To beat racism we need a strategy that can win, tactics that work, a clear plan of action, and a leadership that can be trusted.

But the history of the anti-racist struggle, in Britain and elsewhere, is a history of false strategies, failed tactics, inadequate political programmes and leaders who betrayed.

In response to this many people reject political programmes, strategies and organisations altogether. But wherever there is a fightback there will be somebody trying to lead, there will be some political strategy in operation.

Take the inner city revolts of the 1980s. These were spontaneous risings against police repression; expressions of anger aimed at punishing the police for their harassment of black communities.

When the fighting had died down all sorts of self-appointed leaders stepped forward claiming to represent the community that had fought back. Many were corrupt local politicians. Their message was: if only the government would pour money into this or that scheme the anger of the youth could be contained.

Their strategy was to contain the revolt. Their tactics were police liaison committees and government handouts. Their programme was one of piecemeal capitalist reforms and the creation of a black middle class. As leaders they were useless.

That is why every anti-racist fighter has to take notice of the political programmes and philosophies on offer: you may not be interested in them, but they are interested in you. Unless you have a clear idea of your own strategy, your own programme and are prepared to take on a leading role in the struggle yourself, then, no matter how heroically you fight back, you could end up being used to further somebody else’s aims.

In this section we will examine the strategies on offer in Britain today which focus on class struggle as the key to victory in the struggle against racism and capitalism.

**Economism:**

**The SWP**

To convince youth and workers who are influenced by the ideas of reformism and black nationalism Marxists need to offer a credible alternative explanation of the roots of racism. This is something the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has tried to do over the last few years. It has failed.

SWP member Kevin Ovenden’s book, Malcolm X?Socialism and Black Nationalism, was read by thousands of youth. Unfortunately, on the question of the causes of racism, its critique of black nationalism was thoroughly unconvincing.

Ovenden shows that it is not in the interests of workers to be racist. His explanation of why, despite this, many white workers are racist, is based on two points.
The first, which no socialist would deny, is the conscious use of racism by the ruling class to divide the workers. But Ovenden realises that this is not enough. For Marxists, ideas are determined by social reality. So his second point is that a material basis for racism can be found in the experience of the working class:

?Racism can lodge in the minds of the workers because it appears to correspond to one part of their experience of living under capitalism?the compulsion to compete in order to get by.?

According to Ovenden, capitalism also provides the solution to this problem by continually bringing black and white workers together in factories, estates and common struggles, where they can overcome the tendency to compete with each other.

But while it is true that workers are forced to compete with each other, and that common struggles provide an opportunity for socialists to overcome this, these facts alone do not constitute a Marxist explanation of racism.

Looking at a place like the Isle of Dogs, where there is competition for inadequate housing and resources, we are left with an unanswered question: why is it black workers who are being targeted as ?competition? by white workers? Why aren?t the white workers fighting each other?

If the cause of racism can be reduced to competition plus the effects of the bosses? propaganda, this leaves us with no material reason why such competition should take place on specifically ?racial? lines.

Competition between workers for scarce resources is not enough to explain the material root of racism under capitalism. Even where workers come together in common struggles over wages, housing and living standards, this alone does not automatically remove the basis of racism.

In short, Ovenden?s position is a piece of crude economism. It reduces the whole question of racism to a phenomenon that originates within the economic struggle?workers? resistance to the employers over pay, jobs and living conditions?and can be overcome on the basis of that struggle alone.

Don?t take our word for it. Another SWP leader Alex Callinicos, without overtly mentioning Ovenden?s book, wrote in International Socialism Journal (ISJ) No 52, soon after the book was published:

?The mere fact of economic competition between different groups of workers is not enough to explain racial antagonisms.? 

So much for Ovenden?s analysis. But what then is the root cause of racism? If we are not to be left with the crude view that workers are racist simply because of the bosses? propaganda we must look for the real material roots of racism in capitalist society.

Callinicos develops his position in ?Race and Class?, an article in ISJ 55. The article includes a critique of black nationalism and reformism, much of which we would agree with.

For example, Callinicos is right to insist that racism is not a mere ?ideological hangover? from past material conditions, as Peter Fryer has argued, but thrives on the material conditions of modern capitalism.

He also correctly rejects the view, held by many black nationalist theorists, that racism has always existed. For Marxists, systematic racial oppression, as opposed to prejudice, ignorance and xenophobia, began with the rise of capitalism.

It took different forms, materially and ideologically, in different epochs of capitalist development: from slavery, through colonialism to the pseudo-scientific racism of the imperialist epoch.
But just what is it that perpetuates racism in modern capitalism? Here Callinicos gets into difficulties. He tries to distil three factors from Karl Marx’s description of the English attitude to the Irish in the nineteenth century:

(i) Economic competition between workers . . .
(ii) The appeal of racist ideology to white workers . . .
(iii) The efforts of the capitalist class to establish and maintain racial divisions among workers.

Looked at closely, points (i) and (iii) are similar to those raised by Ovenden. We are left with point (ii), the appeal of racist ideology. But why does racist ideology appeal to white workers?

