective of any class divisions. Unity of all black people—workers, poor farmers and the urban poor, as well as middle class and even rich blacks—became for him a precondition for an effective fight against racism. This is what he meant by his famous statement that:

"Before a group can enter open society, it must first close ranks."

The first and most fundamental problem with this approach is that it downplays the central question of class. The unity of black people, as blacks, blurred the real conflicts between blacks of different classes. It blurred the differences between those who advocated reliance on the Democrats, and those who fought for militant action. It was a "unity" that contained the real possibility of holding back the black struggle.

At the same time it cut off, in advance, the possibility of building fighting unity between black and white workers against the common enemy. In far too many cases the white working class and their unions had

proved themselves to be racist. Insofar as Black Power meant not holding back the struggles of black people until white workers became anti-racist it was right and justified. But for Carmichael it was not simply this.

He went on to ignore the real material difference between white workers and their white bosses, and the potential for anti-racism to be built within the white working class because of this difference. As he told a meeting in Watts, Los Angeles, "the only reason [whites] suppress us is because we are black". For this reason white society was conceived simply as a monolith, with no fundamental contradictions between the interests of its respective classes.

While Carmichael insisted that all blacks must be united across class divisions, working class organisations, like the trade unions, were all but written off as "coalitions between the economically secure and the insecure". The racism of the official unions had to be acknowledged and fought. But Carmichael threw out the baby with the bath water, downgrading the rich experience of black workers, indeed black women such as Dora Jones of the Domestic Workers' Union, Floretta Andres of the New York Teachers' Union and Miranda Smith and Velma Hopkins of the Food, Tobacco, Agriculture and Allied Workers' Union, who played leading roles in the rise of industrial unionism and the CIO union federation. These experiences proved that it was both necessary and possible to challenge racism within the working class and build unity in struggle. Whilst for a minority, such as Julius Lester, Black Power meant an increasingly hardline separatist stance, involving rejection on principle of collaboration with whites (he gave one of his pamphlets the ironic title *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!*), Carmichael did not rule out coalitions with whites, but said they could arise only after black people had united.

At the same time as relegating the importance and downplaying the possibility of common class action between black and white workers, Carmichael's conception of the black community closing ranks failed to get to grips with the political and class differentiation within that community. As Jim Forman acutely observed when appealing to SNCC staff to recognise the ambiguities and inadequacies of the Black Power slogan:

"Are the problems we face only ones of color? ? What is upper, lower, middle class? Do they exist among blacks? Why is there a black banker in one town and a starving Negro in the same? ? Do the problems of a black welfare mother only arise from her blackness? If not, then what are the other causes?"

Whilst for SNCC workers and poor blacks the Black Power slogan was one of militancy, for other more moderate and conservative blacks it meant promoting black businesses, a black middle class and even bourgeoisie, rising not with their class but out of their class. In short it meant the furthering of the development of a black middle and upper class, with the attendant danger of a layer of privileged blacks being co-opted into support for the very establishment that Carmichael and others had repeatedly risked their lives to challenge.

Thus Black Power was to become the rallying call not only of the most exploited and oppressed blacks, but also of the most conservative and bourgeois forces within the community. That is why one Black Power conference was sponsored by black Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, who was trying to subordinate the movement to the Democrats and who, as Carmichael admitted, was "talking about stopping the throwing of Molotov cocktails and not stopping the causes that bring about the throwing of the cocktails".

A new layer of moderate community leaders was able to consolidate around the Black Power slogan, holding conferences sponsored by, among others, the white owned corporation Clairol. This was in line with the attempts of US capitalism to co-opt a privileged layer of blacks as its answer to the urban uprisings and mass struggles of the 1960s. This is clear from the words of former Republican President, reactionary

racist and proven crook, Richard Nixon:

"What most of the militants are asking is not separation but to be included in - not as supplicants, but as owners, as entrepreneurs - to have a share of the wealth and a piece of the action. And this is precisely what the federal central target of the new approach ought to be. It ought to be oriented toward more black ownership ? black pride, black jobs, black opportunity and yes, Black Power ?"

Power

In the end, the Black Power slogan and the approach it represented proved not only ambiguous and capable of being adopted by conservative forces, but also disorienting for some of the most militant civil rights fighters. As SNCC declined under the twin blows of external repression and internal ideological incoherence, Carmichael himself turned to the pan-African nationalist "socialism" of Nkrumah and Sekou Toure, President of the bourgeois republic of Guinea.

Carmichael ended up accepting Toure's offer of moving to Guinea and acting as his personal secretary in 1968, taking the name of Kwame Ture and joining the leadership of Guinea's ruling party in 1972. The notion of uniting all black people before, and as a precondition for, fundamental social change allowed him to support a government which, despite its radical rhetoric, upholds the capitalist system. Carmichael was wrong to believe that the only reason whites suppress black people is because they are black. The root cause of racism is the capitalist system of production for profit.

That system expanded and grew, by using slavery in the development of the New World. It justified both that historic crime against African people and the subsequent political and economic enslavement of the colonial world by denying that Africans and the majority of the peoples of Asia are fully human. It continues to use racial division to undermine the action and the unity of the working class, and to tie white workers to political support for the global system of imperialism. While the heroic struggles of the civil rights movement in the 1960s won real democratic gains for black people, the root causes and brute reality of racism in the USA remain intact. Liberation remains a goal that young blacks are prepared to fight and die for. But as the black writer Harold Cruse pointed out at the time of the debates within the civil rights movement, the Black Power slogan avoids the central issue of "which class is going to wield that power."

If true emancipation is to be won, power must be wielded by the working class, black and white, the only class with the social cohesion and strength to uproot the capitalist system and every manifestation of bigotry, discrimination and racism.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/1968-usa-civil-rights-black-power>