

## Break with the Capitalist Democratic Party! For a Revolutionary Workers Party!



# Obama: Commander-in-Chief of Racist U.S. Imperialism



AP photos

From Bush to Obama, imperialist war and capitalist economic crisis will continue. Left: U.S. Marines in Afghanistan, July 2008. Right: Line at New York job fair as unemployment soars.

The election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States has aroused great expectations among working people and the oppressed around the world. Black people and others celebrated on streets throughout the country the election of the next Commander-in-Chief of bloody U.S. imperialism. Michelle Obama, the descendent of slaves, will be first lady in a White House whose foundations were laid by slave labor. This is something most Americans never expected to see in their lifetime. Amid fears of a new Great Depression, as millions of working people are losing their homes and unemployment grows, hopes for “change” center on the incoming Democratic Obama administration. These hopes will be brutally dashed.

As America’s next top cop, Obama will preside over the racist capitalist system, which is based on the exploitation of working people at home and abroad. As against the reformists, who either explicitly or implicitly backed Obama, we Marxists fight to break working people and the

oppressed from illusions in the capitalist Democratic Party of war and racism. On principle, we do not vote for, or otherwise extend any political support to, any capitalist politician—Democrat, Republican, Green or “independent.” As the front-page headline of WV No. 923 (24 October) emphasized: “McCain, Obama: Class Enemies of Workers, Oppressed.”

We Marxists also do not run for the executive offices of the bourgeois state, such as mayor, governor or president. This is based on our understanding that the capitalist state—which at its core consists of the cops, military, courts and prisons—exists to defend the class rule and profits of the bourgeoisie. Holding executive office means administering the capitalist state. Our aim is the forging of a revolutionary workers party to lead the multiracial working class, and behind it all the oppressed, in the struggle to overthrow the capitalist order through workers revolution and establish a workers state where those who labor rule.

Immediately upon winning, Obama sought to tamp down expectations for his administration. He made his agenda of “national unity” patriotism clear when he declared on election night, before a crowd of 250,000 people in Chicago celebrating his victory, the need for “a new spirit of

sacrifice.” In this, Obama is following in the footsteps of the black Democrats who have been employed as mayors and police chiefs of major urban areas—from L.A. to Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and elsewhere. Their job has been to *keep working and black people down*, to oversee rampant cop terror and administer the slashing of social programs; their value to the racist rulers is epitomized by the statement of black former New York City mayor David Dinkins: “They’ll take it from me.” With the U.S. entering a deep economic recession, it will be Obama’s job to contain potential social unrest and impose austerity measures upon working people—and his current popularity may very well allow him to get away with much.

With cool “post-partisan” arrogance, Obama—wielding his own \$660 million campaign, which was supported by significant sections of the bourgeoisie—blames the oppressed for their own oppression. In his Chicago victory speech, Obama stated: “If there is anyone out there...who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.” A similar message came from McCain in his concession speech, who bluntly stated, “Let there be no reason now for any American to fail to cherish their citizenship.” As we warned in “Obama Offers Facelift for U.S. Impe-

rialism” (WV No. 920, 12 September): “Obama serves as a very powerful propaganda weapon for the bourgeoisie, telling black people and the oppressed to shut up and stop complaining, because, you see, ‘the American dream’ works!”

From the standpoint of the international working class and oppressed there is *nothing to celebrate* in Obama’s victory and much to fear. Enthusiasm among large sections of the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, is justified. After nearly eight years of one of the most incompetent and widely despised regimes in recent U.S. history, they now have in Obama a more rational face for their brutal, irrational system. Obama has also inspired illusions in the trappings of bourgeois democracy, the means by which the capitalists disguise their rule with the appearance of a popular mandate. Abroad, Obama provides an invaluable facelift for U.S. imperialism, the main enemy of the world’s working people.

Obama calls to remove “combat troops” from Iraq (while maintaining a “residual force”) in order to redeploy at least another 10,000 soldiers to Afghanistan in support of that murderous occupation. He is dedicated to further machinations against Pakistan, including military incursions into that country. In his July 24

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# Obama...

