From Civil Rights to Black Power

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On the evening of 1 December 1955, a Black woman passenger in a bus in Montgomery, Alabama started a revolution. Rosa Parks, tired after a long day’s work tailoring in a downtown department store, was sitting in a seat in the “coloured section”. When a number of (white) passengers boarded and there were not enough seats for them in the “for whites” section, the driver said to Rosa and three other Black passengers - “Move y’all, I want those two seats”. Three of them did as he said but Rosa did not move. “Are you going to stand up?” the driver demanded. Rosa Parks calmly said: “No”. The driver replied, “Well, I’m going to have you arrested.” And Rosa politely replied, “You may do that.” And he did.

The incident, the arrest, triggered the historic 381 day Montgomery Bus Boycott. For Rosa Parks was not just a Black woman worker, she was an activist in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, one of the oldest, most prestigious and respectable Black organisations in the US.

The minister of the Dexter Road Baptist church in Montgomery was Martin Luther King Jr. He rapidly became the leader of the Montgomery movement and after its success went on to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SCLC. The Montgomery demands were strikingly modest. Not the total desegregation of the buses but that Black passengers should not have to give up their seats for whites and that Black bus drivers should be employed on routes with mainly Black passengers.

The response of the racists to this modest victory was to organise to defend segregation. The White Citizens’ Alliance in Montgomery increased in membership from 600 to 12,000. Something approaching a reign of terror place in Montgomery. Bombers destroyed five churches, snipers opened fire on the buses and Klansmen lynched a young Black teenager. Rosa Parks lost her job, was Blacklisted, received repeated death threats and eventually had to leave Montgomery. Also it did not at first prove easy to imitate Montgomery: an attempted bus boycott in Birmingham, Alabama, in November 1958, failed.

Plainly, African Americans still faced a massive barrier to equality both in terms of democratic rights and in terms of education, housing, wages and jobs.

The legacy of Slavery - Jim Crow

The effects of African slavery during the birth of American capitalism left an indelible stain on the country’s claims to democracy and the assertion that the two are necessarily and inextricably linked. Karl Marx considered chattel slavery, where the slave is the personal property of the owner, to buy or sell at will, not a legal person with rights etc. as “as much the pivot on which our present day industrialism turns as are machinery, credit, etc.”

He added, “Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry. It is slavery that has given value to the colonies, it is the colonies that have created world trade and world
Trade is the necessary condition for large scale machine industry. (Marx to Annenkov, 1846). Later, in Capital, he saw it as an essential part of the early stages of capitalism, what he called the primitive accumulation process, which also included the dispossession of native Americans and European peasants.

At the time of the American Revolution and War of Independence, 1776-1783, one-fifth of the population of the 13 colonies were Black slaves. The leaders of the new Republic, Washington and Jefferson, were both slave owners. Despite the Declaration of Independence with its ringing clarion call that, “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”, it required a bloody civil war 80 years later to abolish slavery.

The hesitation of Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation is well documented. His and his immediate successor’s leniency towards the rulers of the former Confederate states meant that at first no attempt was made to politically enfranchise the freed slaves, let alone to give them the land they and their forbears had cultivated for a century and a half. Thus, the “Plantocracy” were able to survive and eventually re-establish their rule and exploitation of their former slaves.

Radical Reconstruction, 1866-1877, briefly gave many African Americans the vote and access to State legislatures and governments, but the eventual reconciliation between the northern capitalists and their Republican Party led to a vicious counterrevolution, which robbed Black people of most of their Civil War gains. The system called Jim Crow (after a racist stereotype music hall song) was established and not dismantled until the 1960s.

From the 1890s to just before the First World War, the former Confederate States, passed constitutional amendments and voting regulations that virtually disfranchised Black voters. By 1910, 90 per cent of Black voters in the South were denied the vote and in Louisiana, where Black people were in a majority, only 0.5 per cent were eligible to vote. Poll taxes and literacy qualifications excluded most and, indeed, many “poor whites”, too. Those not on the electoral register were not entitled to serve on juries or hold any public office either. President Woodrow Wilson who, in Europe, posed as the bringer of democracy after the First World War, extended segregation to federal offices in Washington.

Before 1941, white supremacy was defended by an openly racist theory and ideology, that is, that Blacks represented an inferior race. This was broadcast in popular culture, films and radio broadcasts in ways that systematically patronised or degraded African Americans and boosted notions of white superiority.