Here Callinicos and the SWP have to confront the existence of systematic social oppression. When we look at the position of women in class society we can see that the ideology of sexism is rooted in the material, social oppression of women in the family. So it is with the systematic oppression of racial minorities in capitalist society. The ideology of racism is a product of racial oppression.

This distinction does not appear in Ovenden’s book. But Callinicos does speak of, oppression, of systematic inequalities in power and life chances stemming from an exploitative social structure. The problem is that Callinicos provides us with no explanation of just how and why capitalism spontaneously generates this racial oppression. He produces a critique of the black nationalist explanation, but no positive explanation of his own.

He identifies the time and place of the development of modern racism as being:

. . . in the advanced capitalist countries . . . in the late nineteenth century, as part of the process through which the European ruling classes sought to incorporate newly enfranchised, increasingly organised workers within the same community. Against a background of growing competition among the imperialist powers, workers were encouraged to identify their interests with those of their ruling classes.

The question arises: by what means, other than propaganda, did the bosses encourage organised workers to identify with their own imperialist ruling class? Lenin gave a straight answer to this question: it happened through the creation of a labour aristocracy of relatively privileged workers, through which bourgeois ideas, specifically national chauvinism and reformism, could be spread amongst the mass of workers.

But Callinicos refuses to link the rise of racism to the material privileges of a stratum of British workers. He does so because he is obliged to reject the idea that white workers benefit from racism. He writes:

Perhaps the single most important difference between Marxists and black nationalists is that the latter believe that white workers materially benefit from racism.

Callinicos goes on to attack, correctly, the widespread view, shared by Maoists and Third Worldists as well as black nationalists, that all white or western workers form a privileged labour aristocracy benefiting from the imperialist super-profits extracted from Third World toilers.

Against their claims that Lenin supported such a view, Callinicos points out that Lenin’s theory was an attempt to explain reformism by arguing that it reflected the material interests of a layer of the western working class.

But despite clarifying this, Callinicos goes on to reject Lenin’s entire theory of the labour aristocracy as a basis for understanding racism.
Lenin's theory refers to a materially privileged stratum of workers and union officials. It is crucial to an understanding of the material roots of racism within modern capitalism.

At the heart of modern capitalism—imperialism—lies the contradiction between an international economy and the political form of its development, the nation state. The system of competing nation states strangles the potential of the world economy and repeatedly plunges humanity into barbaric acts of war, destruction and genocide.

At the very dawn of this epoch, Lenin grasped the interlinked character of reformism, racism and national chauvinism:

> It is perfectly obvious that social chauvinism's basic ideological and political content fully coincides with the foundations of opportunism [i.e. reformism?WP]. It is one and the same tendency.

For Lenin, the source of these phenomena was the relative privileges which the bosses in the imperialist countries were able to grant to a layer of workers. They could do this because of the super-profits that the imperialist powers accrued through their domination of the world market and their exploitation of the colonies.

Callinicos is extremely wary when it comes to revealing his attitude to Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy. He states that it is a ?poor guide? to the behaviour of skilled workers in the west during the years of revolutionary upheaval in the early twentieth century. He refers to ?flaws in its economic arguments?.

If he were honest he should say clearly, as SWP members Kevin Corr and Andy Brown did in ISJ 59, that Lenin's theory is ?fatally flawed? i.e. wrong?and that this, as Tony Cliff has written, ?invalidates the whole of Lenin's analysis of reformism?. (Neither Washington Nor Moscow 1982).

Callinicos, Cliff and most SWP theoreticians reject Lenin's theory of the labour aristocracy because it implies that some workers have a short term interest in the maintenance of capitalism, and that some white workers do benefit from colonialism.

So do white workers benefit from racism in any way? Let us look at Callinicos' own attempt to define oppression: ?systematic inequalities of power and life chances?.

Every black working class person knows what this means in practice. It means preferential treatment for white schoolmates, white job applicants, white criminal suspects. It means huge differences in the rate of unemployment, even in areas of high white working class unemployment.

Somebody benefits from systematic inequality, and it is not only the perpetrators of it, the bosses. There is nothing anti-Marxist or ?nationalist? about the statement that some white workers benefit, in the short term, from racial oppression. Yet Callinicos and the SWP leaders reject the idea altogether. Why?

The reason is that they think that even to recognise such short-term interests must lead to separatism on the question of black oppression and to feminism on the question of women's oppression.

But there is no reason why it should. It certainly did not as far as Lenin and Trotsky were concerned and it need not do so for revolutionary Marxists today.

It simply means that a revolutionary party has to fight the sectional ideas that arise form the experience of such privileges and win the working class to a programme that expresses our common historic interests.
The SWP however, rejects this. They believe that the working class develops revolutionary socialist consciousness spontaneously. That is why they have to deny the very existence of benefits which generate the opposite kind of consciousness: reactionary ideas such as racism and sexism.

To preserve their “spontaneist” theory, they have to deny the very existence of material privileges that are common knowledge to every black person discriminated against at a job interview and every woman who has to cook the whole family’s tea after a hard day’s work.