(continued from page 1)

speech in Berlin before a huge crowd, he invoked the anti-Soviet Cold War to motivate U.S. imperialism’s interests, not least the restoration of capitalist rule in China. He is a staunch supporter of the “war on terror,” including warrantless wiretapping and the renewal of the USA Patriot Act. His inner circle includes Carter- and Clinton-era war criminals like Zbigniew Brzezinski and Madeleine Albright as well as staunch supporters of Zionist Israel like Vice President-elect Joe Biden and Rahm Emanuel, projected to be the new chief of staff. Obama is considering one John O. Brennan, who was among those who created the current CIA detention and torture programs, for director of national intelligence or head of the CIA. Brennan vehemently defended the administration’s use of “rendition” in a December 2005 interview on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, calling it an “absolutely vital tool.”

We say, from Afghanistan to Iraq and Guantánamo: **Free all the detainees!** As revolutionary opponents of U.S. imperialism, we stood for the military defense of Afghanistan and Iraq in the lead-up to U.S. imperialism’s invasions of those countries while politically opposing the reactionary Taliban and Saddam Hussein’s brutal capitalist regime. We called for class struggle against the capitalist rulers at home. We are for the **defeat** of U.S. forces; their every setback serves to assist the struggles of working people and the oppressed

the world over. We demand the **immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. troops and bases from Iraq, Afghanistan and Central Asia! U.S. hands off Pakistan and Iran!** As against the reformist left, which has lined up with its “own” bourgeoisie, we fight for the **unconditional military defense of those states where capitalism has been overthrown:** China, Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea.

Domestically, working people face grinding debt and mass layoffs. And the bourgeoisie has no solution for the current economic crisis and the inevitable boom-and-bust cycles of capitalism. With auto sales collapsing, General Motors and Ford recently announced that over the past three months they burned through cash at a rate of more than \$2 billion a month; GM said that by year’s end it could run out of the cash necessary to fund its business. Even if bankruptcy is averted—or postponed—by government subsidies, as some Democrats are demanding, auto workers face massive layoffs, pay cuts and an all-out attack on pensions and health care.

Meanwhile, in the face of worldwide economic crisis, Obama and the Democrats embraced (with only minor modifications) the Bush administration’s plan to transfer \$700 billion of taxpayers’ money to banks and other financial institutions. So far, this gigantic bailout has done little to unfreeze credit markets. Last week the Treasury Department announced that even though about \$290 billion of that sum had already been allocated, the banks were still not willing to lend to consumers. Obama seeks to socialize the bour-

geoisie’s losses on the backs of working people, while helping the exploiters appropriate the profits for themselves.

Our class opposition to all bourgeois candidates—and to bourgeois electoralism—is based on the Marxist understanding that capitalist society is divided between two fundamental classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whose interests cannot be reconciled. Labor needs a fighting leadership that will unleash the power of the multiracial working class in struggle for workers’ economic interests and also for black rights, in defense of immigrants and in opposition to U.S. imperialism. But the trade-union bureaucracy of both the AFL-CIO and Change to Win union federations promotes Democratic Party “lesser evilism” and spent some **\$450 million** of union members’ dues money on the 2008 elections, rather than building up a war chest for the struggle needed to defend the workers’ interests. Instead of class struggle and international working-class solidarity, the union tops push chauvinist “America first” patriotism and protectionism, promoting the lie that working people abroad, as opposed to the U.S. capitalist rulers, are the enemies of the American proletariat.

## Class and Race in Capitalist America

The U.S. is a country historically defined by chattel slavery, an institution that was smashed only through the blood and iron of the Civil War. It is a country that required a massive civil rights movement, claiming many black and white martyrs, before Southern Jim Crow segregation was finally defeated. The pride among black people over Obama’s election is, whatever his actual policies, a legacy of this history of oppression and enforced exclusion from the “process.”