Another instrument of repression were the anti-Black pogroms, misnamed “race riots”. One of the most notorious occurred in Atlanta, Georgia in September 1906. The Atlanta press and a movement aiming to disfranchise Black people completely whipped up a frenzy of race hatred over supposed rapes of white women. White mobs, meeting virtually no resistance from the city police, murdered Blacks, burnt and looted their homes and businesses. After four days of rioting, ten Blacks were dead and hundreds were injured, whilst over a thousand fled the city. In the years 1910 to 1919, there was an annual average of 62 lynchings. These continued at a lower rate in the 1920s and 1930s but there were also many legal frame-ups that ended in executions. One outrageous miscarriage of justice, the case of the Scotsboro Boys, in 1931, became a worldwide example of US racism.

The Second World War, like the First, saw an objective weakening of segregation and discrimination, with a million African Americans drafted into the armed forces, albeit in segregated regiments, officered by whites. Even larger numbers were drawn into the factories for war production. After the war, however, when Black servicemen returned home, they faced a concerted attempt to “put them back in their place”,

including more lynchings. In 1947, only 12 per cent of Black people in the 11 former Confederate states had the right to vote despite constituting some 20 per cent of the total population. Schools and universities were still strictly segregated, as were places of entertainment, restaurants, housing and public transport.

Vicious as the backlash was, however, it could not for long suppress an idea and a movement whose time had come. President Harry Truman had abolished segregation in the US military in 1948 and in 1954, in Brown vs the Board of Education, the Supreme Court had ruled segregation in public (state) schools unconstitutional, though this had to be enforced by hard and bitter battles throughout the 1960s and has since been massively undermined by the deliberate zoning of housing.

On 1 February 1960, an impulsive and practically unplanned act of bravery by four Black college students sparked a mass civil rights movement in the US. The students went into a Woolworth’s 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,4 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 into 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 North Carolina?s state capital 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 Gandhi?s 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 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 US, especially those within the Democratic Party, could be gently edged towards reform. After the sit-ins, 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, CORE, 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. The KKK was the main white supremacist organisation, founded in the years immediately following the abolition of slavery, which organised the lynching of thousands of Black people and the burning of homes and churches. It was the illegal terrorist organisation that enforced the system of legal apartheid known as Jim Crow.

In Armiston, Alabama, racists burned out a bus 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 the pacifist strategy. 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 combined police and Klan brutality but their leaders were still relying on protection from Democrat Presidents, first John F Kennedy, then Lyndon B Johnson.

The Democratic Party could see the value of winning additional votes from Southern Blacks. 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 wrecked the South.

Kennedy’s plan backfired because of the violent resistance of the racist State authorities.

In McComb, Mississippi, 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 to 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 the President’s brother, and Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, saying that if the government could not protect their rights on such property then, you must be considered a party to these violations of our constitutionally guaranteed civil rights?. Charles Sherrod, a SNCC field activist, was even more blunt.
He declared, “if we are murdered in our attempts, our blood will be on your hands?.

The structural problem was that the Southern Democrats (?Dixiecrats?) were the historic party of the slave owners, the party that had legislated Jim Crow, the party whose rule was unbroken in the States of the former Confederacy. In his inauguration speech, in 1963, the most infamous of them, Governor George Wallace of Alabama, proclaimed, “I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever?.

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 Dixiecrats. This achieved nothing in practical terms. The Democrats were, and remained open and unflinching representatives of the capitalist ruling class, and in the South, up to their necks in defending segregation.

Although the patrician northern Democrats, like the Rockefellers and the Kennedys, were prepared to introduce electoral and other civil rights legislation, they were chary of enforcing it at least until a movement emerged which threatened them with something more than nonviolent protests.

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 for that day which was never made.

SNCC’s John Lewis drafted a declaration that rejected Kennedy’s proposed civil rights bill as inadequate and as failing to protect people who were actively claiming and fighting for their rights in the South. He planned to tell the 250,000 people at the Washington rally:

“I want to know, which side is the federal government on?? and 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 nonviolence, 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 his proposed speech to other civil rights leaders but 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. Nonetheless, on the day, Lewis still launched into a bitter attack on both Democrats and 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 US, 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??