Does this mean that white workers themselves become the oppressors, as the black nationalists claim? No. The entire capitalist system is the fundamental cause of this oppression. However, we have to say that white workers, at certain times and places, participate in the bosses’ oppression of black people.

If SWP members recoil in horror at this suggestion they should remember the dockers’ march to support Enoch Powell in the 1960s—a march by the same dockers who later helped bring down Ted Heath’s Industrial Relations Act through mass strike action.

Of course not all white workers consciously collaborate with racism. Quite the opposite. The vast majority of organised workers think of themselves as anti-racist.

In the course of struggle itself, and with effective propaganda by a revolutionary socialist party, the mass of the working class can and will see through the false and reactionary ideas which capitalist schools, churches, newspapers and media have taught them.

Both Ovenden and Callinicos bring forward figures from US sociologists (V Perlo, A Szymanski) to support the idea that, in the long run, white workers have no interest in racism. At the level of wage earnings Szymanski found that “the greater the discrimination against [blacks and Hispanics] the higher the inequality amongst whites.” Conversely, where black earnings were higher, white workers earnings were higher too.

What does this evidence really tell us? It tells us that where the bosses use racism successfully to divide the working class, they weaken the entire working class, black and white. It is a pattern borne out for example in Northern Ireland, between Catholics and Protestants.

But even Szymanski’s conclusion—that white inequality was higher where blacks were most oppressed—does not disprove the assertion that some white workers benefit from the oppression of black people, through preferential access to education, housing, health care and employment. Callinicos? is unable to find a material answer to the question: why does racist ideology appeal to white workers?

This leads him off in the direction of an idealist explanation for racism, one that is not rooted in material reality but in ideology alone. For all Callinicos? hostility to the “black radical” tradition which has attempted to fuse Marxism and black separatism, he is eager to take on board one of its main theories—that of the “psychological wage”.

W.E.B. Du Bois’ assertion that, in the southern USA, white workers received “a sort of public and psychological wage” in return for their actual low wages is taken up by Callinicos as a “better explanation” than the materialist theory of the labour aristocracy. By this Du Bois meant that white workers are comforted by the belief that they are “superior” to blacks - even if they don’t personally receive any material advantage.

Desperate to find an alternative theoretical basis to Lenin’s theory, Callinicos even tries to draw in
Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism as an ‘imagined community’. Despite Anderson’s own wish to distinguish between racism and nationalism, Callinicos claims that Anderson’s description of nationalism—a deep horizontal comradeship transcending actual inequality and exploitation—is applicable to modern racism.

It might well be—but only as a description of ideas, as a tool for understanding the psychology of modern racism. Neither Anderson’s theory, nor the idea of a ‘psychological wage’ provides a materialist explanation of the roots of white workers’ racism. It is an explanation which says ideas determine material reality, not the other way round.

However there is a germ of truth within Du Bois’ theory of the ‘public and psychological wage’ and, when we examine it, it supports the Leninist view of the labour aristocracy and the material roots of racism.

The ‘psychological wage’ could not stick if it was mere trickery. There has to be some material basis for it. This, presumably, is what Du Bois means by the ‘public? wage for poor whites in the southern USA. This ‘public? wage is described over and over again in the books, films and music of black Americans. White workers could use bars, swimming pools, public transport, cafes and cinemas from which black workers were barred.

To say that white workers’ wages are depressed by class divisions is not the same as to say they do not derive immediate material privileges from those divisions. It is precisely the threat to those short-term privileges which winds up racist workers and drives them into the arms of open racist politicians—from Alabama to the Isle of Dogs.

The benefits we are talking about are relative and temporary: white workers receive better wages but that is no use when you lose your job. On the Isle of Dogs white workers fought for preferential treatment—but even the best houses available were in poor condition.

The differences are of course not as great as the differences between the working class and the ruling class. But they do produce divisions between white workers and black workers, just as they do between men and women, and they are based in a real, material stratification of the working class, not only on ideas that the bosses put in our heads.

These relative privileges, these temporary benefits do not alter the fact that it is in the material interest of all workers to fight all forms of oppression.

But simply to assert that without first recognising the differential effects of that oppression is crude and abstract, denying the real experience of black and white workers.

SWP members, when they hear Cliff and Callinicos assert ‘we are the real Marxists, the real Leninists?, should reflect on the implications of the SWP’s theory of racial oppression.

The SWP want to deny that some white workers gain short term benefits from racism, just as they deny that some male workers gain from the oppression of women.

Ultimately we are left with the assertion that there is no material reason for workers’ racism other than ‘competition’. This leads them a step further—if we abandon Lenin’s idea of a labour aristocracy based on crumbs from the table of imperialist super-profits, then we are left with no material reason for reformism either.

Racism thrives on the nationalist poison generated by imperialism. The international system, which drags
millions of workers from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean to work in the imperialist heartlands, also creates their systematic oppression within those heartlands.

White working class racism is perpetuated, yes, by a public and psychological wage, but that in turn is rooted in real short term advantages for some white workers. It is perpetuated by today?s labour aristocrats and petit-bourgeoisified sections of the working class, such as well paid office workers and skilled tradesmen.