However, the condition today of the black masses, particularly those in the ghettos, is one of desperate poverty, police violence, massive incarceration. The “end of racism” myth of Obama’s campaign is a cruel hoax, as is Obama’s statement that the civil rights movement brought America “90 percent of the way” toward racial equality. As we pointed out in our first article on Obama’s candidacy almost a year ago, “The Obama Campaign and the ‘End of Racism’ Myth” (WV No. 906, 18 January):

“Black oppression continues to be the central defining feature of U.S. society. It is **materially rooted** in and central to American capitalism. As against both liberal integrationists and black nationalists, our struggle for black liberation is based on the program of **revolutionary integrationism**. While opposing every manifestation of racist oppression, fighting in particular to mobilize the social power of the multiracial labor movement, we underline that full equality for the black masses requires that the working class rip the economy out of the hands of the capitalist rulers and reorganize it on a socialist basis. Only then will it be possible to eliminate the material roots of black oppression through the integration of black people into an egalitarian socialist society based on a collectivized economy with jobs and quality housing, health care and education for all.”

As the examples of Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice also show, there is now a huge class gulf between the petty-bourgeois black professionals who were the main beneficiaries of the liberal-led civil rights movement and the masses of black workers and ghetto poor. But black president or not, America is America—racist, brutal, violent. As Obama’s Grant Park election night celebration was going on, Chicago cops harassed black residents cheering his victory. That same night in Staten Island, New York, a 17-year-old black youth was chased and beaten by racists who screamed “Obama!” at him. Four days after the election, Ecuadorian immigrant Marcello Lucero was fatally stabbed near the Patchogue, Long Island train station by a gang of racist teens who reportedly drove around searching for a Latino to attack.

Under the guise of being a post-“culture wars” unifier, Obama’s positions on many issues are only a hair’s breadth away from such stalwart reactionaries as Joe Lieber-

man (and we’re not sure about the hair). Obama opposes gay marriage. He is a supporter of the racist death penalty, a legacy of chattel slavery in the U.S. This past July, Obama stated his opposition to mental health exceptions for “late-term” abortion bans with the paternalistic statement that a woman’s rationale for an abortion cannot be “just a matter of feeling blue.”

## Reformists’ Obamamania

The “Anybody but Bush” reformist left is head-over-heels over Obama’s election. In opposition to working-class political independence from the capitalist rulers, they promote collaboration with the bourgeois enemy as the way forward. *Workers World* (14 November) stated: “The election victory of Barack Obama will go down in history as a triumphant step forward in the struggle against racism and national oppression in the U.S.” This was preceded by a 6 November piece in which Workers World Party leader Larry Holmes babbled on about the “elation” and “feeling of liberation” unleashed by Obama’s win, not bothering to even mention their endorsement of capitalist Green Party candidate Cynthia McKinney (whose campaign was, as we said, a stalking horse for the Democrats). According to Holmes, “The feeling on the streets of cities large and small across the U.S. on election night was that now, anything is possible, and it is.” So, it is “yes we can”—under capitalism.

The International Socialist Organization (ISO) threw an election night party in Harlem to “celebrate the end of far too many years of republican rule” and to discuss “what can activists do to press their demands on the next administration?” The ISO’s *Socialist Worker* (7 November), aping liberal buzzwords, gushed that Obama’s victory was “transformative.” While acknowledging that many of Obama’s positions point “to a big gap between the hopes and expectations of Obama voters and the cautious, moderate program he has put forward,” the ISO intones: “None of this is to say that no change is possible. Tens of millions of people want a new direction. The question is whether they can be organized to fight for it.”

For its part, the eccentric Stalinist-reformist Progressive Labor Party (PL) wrote in its newspaper *Challenge* (10 November) that Obama is a capitalist politician, noting that PL’s “exposing and opposing Obama and the ruling class he serves may not be ‘popular’ at first.” But actions speak louder than words: As we earlier reported, PL openly declared that it would “actively participate in Obama’s campaign” (*Challenge*, 26 March). One “Red Registrar” even boasted in a letter to *Challenge* (4 October), printed without comment, “I helped out at a voter registration drive in my neighborhood that I found out about through BarackObama.com”! These reformists perpetuate deadly illusions that this government of the capitalists, by the capitalists and for the capitalists can be made to serve “the people.”