The scale of the March on Washington and the prospect of the movement radicalising if King’s strategy failed to produce any progress combined to bring about the civil rights movement’s greatest legislative achievement: the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Though introduced by Kennedy, its presentation to Congress was interrupted by the latter’s assassination. His Vice President and successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, however, took it up vigorously and, despite fierce opposition in the Senate from Southern Democrats, got it through.
To deal with African Americans being denied the vote, the Act set schooling to sixth grade as sufficient legal proof of literacy. It ended segregation in all public places such as theatres, restaurants and hotels and on public transport. It banned discrimination in employment on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex or national origin. An Equal Employment Commission would ensure that federal funding would not be given to segregated schools and that no company which maintained any form of segregation could receive a federal contract.

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. The 1964 Act was its crowning achievement. At the same time, it faced a vicious racist backlash, and long drawn out resistance. For thousands of youth, the pursuit of legal reforms as a goal, and nonviolence as a strategy, were increasingly called into question.

**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 ideas of organised self-defence of Black communities more favourably, 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 percent 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.

In early 1965, events took a sharper turn. Attempts by Martin Luther King to organise a mass march from Selma to Montgomery met with sustained police attack and barricades. On 10 March, 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.

The 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. Forman argued firmly for continuing the marches and not flinching from confrontation with the police. As he 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 developed 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

Also in 1965, SNCC took the highly political step of speaking out against the war being pursued by the US 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 US. 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 US.

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.

?Race? and Class

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, however. When he wrote of the need for Black consciousness and self-identification as a vital first step and argued 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.

He was investing Black Power with another, wrong and dangerous meaning, namely 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?. Certainly, the racism of the official unions had to be acknowledged and fought, but Carmichael threw the baby out with the bath water. This devalued 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 cry 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 . . .?

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 fighters in the civil rights movement. As SNCC declined under the twin blows of external repression and internal ideological incoherence, Carmichael himself turned to the pan-African nationalist ?socialism? of Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Touré, President of the Republic of Guinea.

He ended up accepting Touré?s offer of moving to Guinea and acting as his personal secretary in 1968, taking the name of Kwame Touré and joining the leadership of Guinea?s ruling party in 1972. The notion of unifying all Black people before, and as a precondition for fundamental social change, allowed him to support a government which, despite its radical rhetoric, upheld 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 pure and simple 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 and prejudice 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 US 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.

**The Nation of Islam and Malcolm X**

Elijah Muhammed’s Nation of Islam, founded in Detroit in 1930, totally rejected white society, believing it could not be reformed. Muhammed’s strategy was unequivocally separatist. He taught that white society and white people in general were inherently racist, and that Black people in the US should separate and form their own nation. He called for a return to Africa, and stressed Black Americans’ international links with the peoples of the Third World but also preached the possibility of a separate Black territory in North America.

In the 1950s, his influence began to grow significantly. What attracted many young Black people was the Nation’s emphasis on Black pride. It taught that God was Black, that whites were an inferior race. It encouraged the establishment of Black businesses and celebrated African civilisation. 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 channeled into recruiting and educating the poorest sections of the Black working class, especially among the large Black prison population.

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

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, at times anti-capitalist formulation of his politics. 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 Elijah Muhammed, his politics
remain contradictory: not a fusion of the struggle for Black liberation with socialism but a confusion, about both ends and means.

George Breitman, Malcolm’s biographer and a leader of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), wanted to defend Malcolm from critics who simply labeled him a Black nationalist. But his analysis also fitted in with the SWP’s belief that Malcolm had become an ‘unconscious’ revolutionary socialist and internationalist.

When he launched his own organisation. 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.”

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 specific needs. But the idea that a joint struggle between Black and white workers should be put off until after “Black unity” is achieved has proved no guide to action.

If “Black unity” meant a separate Black state, as it did for Elijah 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 cities of the US, even if compacted into ghettos within those cities. Equally, if “Black unity” meant a single organisation, that could not be achieved either. The Black reformists like King and James Farmer recognised that their white liberal allies feared Malcolm X, and therefore distanced themselves from him.

Despite the repression meted out against them (including the later assassination of King), the leadership of the civil rights movement represented an embryonic Black middle class, even a nascent Black bourgeoisie. It was this layer that would benefit most from President Johnson’s reforms in the late 1960s, while for the masses there remained poverty and oppression.