But the working class has no strategic interest in racism. The workers of the Isle of Dogs have been weakened in their ability to fight their real enemies, the bosses, by the racism which has flourished there. As long as they remain divided, housing, employment and education will get worse for all?not better.

Revolutionary socialists have to build a united party and a united fight, involving black and white workers. But we have to do so using a strategy based on a correct understanding of reality. If we understand racism?s roots in imperialism, national chauvinism and reformist opportunism, we can do it and we will win. But by rejecting that Leninist theory out of hand, the SWP turn their backs on reality, and will fail.

Class & Community: A.Sivanandan
The name of Ambalavaner Sivanandan is not familiar to many on the British left. It should be. He has become the most influential black political thinker in Britain. His writings have shaped the outlook of a whole layer of black activists.

Sivanandan is a long time scourge of the British left on the question of black struggles against oppression. When Sivanandan derides the white left for its tendency to view working class racism as an aberration (Race and Class Vol. 35, 1994) he hits the mark as far as the two largest far left organisations, Militant and the SWP, are concerned.

They share the notion, typical of economism, that racism is simply a question of workers competing with each other over jobs and resources. Once black and white unite and fight around economic questions, they believe, racism will spontaneously disappear.

Another target of Sivanandan?s criticism has been the declining and crisis-ridden Eurocommunist tradition, and its key black intellectual, Stuart Hall. Sivanandan?s The Hokum of New Times, is a scathing polemic in which he ridicules the ideological underpinnings of the Communist Party?s collapse into liberalism:

?New Times is a mirror image of Thatcherism passing for socialism. New Times is Thatcherism in drag.?

A third distinctive feature of Sivanandan?s politics is his opposition to the liberal race relations industry and its left wing offshoots, the Ethnic Minorities Units set up by many Labour councils in the 1980s. According to Sivanandan this was simply:

?Government moneys for pluralist ploys?the development of a parallel power structure for black people, separate development, bantustans?a strategy to keep race issues from contaminating class issues.?

When we look at these targets of Sivanandan?s criticism it is easy to understand his appeal. But, viewed critically, Sivanandan?s work does not present a coherent strategy for black liberation or socialism.

Like revolutionary socialists, Sivanandan sees an understanding of imperialism as crucial to understanding racism in Britain. But his understanding of imperialism is wrong, leading him to locate the Third World as the centre of the struggle for socialism:

?I do not think it is our business to be sectarian, to take sides between liberation movements to tell them
how to conduct their struggles. We try in Race and Class to guard against left cultural imperialism: the
tendency to extrapolate from the western experience onto Third World societies.? (Communities of
Resistance)

In practice this translates into an accommodation to a range of Stalinist-influenced and petit-bourgeois
nationalist leaders. Sivanandan berates one left wing writer?s ?inability to distinguish between reactionary
(bourgeois) nationalism and the revolutionary nationalisms of Ho, Fidel and Cabral and Mao?. It is to
Vietnam and Cuba that Sivanandan refers when he talks about ?the workers and peasants having a bash
at socialism?.

The Stalinist-led national liberation movements were fighting a just struggle against imperialism. But by
reserving a place for the ?anti-imperialist? bourgeoisie in the struggle and limiting the revolution to a
democratic stage, they systematically held back workers? struggles.

Even in Vietnam and Cuba it was not socialism they introduced, but stagnant regimes modelled on the
bureaucratic planning and dictatorship of the Stalinist USSR, often practising racism against minorities of
their own. It is not ?Eurocentrism? to point out that ?Third World? Stalinism was essentially no different
from the Stalinism of the European and US Communist Parties. Sivanandan?s model of Third World
?socialism? has failed.

This incomplete break with the Eurocommunists can even be seen in Sivanandan?s savage attacks on
New Times:

?The working class was decomposing under the impact of new forces of production and old forms of
labour organisation were becoming frangible [fragile]. The old Marxists . . . had for so long been fighting for
the emancipation of Labour from Capital that they could not bear to think that it was Capital that was now
being emancipated from Labour.?

Sivanandan thus accepts the basic premise of Eurocommunism, that old forms of working class struggle
have been rendered obsolete. But instead of accepting the neo-liberal, pacifist and cross-class conclusions
of the Eurocommunists, Sivanandan called for a refocusing of both socialism and anti-racism towards,
?that third of the nation which Thatcherism has dispossessed?.

According to Sivanandan the end of the traditional working class did not mean an end to class struggle,
only that the terrain of battle has moved ?from the economic to the political, from the base to the
superstructure?.

?The battle is the same as before?, Sivanandan writes, ?only it needs to be taken on at the
political/ideological level and not at the economic/political level?. (Communities of Resistance)

Before we examine the effect of this view on Sivanandan?s anti-racist strategy, it is necessary to say that
Sivanandan, along with the Eurocommunists, massively overestimated the effects of economic changes on
the workers? movement. It is not British capitalism?s ?emancipation from Labour? that is the problem, it is
workers? consciousness, bureaucratic misleadership and the legacy of a decade of defeat.