All of our activity is directed toward forging, training and steeling the proletarian vanguard party necessary for the seizure of state power. In contrast, the politics of the reformists consist of oppositional activity completely defined by the framework of bourgeois society. This was sharply characterized by Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky in his 1924 work, *Lessons of October*, as “the actual training of the masses to become imbued with the inviolability of the bourgeois state.”

We stand on what Trotsky wrote in *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (also known as the Transitional Program), the basic programmatic document adopted at the 1938 founding conference of the Fourth International, world party of socialist revolution. As Trotsky put it, the Fourth International “uncompromisingly gives battle to all political groupings tied to the apron-strings of the bourgeoisie. Its task—the abolition of capitalism’s domination. Its aim—socialism. Its method—the proletarian revolution.” ■



TROTSKY

## Bourgeois Liberalism vs. Black Liberation

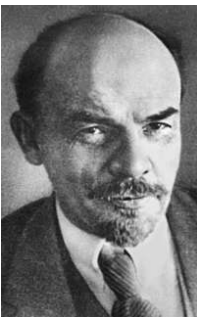
*In a 1933 document called “Communism and the Negro” (published by Verso in 2003 under the title Race and Revolution), Max Shachtman, then a Trotskyist leader, exposed the hypocrisy of bourgeois liberals who claimed to support black rights. While the civil rights movement later shattered Jim Crow segregation in the South and won formal legal equality for black people, the role of bourgeois liberalism today remains, at bottom, as Shachtman described it some 75*

*years ago: defense of the American capitalist order. Black oppression, a fundamental component of American capitalism, can only be eradicated with the overthrow of bourgeois rule through socialist revolution.*

The liberal wing of the bourgeoisie does not rise to greater heights than outright reaction in the essential aspects of its “solution.” The greatest concern of these “friends of the Negro” is to pour cold water on his flaming protests; to console him with soothing phrases in the moments of his anguish and misery, to beseech the Negro to have patience, while they are in turn beseeching the big bourgeoisie to make enough concessions to the black to prevent him from revolting. They insinuate into the mind of the Negro the treacherous idea that nothing is to be gained by flying in the face of prejudices, that the Negro must wait until his oppressors have evolved to a “higher understanding of his problems.” They give him significant warnings that the “right people” will not be won to the cause of sweetness and light if the Negro does not behave like a good Christian, bearing his cross with dignity and grace, until those who have burdened him with it relent their unfairness. The best of the liberal friends of the Negro (save the mark!) reveal their fundamental white chauvinism the minute the latter turns toward the revolutionary movement or engages in a genuinely militant struggle which requires that the pretended friends lend their assistance in more concrete form than mere oratory and literature....

What they warn against is that the master class will be “offended” if the Negroes “offensively insist” upon those elementary rights which should be the common property of the citizens of even a democratic capitalist republic. And what the Negro must always bear in mind, teach these auction-block liberals, is that it is foolish to “butt one’s head” against the social and economic system of the ruling class.

—Max Shachtman, “Communism and the Negro” (1933)



LENIN

# WORKERS VANGUARD

**Marxist Working-Class Biweekly of the Spartacist League of the U.S.**

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The Spartacist League is the U.S. Section of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist).

*Workers Vanguard* (ISSN 0276-0746) published biweekly, except skipping three alternate issues in June, July and August (beginning with omitting the second issue in June) and skipping the last issue in December, by the Spartacist Publishing Co., 299 Broadway, Suite 318, New York, NY 10007. Telephone: (212) 732-7862 (Editorial), (212) 732-7861 (Business). Address all correspondence to: Box 1377 GPO, New York, NY 10116. E-mail address: [vanguard@tiac.net](mailto:vanguard@tiac.net). Domestic subscriptions: \$10.00/22 issues. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Workers Vanguard*, Box 1377 GPO, New York, NY 10116.

*Opinions expressed in signed articles or letters do not necessarily express the editorial viewpoint.*

The closing date for news in this issue is November 18.