After Malcolm returned from a trip to Africa he began to break with Black nationalism. Describing a meeting with a white Algerian revolutionary nationalist, he recalled:

> “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)

After returning from Africa, he posed things in a more international way. He founded the strictly secular Organisation of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), even though he himself remained a Muslim until his death. The organisation’s aims were confused. On the one hand, he conceived it as an umbrella organisation that could unite all the civil rights and Black nationalist groups. On the other, he was obliged to build it as a separate political organisation which challenged the programme and tactics of the King/Farmer assimilationist 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 did make 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." However, his programme was not overtly anti-capitalist. It denounced poor housing, job discrimination and the high cost of living in the ghetto, but nowhere did it set itself against the whole system of wage slavery: the exploitation of the worker by the employer. As a result, its solutions to the economic plight of Black people were formulated as a series of reforms to the capitalist system, and militant self-organised tactics to achieve them.

The statement of aims proposed a housing self-improvement programme and a rent strike to win it. The only real economic demand in the section on "Economic Security" was 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 was, at best, 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 US. It is futile as a strategy for economic liberation. Like all utopian socialist programmes, Malcolm's emphasised education rather than class struggle. It outlined a series of reforms in education Black people must fight for: control of 10 per cent 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.

The economic programme contained no orientation to the workplace, strike action, occupations and picket lines, even over the specific question of job segregation and discrimination. Still less was there any strategy for building unity in action with white workers. If, at an economic level, the programme was totally inadequate and reformist, it did contain a revolutionary challenge to racist state violence. All of Malcolm's programmatic statements were clear on the right to Black self-defence against racist attack: "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."

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. His inspiration, still strong today, was his call to struggle against racism, poverty and exploitation ?by any means necessary?. What those means would have to be, Malcolm did not live to resolve, but he remains a giant figure of the great movement of the 1960s.

**Martin Luther King: A dream deferred**

After the defeat of the Selma, Alabama campaign for voting rights in the spring of 1965, which was marked by two racist murders and savage attacks against Blacks by police and state troopers, King and the SCLC appeared to be a spent force. A new generation of militants, especially those from the northern inner city ghettos, saw King as either irrelevant or, worse still, as an "Uncle Tom". He was harshly criticised by the rising movement and his concentration on civil rights was being eclipsed by calls for Black Power.

Yet he remained tied to his pacifist strategy despite the mounting racist and state violence. His
demonstrations, beaten and tear-gassed before the eyes of a watching world, were still intended to shame the US ruling class into reform. But this strategy was proving itself a non-starter for thoroughgoing Black liberation. While it did eventually remove the worst aspects of Jim Crow apartheid in the south, at a terrible human cost to the movement in terms of deaths and injuries, it could not defeat racism in US society.

Ultimately, it could only succeed in creating the conditions for enlarging the Black middle class within US capitalism. For the majority, the ghetto would remain an escape-proof prison. Over 30 years after King described his 'dream' of Black equality and social justice, the life expectancy of a Black man in Harlem was less than that of a peasant in Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest countries.

King's importance as a Black leader, however, was his willingness to organise the Black masses into a movement. And, in the last two years of his life, he even sought to turn this movement towards the working class. Many of his erstwhile allies became disquieted by the left wing edge he began to give it with comments like: ? . . . we're treading in very difficult waters, because it really means that we are saying that something is wrong with the economic system of our nation . . . It means that something is wrong with capitalism.?

In mid-1965, King gave in to pressure and backed down from some tentative criticisms of the US involvement in the Vietnam war when the majority of SCLC leaders told him to shut up for fear that public criticism of the Johnson administration would jeopardise the Voting Rights Act. In 1967, however, he admitted he had been wrong to retreat and broke with the open pro-imperialists in the civil rights movement:

?I backed up a little when I came out [against the war] in 1965. My name then wouldn?t have been in any book called Profiles of Courage. But now I have decided. I will not be intimidated. I will not be harassed. I will not be silent and I will be heard.?

He went on to denounce the war and branded the US, ?the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today?, a move that cost him the support of many Black and white allies in the Democratic Party. Of course, his criticisms of the US role in Vietnam flowed from his pacifist stance, but he did lay bare the hypocrisy of the white liberals who had once lavished praise on him:

?They praised us in . . . Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. Oh, the press was so noble in its applause and . . . praise when I would say ?Be nonviolent towards Bull Connor? [Birmingham's brutal police chief]. There is something strangely inconsistent about a nation and a press that would praise you when you say, ?Be nonviolent toward Jim Clark? [Selma's police chief] but will curse and damn you when you say, ?Be nonviolent toward little brown Vietnamese children?.?