That is not to deny that new forms of struggle and arenas of struggle have emerged. But socialists must
reject the idea that the ?economic struggle? has simply been replaced by a combination of political,
ideological and cultural struggles.

The economic struggle is the practical resistance of workers to their employers. It continues to involve
millions, including hundreds of thousands of unionised black workers. Revolutionary Marxism aims to
prosecute the class struggle in each of its forms?economic, political and theoretical?so as to organise the
working class in the struggle for power.

This means fighting to bring the trade unions under rank and file control and win them to revolutionary leadership—not writing off the economic struggle and the institutions it has created as somehow a thing of the past.

Sivanandan spells out clearly what the rise of Thatcherism meant for the struggle against racism:

?The nature and function of racism was beginning to change. The recession and the movement of capital to the labour reserves of the Third World, I pointed out before, had stopped the importation of labour. The point now was to get rid of it. Hence the rationale of racism was no longer exploitation but repatriation, not oppression but repression?forged at the ideological level through the media (directly) and the schools (indirectly and in the long term) and effected on the political level through the forces of law and order.?\n
The black struggle, Sivanandan wrote, was no longer one between ?employers and workers but the state and the workless?.

Of course there is a large measure of truth in the tendencies Sivanandan outlines, but his analysis is schematic and wooden. It was not the 1979 recession which introduced the politics of repatriation to the political mainstream but the end of a specific period of cheap labour expansion in the early 1960s. Even now the bourgeois consensus remains at the level of formal ?equal opportunities? in return for strict racist immigration laws, not overt repatriation.

Certainly the street-level resistance of ?second generation? unemployed and youth has become a vital arena of black politics and resistance. But the idea that the struggle between bosses and workers is no longer a concern of anti-racists is nonsense and leads directly to Sivandandan?s confused political strategy.

Sivanandan stood firm throughout the 1980s and 1990s against the rise of ?identity politics? amongst the oppressed and against the fragmentation of ?black as a political colour? into a variety of competing ethnic hues.

Since offering a cautious welcome to the launch of the Anti-Racist Alliance (ARA), he has given short shrift to its largely self-appointed black leaders, who ?tend to use [community struggles] as a means of gaining legitimacy and publicity for their own organisation? instead of putting themselves at the service of the community?. (Race and Class Vol. 35)

While he is a critic of the black bourgeois leadership and continues to advocate class politics, the concept of ?community? is central to Sivandandan?s strategy. At times ?community? seems to have an almost mystical significance in his writings, yet there is never a clear definition of the concept. Sivanandan repeatedly documents the class stratification that has taken place within Britain?s black population.

But by not aligning himself with any political tendency, and by downplaying the role of the organised working class, black and white, Sivanandan avoids the responsibility of charting a path that can transform ?dynamic, organic? local struggles.

In his analysis of the Grunwick strike of the mid-1970s, despite documenting the way in which the trade union bureaucracy used and then discarded the Asian women strikers, Sivanandan draws the wrong conclusions.

He contrasts Grunwick negatively to earlier black strikes, such as Mansfield Hosiery and Imperial
Typewriters:

?The lessons of earlier strikes?that black workers needed to rally the community behind them and from that base force the unions to their side?had been temporarily unlearnt by workers who had not had the benefit of that tradition.?

But this was not the lesson of Grunwick. Tens of thousands of white workers and youth rallied to the Grunwick pickets. It was the inability of rank and file workers to overcome the legalism and pacifism of their leaders and turn sympathy into solidarity strike action which led to defeat.

Certainly the vanguard layer of rank and file trade union militants that developed in the 1960s and 1970s was defeated and largely dispersed in the 1980s, creating new problems for linking community struggles against racism with the organised power of the working class. Nevertheless this remains the key to victory, a key which Sivanandan consistently discards.

Sivanandan has always been open in his support for organised self-defence by black communities under attack. So are we. The difference lies in the fact that revolutionary socialists aim to transform the isolated acts of resistance into a political movement which can challenge capitalism, whether on the street or in the factory.

Sivanandan is clearly opposed to black nationalism and to the passivity that pure cultural politics prescribes. He writes:

?. . . whilst the struggle against racism could not be subsumed to the class struggle it could not in the name of that autonomy, become separatist, inward looking or nationalist.? (Race and Class Vol. 35)

But Sivanandan?s politics of community resistance do imply a form of separatism?not the small world of separatist sectarian grouplets but a kind of separatist stage-ism: organise the black community first and then worry about the working class organisations.

This is self defeating. Revolutionary socialists fight for black workers? self-organisation, but within and as part of the whole workers? movement. We seek to place black struggles on the agenda of the whole working class and focus the workers? most powerful weapons in support of these struggles. Even within the community itself a class line has to be drawn, between the working class, the middle class and the bosses.

Class politics within the black community can draw in sections of the middle class, around both the fight against racism and to a limited extent economic questions like strikes. But this must never be done at the expense of dropping working class independence and the right to carry out militant, illegal direct action.

Like Sivanandan, revolutionary socialists reject reformist multiculturalism, middle class careerism and overt separatism. But we remain revolutionary integrationists. Our aim is to integrate the struggles of black working class communities into the struggles of the organised working class as a whole, revolutionising both in the process.