**No. 925**

**21 November 2008**

## 23rd Annual Holiday Appeal



Anarchist Black Cross

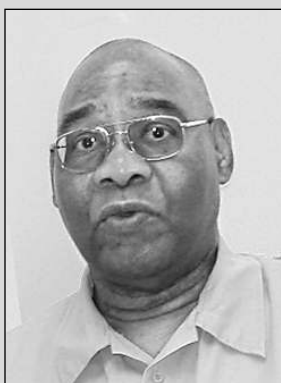
**Clockwise from right:**  
Jamal Hart (far right) with his son Jamal Hart Jr., Delbert Africa, Ed Poindexter, Tom Manning, Jaan Laaman (far left) with his son Rick.



Monique Code



December 16th Committee



Jericho Movement



Jericho Movement

## Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Now! Free the Class-War Prisoners! Abolish the Racist Death Penalty!

In 1927, James P. Cannon, a leader of the Workers (Communist) Party, secretary of the International Labor Defense (ILD) and later the founder of American Trotskyism, aptly described the annual Christmas drives that newspapers like the *New York Times* hold (to this day): “The men, women and children of the working class, who have been on the rack of capitalist exploitation and are now dropped into the abyss of misery and poverty, are chosen and classified by these arch hypocrites—so their sanctimonious appeal can be made to the comfortable capitalists, to soften the bitterness of these few workers with the insult of charity, and to save their own conscience by acts of ‘generosity’” (“A Christmas Fund of Our Own,” *Daily Worker*, 17 October 1927). To this “horrible farce,” Cannon counterposed the worldwide campaign to raise a special fund for those imprisoned for the labor cause and their families as a way of “transforming the hypocritical spirit of

Christmas into the spirit of solidarity with the class-war fighters behind bars.... The Christmas Fund drive of International Labor Defense is a means of informing them that the workers of America have not forgotten their duty toward the men to whom we are linked by bonds of solidarity.”

For the past 23 years, in the tradition of the ILD, the Partisan Defense Committee—a class-struggle, non-sectarian legal and social defense organization associated with the Spartacist League—has been sending monthly stipends as an expression of solidarity to those imprisoned for standing up to racist capitalist repression. Each year we have held Holiday Appeal benefits to raise funds for this unique program. This year’s Holiday Appeal benefits will focus particularly on the struggle to mobilize the multiracial working class in demanding freedom for death row political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal.

The PDC calls on labor activists, fighters for black rights, immigrant rights and defenders of civil liberties to join us in generously donating and building our annual Holiday Appeal. An injury to one is an injury to all! We print below brief descriptions of the 16 class-war prisoners who receive monthly stipends from the PDC.

**Mumia Abu-Jamal** is a former Black Panther Party spokesman, a well-known supporter of the MOVE organization and an award-winning journalist known as “the voice of the voiceless.” The fight to free America’s foremost class-war prisoner has reached a critical juncture. This past March, the U.S. Third Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Mumia’s frame-up conviction, ordering a hearing to reinstate the death penalty or entomb him for life. His lawyers are appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court, which has turned down prior appeals for Mumia in 1990, 1999, 2004 and earlier this year. In an ominous new development, the Philadelphia district attorney’s office has advised the U.S. Supreme Court that it is seeking Mumia’s execution.

9 December 2008 is the 27th anniversary of Mumia’s arrest for a killing that the cops know he did not commit. Mumia was

framed up for the 1981 killing of Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner and sentenced to death explicitly for his political views. Mountains of evidence proving Mumia’s innocence, including the sworn confession of Arnold Beverly that he, not Mumia, shot and killed Faulkner, have been submitted to the courts. But to the racists in black robes, a court of law is no place for evidence of the innocence of this fighter for the oppressed.

Mumia faces the racist death penalty or life in prison because he has always spoken for the oppressed. Time is getting short. Workers, immigrants, minorities and all opponents of racist oppression

must mobilize to free Mumia now!