While this marked a shift by King, it was not a break from his previous strategy. When Blacks in the inner cities of the US exploded into riots he blamed the cause of the riots on ?nice, gentle, timid white moderates who are more concerned about order than about justice?. But at the same time he argued that the riots themselves were misguided and counter-productive. The development of organised self-defence, espoused by the Black Panthers, was not part of King's strategy.

What he turned to was a left reformist strategy that went beyond civil rights and towards social justice. He defied advice from the ultra-moderate leaders of the SCLC and sought to turn the movement's focus towards the appalling housing conditions of Black workers in the northern ghettos. In January 1966, he moved into a slum flat on Chicago's South Side, launching a campaign to win an open housing law and a massive increase in state funding.

Despite finding that his marches were once again the subject of brutal racist and police attack, and despite
a growing pessimism in the ability of the whites to be persuaded of the need for equality for Blacks, he held
fast to his strategy of peaceful pressure on the establishment. He remained the most prominent leader of
the SCLC but supplemented it with a national Poor People’s Movement, an organisation that proved
unable to survive the death of its founder.

On 4 April, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. died of gunshot wounds in Memphis, Tennessee. King had gone to
the southern city to lend his support to a strike by Memphis’s predominantly Black refuse collection workers
who were fighting for union recognition. The supposed assassin was James Earl Ray, but it is widely
believed that the US state, specifically the FBI, was responsible for the killing.

King had undoubtedly moved left, and it is equally likely that this move prompted plots by the US state to
kill him. Ultimately his Christianity, his reformism and his pacifism sealed the fate of his political evolution.
After his death, no coherent strategy bequeathed by him, and no militant movement inspired by him
survived. His contribution was to bring shame on the brutality of racism in the US, but not to eradicate that
brutality. He built the biggest protest movement against racism in the history of the US, but his strategy
blocked the ability of that movement to go beyond the fight for concessions towards the fight for liberation.

As with Malcolm X, many claim King’s legacy and, like Malcolm X, that legacy is riven with contradictions.
Just as it is necessary for anti-racist militants today to transcend the limitations of Malcolm’s nationalism,
so it is necessary to transcend the limitations of King’s reformism and pacifism.

Since the assassination, the US establishment has sought to incorporate King as a hero, another ?great
American? martyred for a noble cause. It has frequently been assisted in this by King’s surviving family
members and one-time SCLC aides. Despite initial opposition from President Reagan and some state
legislatures, King’s birthday became a national holiday in the US in the 1980s.

Even before the assassination, events were generating new rebellions in the inner city ghettos. An uprising
of Black youth took place in the Watts neighbourhood of Los Angeles lasting from 11 to 17 August 1965,
triggered by a clash between a Black motorist and a policeman. It resulted in 34 deaths, 1,032 injuries,
3,438 arrests, and over $40 million in property damage. Then there was the Detroit Uprising of July 1967,
another response to the brutality of the police. 800 State Police Officers and 8,000 National Guardsmen
were ordered to the city by Michigan Governor, George Romney, later augmented by 4,700 paratroopers
from the 82nd Airborne Division ordered in by President Johnson. The assassination itself sparked major
riots in Chicago and huge crowds flooded onto the streets of 100 major cities across the country.

These uprisings convinced the ruling class, more than any reasoned arguments, that all attempts to delay
integration or preserve segregation could only lead to a major social explosion. Thus politicians like
Richard Nixon espoused civil rights and even talked of ?Black Power? and the arch-racist George Wallace
announced his conversion to integration. The fear of revolution works wonders that the most reasonable
pleas for reform never can. New militants, conscious revolutionists, now emerged, trying to develop a new
strategy for Black liberation.

**Black Panthers seize the time!**

In October 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, two young Black militants, founded, and became leaders
of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, which later became known just as the Black Panther Party.
Newton and Seale grew up in the Black ghetto of Oakland, a working class city in the Bay Area of
California. Influenced by the teachings of Malcolm X, they 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 wrote:

“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, 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 poseurs talked, Newton and Seale 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 Newton 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. 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 Newton’s knowledge of the gun laws. Time and again, Panthers faced down the police with pistols and shotguns. Every time the police tried to take the guns from them, Huey Newton quoted the constitution, 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 front actions 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 US, the Black Panther Party failed as a political organisation. The heroism and determination of the Panthers could not substitute for a clear revolutionary strategy.
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 US, for it left as a possibility a purely national solution. 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, based 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 “Little Red Book”, at a profit, to the “radical leftists” on the Berkeley university campus. Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Castro and Guevara all began to exert considerable influence on the thinking of Newton and Seale. They embraced the Stalinist “stages theory” of revolution: first Black liberation, then socialism.