To do that we need the weapon of a political party?something which Sivanandan?s whole existence as an independent ?tribune of the people? rebels against. Paradoxically, for all Sivanandan?s praise for politics, ideology and ?subjectivity?, he fails to see that only an organised force can change the politics and subjective ideas of the working class.

Socialist separatism: Panther and the BUFP
Many specifically "black Marxist" organisations correctly reject economism, and identify material roots for working class racism. But they draw wrong political conclusions from this.

One of the longest established of these groupings is the Black Unity and Freedom Party (BUFP). Though they are small and lacking in influence today, the example of their method is instructive, demonstrating the weaknesses inherent in "socialist" black separatism.

The BUFP claims that "the contradiction of primary importance is that between the classes (BUFP Manifesto). Therefore it is fiercely critical of black nationalism and the strategy of building a black cross-class alliance.

However when we look at the BUFP's programme and practice we see severe shortcomings. It has an overt maximum and minimum programme - a short term list and a long term list.

The BUFP's short term programme is little more than a radical version of the reformist multiculturalists programme:

- An immediate end to and a public inquiry into the brutal racist activities of the police.
- An end to the unfair and unjust treatment of black people at the hands of the judiciary.
- In all schools where there are black children there must be a representative number of black people on the governing boards.
- Full employment and an end to all discriminatory practices in employment.

In addition there are a number of more radical demands: the scrapping of racist immigration controls, the scrapping of the CRE, an end to the exploitation of women by men. Yet no link is made between the BUFP's minimum programme of reforms and their maximum goal of the seizure of state power by the working class.

Indeed it cannot make such a link, because of its insistence on black socialist organisation as an alternative to forging class unity at an organisational level.

When it intervenes in the class struggle it has been principally around the call to drive the "white left" out of community based campaigns, like the original Broadwater Farm defence campaign.

This cannot unite black workers with white workers in common struggle against racism.

Indeed this is not even one of the stated aims of the BUFP. Neither can it strengthen black workers' self organisation in the fight against racism within the labour movement, because its separatist approach rules out any sustained united front with other forces, including black workers in the trade unions.

Panther UK, who began as Militant Labour's black organisation, but who have now split from Militant, are no better.

"Free at last, free at last!" proclaimed the front page of Panther under the headline, "A declaration of independence?. The freedom being celebrated was from Panther's connections with Militant Labour.

The split in Panther UK came, we are told, after "a year long protracted debate on the crucial issue of whether the group should develop as a genuinely independent Black and Asian organisation with the perspective of becoming a party at a later stage, or whether it should operate as a campaign group, with
the objective of recruiting the best elements to the Militant?

The political results of Panther’s new found ?freedom? are contained in a reformulated programme. Reading this shows that the differences were not simply over Panther’s independence, or its relationship to Militant. They were over central questions of the strategy for black liberation.

Under Militant’s control, Panther drew up a programme that bore all the hallmarks of a centrist method. By this we mean an approach that represents a half-way house between reformism and revolutionary politics.

Until 1992, Militant used to present itself as the organic left wing of the Labour Party. Instead of challenging the ideas of reformism head on, they adapted their programme to these ideas.

A revolutionary programme must include the fight for reforms and for immediate improvements in the conditions of the working class. But it links every struggle to the need for the working class to organise the fight for political power. Above all, it makes it clear that the capitalist system cannot be transformed by peaceful, constitutional means.

The armed power of the state, its apparatus of coercion and oppression, will have to be smashed by the working class and replaced by the rule of democratic and accountable workers? councils defended by a workers? militia.

Militant abandoned this approach. Instead they included no link in their programme between the fight for reforms and the need for revolution. On the contrary, they even went so far as to argue that socialism could be introduced peacefully by a Labour government. When events knocked Militant out of its forty-year groove of adaptation to Labourism, it looked for other movements and other false ideologies to adapt to.

One of those ideologies was black separatism, which was on the increase as a layer of black youth rediscovered the ideas of leaders like Malcolm X.

So instead of adapting to Labour, they adapted their politics to black separatism. Just as Militant dubiously tried to claim the heritage of Labour’s founder, Keir Hardie, so Panther claimed to continue the tradition of US Black Panther leaders, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton.

Just as Militant separated the day to day struggle from the final goal, so Panther argued for justified demands against racism, but failed to link these systematically and practically to the struggle for socialism. Crucially they failed to explain that only through uniting the working class to carry out a social revolution could black people achieve liberation.

Militant conceived the launch of Panther as a tactic. Ultimately its aim was to build a black movement politically allied to and led by Militant. There was nothing wrong with this goal. Revolutionary socialist parties should always strive to carry out special forms of work, with special organisations and papers, amongst black people, women, youth, lesbians and gays.

What was wrong, in addition to their programmatic adaptation to separatism, was Militant’s dishonest way of carrying out this work. The leaders of the original Panther continually denied any formal links with Militant in public. Many black Militant members did not even sell Panther.