**Leonard Peltier** is an internationally revered class-war prisoner. Peltier’s incarceration for his activism in the American Indian Movement has come to symbolize this country’s racist repression of its native peoples, the survivors of centuries of genocidal oppression. Peltier’s frame-up trial, for the deaths in 1975 of two marauding FBI agents in what had become a war zone at the South Dakota Pine Ridge Reservation, shows what capitalist “justice” is all about. Although the lead government attorney has admitted: “We can’t prove who shot those agents,” and the courts have acknowledged blatant prosecutorial misconduct, the 64-year-old Peltier is still locked away. Federal courts continue to keep under government seal thousands of FBI documents, covering up the racist frame-up that has already stolen more than 30 years of his life.

Eight MOVE members—**Chuck Africa, Michael Africa, Debbie Africa, Janet Africa, Janine Africa, Delbert Africa, Eddie Africa** and **Phil Africa**—are in their 31st year of prison. They were sentenced to 30-100 years after the 8 August 1978 siege of their Philadelphia home by over 600 heavily armed cops, falsely convicted of killing a police officer who died in the cops’ own cross fire. In 1985, eleven of their MOVE family members, including five children, were massacred by Philly cops. This year, after three decades of unjust incarceration, nearly all of these innocent prisoners had parole hearings, but none were released.

**Jaan Laaman** and **Thomas Manning** are the remaining anti-imperialist activists known as the Ohio 7 still in prison, convicted for their roles in a radical group that took credit for bank “expropriations” and bombings against symbols of U.S. imperialism, such as military and corporate offices, in the late 1970s and ’80s. Before their arrests in 1984 and 1985, the Ohio 7 were targets of massive manhunts. Their children were kidnapped at gunpoint by the Feds.

The Ohio 7’s politics were once shared by thousands of radicals during the Vietnam antiwar movement and by New Leftists who wrote off the possibility of winning the working class to a revolutionary program and saw themselves as an auxiliary of Third World liberation movements. But, like the Weathermen before them, the Ohio 7 were spurned by the “respectable” left. From a proletarian standpoint, the actions of these leftist

*continued on page 11*



**Class-Struggle Defense Notes  
No. 35, Spring 2008**

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## 23rd Annual Partisan Defense Committee Holiday Appeal Benefit for Class-War Prisoners

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**Sunday, December 7  
1 to 5 p.m.**

2939 Ellis Street  
Berkeley  
(2 blocks west of MLK,  
just north of Ashby  
at Ashby BART)

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Jennifer Beach

### Los Angeles

**Saturday, December 13  
1 to 4 p.m.**

Immanuel  
Presbyterian Church  
3300 Wilshire Blvd.  
(at Berendo St., 2 blocks west of  
Vermont/Wilshire Red Line Sta.)  
For more information:  
(213) 380-8897

### New York City

**Saturday, December 13  
4 to 8 p.m.**

Nuyorican Poets Cafe  
236 East 3rd Street  
between Aves. B and C  
(take F train to Second Avenue,  
or #6 train to Bleecker St.)  
For more information:  
(212) 406-4252

### Chicago

**Sunday, December 14  
3 to 7 p.m.**

United Electrical Hall  
37 S. Ashland  
(at Monroe)

For more information:  
(312) 563-0442

### Toronto

**Friday, December 12  
7 to 10 p.m.**

Steelworkers Hall  
25 Cecil Street  
(1 block south of College  
at Ross St., west of  
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For more information:  
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**T**he *Great Debaters*, directed by Denzel Washington, produced by Oprah Winfrey and starring Washington and Forest Whitaker, is supposed to be a feel-good movie about overcoming racism in the segregated South. It is loosely based on an article published in 1997 in *American Legacy* magazine about the debate team of Wiley College—a small, religious black college in East Texas—during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Under the tutelage of their coach, English professor Melvin B. Tolson, the debaters triumph in contest after contest against bigger black schools and jump over the color bar to triumph over prestigious white schools as well, such as a touring Oxford University team from England. The highlight of the movie is their victory over Harvard; the team

**By Don Cane  
and Jacob Zorn**

defeats the all-white Ivy League team by advocating peaceful civil disobedience against oppression. As the credits roll, we are told that one of the debaters, James Farmer Jr., went on to form the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which was founded in 1942 and went on to become one of the organizations active in the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