In the fight against the “fascist” US state, they saw the primary task as being 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 guerrilla war were decisive in Newton and Seale’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 Newton 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 how and why they failed to develop a political strategy that could ultimately defeat the US imperialist state.

That state took vicious revenge on the young Black militants who had used the gun laws to defy its racist police and the brutalisation of the Black communities. At the centre of the spider’s web was J Edgar Hoover. He considered Martin Luther King a Communist and tried all sorts of dirty tricks to silence him, spying on his liaisons with various women, trying to Blackmail him and even persuade him to commit suicide. Now a massive FBI operation, the Counter Intelligence Programme COINTELPRO, 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, many of the Panthers stood firm. To this day, some of their members remain in US prisons. Today’s generation of Black militants can learn from the mistakes of the Panthers. Black self-defence can be a starting point, and is certainly 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. Likewise, Black self-organisation has to be class based and rooted within the wider working class movement. Nonetheless, 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 at the height of its struggle with the US state.

**DRUM**

Another important development of the Black movement of the 1960s was DRUM – the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. In May, 1968, some 3,000 workers walked out of Dodge Main in Hamtramck in a wildcat strike. Its instigators were a group of Black workers, General Baker Jr, Ken Cockrel, John Watson, Marian Kramer, most of them working class intellectuals, who had been involved in civil rights activities and in rebellions in Detroit colleges against the Vietnam War through the early and mid-1960s. One of them, Baker, had been to Cuba in 1964 and met Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

They had read Marx and Lenin and concluded that it was the industrial working class in the factories, particularly the mass production auto plants, that could lead a revolution against both racism and capitalism in the US. They concluded however that it must be Black workers who did this or at least took the lead. They observed that the United Autoworkers union (UAW), led by Walter Reuther, though it supported Civil Rights and the Democrats, was racist in its attitudes when it came to Black workers playing any sort of leadership role. At Dodge Main, 85 per cent of the workers were Black but, as a result of a company and union promotion policy, only two percent of the foremen and shop stewards were. They concluded that “UAW meant ‘You Ain’t White’”. This was the era when the AFL-CIO was fiercely supportive of the Vietnam War and the need for Black-white workers’ unity was not obvious to many.

Mike Hamlin, one of DRUM’s leaders said, “Whites in America don’t act like workers; they don’t act like a proletariat; they act like racists and that’s why I think Blacks have to continue to have Black organisations, independent of whites.”

The Dodge strikers’ example spread in a few weeks. A FRUM (Ford Revolutionary Union Movement) and a CADRUM (Cadillac Revolutionary Union Movement) were formed and other RUMs would emerge at UPS and the Detroit News. Eventually, a score of workplaces formed RUMs. Many of these collapsed due to management and union repression and a shortage of trained organisers. But they eventually united into a single organisation called the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The aim of the League was hardly a modest one, to take over management of the plants and assume power in the city of Detroit.

They also made contact with groups in the Ford plant in Mahwah, New Jersey, and with a GMC plant in Fremont, California, with steelworkers in Birmingham, Alabama, and autoworkers in Baltimore, Maryland. Extremely creative, they took over a student newspaper and used it to spread their propaganda and also made a film about their activities. The organisers came up with the idea of forming a Black Workers Congress (BWC) that would operate nationally. It stated in its manifesto:

> “Our objective: workers’ control of their place of work, the factories, fields, offices, transportation services, and communications facilities, so that the exploitation of labor will cease and no person or corporation will get rich off the labor of another person. All people will work for the collective benefit of humanity.”

(Manifesto of the International Black Workers Congress 1970)
Unfortunately, the political ideas predominant amongst many of the leaders were Marxist-Leninist, that is, Maoist, which tended to confirm dismissive ideas about the white American workers and the existing unions. The organisation eventually split between those who wanted to remain focused on the auto industry as a revolutionary union and those who wished to turn the BWC into a political organisation. By 1975, they had ceased to operate within the car plants.