This dishonest fusion of centrist ?Trotskyism? with black separatism could not last. Its inner contradictions exploded to create, in the shape of Independent Panther UK, a genuine black separatist organisation.

Included in Independent Panther’s programme are demands for full employment, equal pay and equal access to education, an end to discrimination in the courts and trade unions and self defence ?by any
means necessary?. These are all demands that revolutionary socialists support and fight for.

But when it comes to dealing with the racist state, Independent Panther proves no more revolutionary than its Militant-controlled predecessor.

One of the hallmarks of Militant was its commitment to democratizing the existing capitalist state. While Marxists advocate democratic demands that weaken the ability of the state to repress the working class, black people and youth, we do not hold out the dangerous illusion that this state can be reformed to meet the needs of the working class.

So in the face of police violence we always argue for self-defence organisations, as the first practical step in the here and now towards the construction in the future of a workers? militia.

Independent Panther?s answer to police brutality falls far short of that. It demands:

?a) a community controlled complaints authority to investigate cases of assault on our community, with the power to give compensation and bring criminal charges against police officers

b) policy and operational control of the police by democratically elected representatives from the local communities which they serve

c) the immediate disbandment of the Instant Response Unit and other specialised units used to terrorize our communities?

Every one of these demands would, if enacted, limit the powers of the bosses? state. But for precisely that reason they will never be achieved without a fight to smash that state and replace it. The idea that the working class can ever control the bosses? police force like this is a utopia. No matter how many pictures you stick alongside your programme of Huey Newton with a gun, it is still a reformist utopia.

Another reformist and nationalist utopia is Independent Panther?s programme on third world debt.

Revolutionary socialists always fight for the cancellation of third world debt. One of our strategic goals is an international programme of state investment to undo the damage imperialism has done to the third world. But in Independent Panther?s programme this is posed in a way indistinguishable from the nationalism of bourgeois anti-imperialist movements:

?We want the cancellation of third world debt and the setting up of a fair means of trade and exchange between countries. We believe that the poverty of the so-called third world countries is because the wealth is being stolen and misused by the developed countries of the world. We want financial and technical compensation for the centuries of colonial exploitation and destruction of these countries?.

The international system of imperialist exploitation is not simply a matter of one country robbing another. Nor can it be put right by restoring ?fair exchange?.

Imperialism leads to the combined and uneven development of the colonial and semi-colonial countries. That is what causes poverty and debt. To overthrow this system we will need to overthrow the third world capitalists as well as the imperialist rulers. The whole world economy will have to be transformed in the sphere of ownership, not exchange.

Then the fruits of the labour of the millions of workers and poor peasants will be in their own hands, not the multinational companies, the Western banks or their agents in capitalist third world governments.
Independent Panther’s whole emphasis here—and this is the only section of its programme dealing with international questions—is on squaring its programme with the nationalist utopias peddled by Malcolm X and Nkrumah.

Even Pan Africanists like Walter Rodney, as the same issue of Independent Panther points out, were able to criticise bourgeois nationalism for ignoring class. But Independent Panther’s treatment of the imperialist system ignores class altogether.

Fundamentally, for Independent Panther, the struggle for socialism and black liberation are linked but separate. There is no explanation of why it is only socialism that can deliver freedom from oppression.

Independent Panther deals with the link between oppression and exploitation with the same method as many ?socialist feminists?: there is class exploitation and socialism is the answer to that; and there is social oppression and Panther’s programme is the answer to that.

Why else would Independent Panther set as its strategic goal the creation of an independent black political party?

Revolutionary socialists give full support to black self organisation within the workers’ movement. We fight for the right to caucus, including inside the revolutionary party, and for black sections and conferences in the Labour Party and the trade unions. This is something neither Militant nor the original Panther would ever fight for. Independent Panther’s programme says nothing about these demands either.

But revolutionary socialists do not fight for a separate black party. What different goals do black workers have that mean they need a different party, independent from white workers, to fight for socialism? If they have the same goals?a workers’ revolution, black liberation and socialism?they should be in the same party.

That does not mean a working class party?even one committed to revolution?can’t be infected by racism, or that struggles won’t have to take place within it against instances of racism. Nor does it mean abandoning the tradition of revolutionary parties undertaking special forms of work among the victims of oppression.

What it does mean is that the black working class?a minority of the working class in Britain?will not be able to make a revolution against the capitalists on their own. For that a party must be built of black and white revolutionary workers.

What Independent Panther has outlined in its programme is a separate road to socialism for black and white workers. That is a road to nowhere. The whole Independent Panther programme fights shy of class. For Independent Panther the working class seems not to exist?instead ?oppressed and exploited? people will lead the fight for world revolution. Panther says:

?We believe that black people and all other people will not be free until they determine their own destiny?. What ?other people?? The two all important words?working class?do not appear once in Panther’s programme.

In offering these criticisms of Independent Panther UK, Workers Power does not hold up Militant Labour’s approach as the one to follow. One criticism which Independent Panther levels at the left in Britain does ring true with regard both to Militant and the SWP:
Instead of concentrating on the urgent task of raising the race consciousness of white workers left-wing organisations spend all their time crudely trying to submerge the special problems of racism deep within the class struggle.