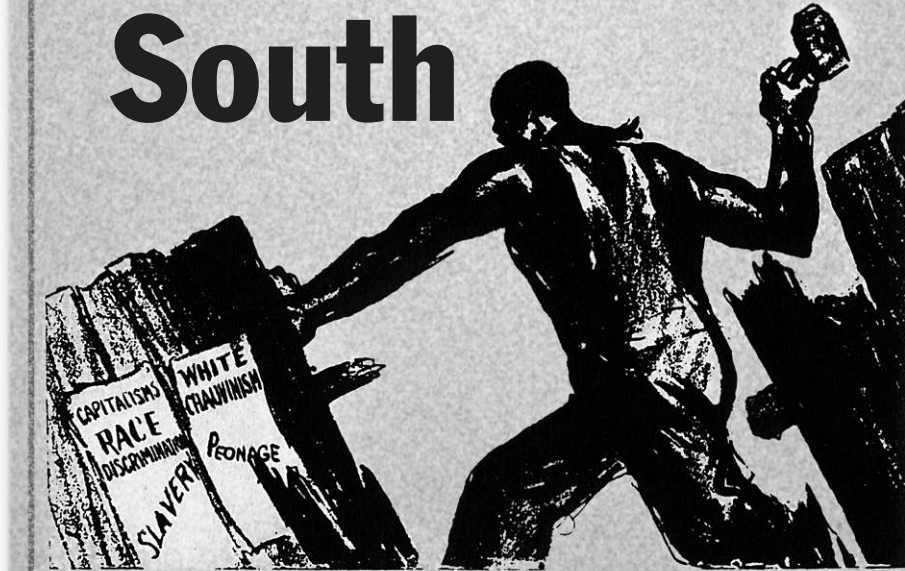
*The Great Debaters* drives home the hardships faced by even relatively elite black students and intellectuals—the “talented tenth”—in the Jim Crow South. Farmer’s father, religion professor James Farmer Sr., the first black person in Texas to earn a PhD, is threatened with death by two impoverished white farmers while driving through the countryside with his family because Farmer accidentally hit their pig with his car. His son resolves to stand up after he sees his educated father forced to grovel before illiterate whites.

Tolson, on the other hand, is obviously some sort of radical, perhaps even a Communist, and he actively opposes racial injustice. In one scene, the young Farmer follows Tolson as he sneaks out in the middle of the night to organize an integrated sharecroppers union, and barely escapes arrest as the police raid the meeting. Later, the police track down Tolson after torturing some of the sharecroppers, arrest him at Wiley and drag him to jail. For an audience not familiar with the everyday violence, oppression and humiliation at the core of Jim Crow segregation, the movie provides a glimpse.

### Black Rights and the Reformist Left Today

*The Great Debaters* opened during the 2007 holiday season, but there should be no doubt that it was made for the 2008 presidential election campaign. The heroes of the film, Tolson and his protégé Farmer, are obviously designed to evoke Barack Obama. The audience is supposed to see Obama, who claims that the civil rights movement “took us 90 percent of the way” toward racial equality, as the modern-day Great Debater, triumphing over historic racism through hard work. It is an echo of Booker T. Washington, who over a century ago preached accommodation to the racist status quo by telling impoverished blacks

# Communist Organizing in the Jim Crow South



Young Worker

## What's Not in *The Great Debaters*



Weinstein Company

**Top: “Smash the Barriers!” illustration from the Young Communist League’s *Young Worker* in 1930. Above: Denzel Washington as Melvin B. Tolson in *The Great Debaters*.**

to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Trade-union bureaucrats, black bourgeois politicians, reformist leftists and others seized on economic and social discontent and peddled support to Obama and the “lesser evil” capitalist Democratic Party—the other party of war and racism. The Communist Party’s *People’s Weekly World* (30 December 2007) wrote, “A film that rings as true and powerful as ‘The Great Debaters’ may have an effect on the 2008 election primaries.” After Obama won the elections, the *People’s Weekly World* headlined a November 6

online statement, “Dawn of a New Era.”