Their failure was not to do with their focus on wildcat strikes and concentrating on giving a voice to excluded and oppressed Black workers, who often had the most dangerous jobs, nor in fighting the union bureaucracy of the UAW. Both of these were correct. White workers joined the early strikes and picket lines. The problem lay in the Third Worldist and sectarian politics of Maoism that unnecessarily isolated them within the broader workforce and the resources of the union. Thus, they could not resist bureaucratic and management repression.

**Conclusion**

The struggles against racism in the US, from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, are indeed historic in more than the literal sense. Their achievements were huge: the destruction of the system of legalised oppression, segregation and open political discrimination. Their leaders, both reformist and revolutionary, will remain important heroes from whom all today’s activists, white as well as Black, can learn.

The great movement headed by Martin Luther King Jr and his team, the direct action sit-ins, the freedom rides and and marches of SNCC, and figures like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X inspired the South African movement against Apartheid. The speeches and writings of Malcolm X, the Panthers, inspired the Black Consciousness Movement of Steve Biko in the 1970s. In South Africa, this all came together in the massive Black trade union movement of the 1980s, whose power led to the surrender of the Apartheid regime.

The slogan of Black Power drew attention to the brutal fact that power in the US was white, that it excluded even the small privileged stratum of the Black population. The untimely deaths, murders of so many of its leaders and militants proved how deadly this power was and that self-defence was not only no offence it was vital to survival. Recent events in Charleston show that today’s white supremacy rests on terrorism, just as Jim Crow and slavery before it did.

The call for Black Power, not just for equal rights, also taught ordinary Black people, women, students, workers, the long term unemployed, that they did not need to wait for, or rely on, white liberals or the Democratic Party to give them their rights as a result of pleading and appeals.

But, as well as brute force from the state, and from white supremacists, Black people were and are excluded from power by property and class. Despite the power of the revolution that demolished the Apartheid state in South Africa, subsequent developments have shown that a struggle that does not get to the capitalist roots of racism, does not become a social revolution, led by the working class, will never finally abolish race privilege and power either.

Black Power, giving Black people their full and complete share of controlling and running society, is inseparable from workers’ power. White workers, providing they break from their racist prejudices, which are the source of their own impotence, their powerlessness in US society, must be integrated into such a revolution. It is instructive that all the figures of the great movement of the 1960s in the US, reformist and revolutionary, had insights into this, though they never were able to develop them, often because they were murdered.
Events in the US today show the same lesson, that formal legal equality is not enough to rip up the roots of racism. Today’s militants are also raising issues of class, of insecurity, inequality in employment and wages.

The system that gave birth to Black oppression in the US and survived emancipation of the slaves and the abolition of Jim Crow, capitalism, still exists, still exploits, and still systematically discriminates against Black working class people. The State forces, which defend this system, are still utterly racist, as the string of murders over the past year or so demonstrate. And, as the Black Lives Matter demonstrations show, it is still meeting fierce resistance.

Another gain of the 1960s was the intense and fruitful political debate amongst the activists: about whether to unite or separate from white liberals or revolutionaries, about what Black Power means, about what should be the role of the working class, Black and white, and indeed workers from all the ethnic backgrounds that make up the US working class today.

From the movements led by Martin Luther King and SNCC, we can learn the importance of mass action, direct action to challenge racism. But a fatal weakness was subordinating the aims of the movement to a cross class alliance with the liberals: above all relying on a bourgeois party, the Democrats. We can recognise the compromises that they made for the alliance with the Democrats and we can learn too the weakness of fetishising nonviolence when the forces of state and fascistic movements threaten to crush you.

The lesson of the Panthers shows that fetishising armed resistance can also lay you open to provocation and repression. Equally, basing yourselves mainly or wholly amongst the most deprived and neglecting employed workers means abandoning the mass force of workers’ struggles. DRUM recognised that industrial action could play a major role and that organisation at the workplace was critical to this but failed to recognise that this also required struggle within the exiting mass unions against the union bureaucracy, alongside antiracist white workers.

All of these lessons could only have been drawn, and can only be drawn today, by the creation of a revolutionary working class party with a correct strategy for uprooting capitalism and racism together. The radicalism of today’s struggles, like Black Lives Matter, shows that Black workers, Black women, Black youth will play a crucial role in building and leading such a party. When it emerges, as it surely will, the foundations of US capitalism in imperialism and racism will really begin to crumble.

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