The source of this error is Militant’s and the SWP’s belief that united trade union struggle will spontaneously overcome racism, sexism and anti-gay bigotry—their economism.

Workers Power has consistently criticised the economism of the SWP and Militant in all the struggles of the oppressed. Our aim is to unite the working class in struggle without ever downplaying the fight against racism within the working class. But if all black revolutionaries are separated off in a different party, how does that help white revolutionaries raise the race consciousness of white workers? It doesn’t, and it is a guarantee that the race consciousness of mainly white socialist organisations will get worse, not better.

When Independent Panther split from Militant, demanding self determination, they threw in their opponents faces a quote from the black revolutionary CLR James, quoted out of time and out of context. Here is another quote from CLR James which Independent Panther will have to learn from, unless they want to repeat all the mistakes of Malcolm X and the US Panthers:

The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race would be disastrous, but to neglect the racial factor as irrelevant is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.

**Conclusion**

What conclusions should then be drawn by those committed to fighting racism, who locate its origins and roots in the capitalist system and who see the working class as the only force with both the interest and the social cohesion and power to overthrow it and build a socialist alternative?

Black workers constitute a section of the working class subject to profound oppression on grounds of race. The existence of persistent racism among white workers can only be explained in a consistently Marxist fashion by pointing to the ability of the capitalist class in the most economically developed countries to offer marginal privileges to sections of the working class as a result of imperialist super-exploitation of the semi-colonial countries (the third world).

Any theory based on the spontaneous disappearance of racism within the working class as a result of economic struggle alone must be rejected as ignoring the powerful material counter-tendencies towards bourgeois ideology within the working class.

Lenin first identified this phenomenon when he developed his theory of the labour aristocracy. Writing of the social roots of reformism and nationalism within the workers’ movement, he observed in March 1915 that:

Certain strata of the working class (the bureaucracy of the labour movement and the labour aristocracy, who get a fraction of the profits from the exploitation of the colonies and from the privileged position of their fatherlands in the world market) as well as petty-bourgeois sympathisers within the socialist parties, have proved the social mainstay of these tendencies, and channels of bourgeois influence over the proletariat.

Yet the existence of such divisions within the ranks of the working class do not mean that the relative privileges of certain layers of workers constitute an impassable obstacle to their revolutionary development. The fundamental error of both the economists and the socialist separatists is their failure to understand
the contradictory processes by which class consciousness develops.

Thus the SWP reject the idea that white workers can benefit from racism because it would contradict their schema of the spontaneous evolution of class consciousness as a result of the economic struggle alone.

Similarly, others, like the BUFP, consider that the existence of material roots to racism writes off the possibility of winning white workers to consistent action against racism whilst such divisions remain in place.

There are sections and divisions within the working class - but the fundamental unity of class interests within the proletariat is not just something that exists on paper or in theory.

It propels workers - including skilled, white and ?labour aristocratic? sections - into struggle again and again.

And as the widespread support for the Grunwick strike by white workers and the rallying of black workers to support for the miners? strike of 1984-85 shows, it is in struggle that ideas can change most quickly, and that workers ?labour aristocratic or not?can be most effectively rallied to the ideas and programme of socialism.

Revolutionaries need to generalise from the overall experience of the working class?of all its sections, throughout history, and in all countries ?in order to develop and advance its class consciousness.

If there are also spontaneous objective pressures towards bourgeois ideology within the working class, this only makes the need for a strong revolutionary party all the more pressing. We need a party that can fight, when necessary, against the prevailing ideas, for a programme of action expressing the interests of the working class as a whole.

This means recognising the need for special forms of organisation for black workers who face particular attacks under capitalism and the indifference or even hostility of sections of white workers.

Revolutionary socialists must be the most consistent defenders of the right of black workers to caucus, to hold special meetings and conferences, to organise within the workers? movement at all levels, from the workplaces through to every layer of the movement?s structures.

A revolutionary party will use special methods for the conduct of propaganda among the racially oppressed?just as the Russian socialists published special materials directed at Jewish workers and upheld the principle that Jewish party members should have the right to their own section of the party to carry out such special work.

Under certain circumstances it would even be necessary for revolutionaries to advocate the establishment of a movement of black workers, within which they would fight for the adoption of revolutionary socialist programme.

These methods have nothing in common with the approach of the ?socialist separatists?. At no point do revolutionaries conceal the fact that only a party able to unite the working class? black and white?in struggle will be able to lead the working class to socialist revolution, the overthrow capitalism and thereby, open the road to black liberation.

Black working class organisation is aimed at promoting the revolutionary struggle of the working class.

It is counterposed to the separatist idea of a separate black political party, or the idea that an all-class,
community based black movement must be built before the working class can unite.

The black working class of Britain is cruelly oppressed, but it constitutes under 5% of the population. United in action and with a leadership armed with a clear conception of its goals, the working class as a whole constitutes the vast majority of the population. It is a force which, purged of sectionalism, privilege, chauvinism and racism, in all their forms, can change the world.

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