Workers World Party’s paper (1 February) called the movie “magnificent” because it “puts everything in context.” The message *Workers World* draws is that “liberation is not to be won through electoral bourgeois politics, but is to be waged and won through open class struggle.” This is rich coming from an organization that has repeatedly supported black Democrats, from Jesse Jackson in the 1980s to New York City councilman Charles Barron in recent years. Workers World called for a vote to Cynthia McKinney, a former Democratic Congresswoman and the 2008 presidential candidate for the capitalist Green Party. After Obama’s win, *Workers World* (13 November) enthused, “Millions in Streets Seal Obama Victory.”

Genuine Marxists do not support any capitalist party or politician—Democrat, Republican, Green or “independent.” The working class must forge a class-struggle workers party that fights for workers revolution. Capitalism is a system based on exploitation of labor, and, in the U.S., a unique and critical mainstay continues to be the subjugation of the black population at the bottom of society.

The veteran American Trotskyist, Richard S. Fraser, wrote in his 1955 work, “For the Materialist Conception of the Negro Struggle”: “The dual nature of the

Negro struggle arises from the fact that a *whole people* regardless of class distinction are the victims of discrimination. This problem of a whole people can be solved only through the proletarian revolution, under the leadership of the working class” (reprinted in *Marxist Bulletin* No. 5 [Revised], “What Strategy for Black Liberation? Trotskyism vs. Black Nationalism”). We of the Spartacist League base our program for black liberation upon Fraser’s perspective of revolutionary integrationism, premised on the understanding that black freedom requires smashing the capitalist system and constructing an egalitarian socialist society. As we wrote in “For a Workers America!” (WV No. 908, 15 February):

“This program of revolutionary integrationism is a fight to assimilate black people into an egalitarian socialist order, which is the only way to achieve real equality. While we fight against all aspects of racial oppression, we point out that there is no solution to that oppression short of a social revolution. This program is in sharp counterposition to the program of liberal integrationism—what American Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon once derided and denounced as ‘inch-at-a-time’ gradualism—which is based upon the deception that black freedom can be achieved within the confines of the racist capitalist system. It is also in sharp contradiction to the petty-bourgeois utopian program of black nationalism and separatism, which rejects and despairs of united multiracial class struggle to abolish this racist capitalist system. Instead, black nationalism seeks to make a virtue of the racial segregation and ghettoization of black people that is seen as unchangeable.”

### The Great Depression in the Jim Crow South

*The Great Debaters* is a well-made movie. But in its paeans to dedication and debate, it downplays the real *social struggle* that was going on in the U.S. in the 1930s, including by black people in the South. The Great Depression exposed the brutal irrationality of capitalism—in stark contrast to the industrial achievements of the USSR—as it threw millions of workers into starvation and misery internationally, including in other imperialist countries. Germany, which was defeated in World War I, was especially rocked by crises, culminating in the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazis in 1933. Only the betrayal by the Stalinist and Social Democratic misleaders allowed the Nazis to come to power unopposed and smash the organized working class in order to save capitalism. A few years later, the Stalinists went on to play an aggressive counterrevolutionary role in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, slaughtering revolutionary fighters in order to appease the “democratic” imperialists and head off proletarian revolution in Spain. Nonetheless, millions of workers, peasants, students and intellectuals joined Communist and social-democratic parties internationally, trying to find a way out of the apparent dead end of capitalism and fascism.

The catastrophic impact of the Great Depression on the U.S. working class was keenly felt by its most oppressed section, black workers. The unemployment rate of black workers exceeded white joblessness by 30 to 60 percent. Even though millions of black people moved to the industrial North and Midwest during the “Great Migration,” which began with World War I, and many others moved to growing Southern cities, half of American blacks still lived in the rural South at the start of the Depression. Southern agriculture was in decline before the Depression hit. “By 1933 most blacks could neither find jobs of any kind nor contracts for their crop at any price,” as noted by historian Harvard Sitkoff in *A New Deal for Blacks*. “A specter of starvation haunted black America.”

Southern agriculture in the 1930s was, even by contemporary bourgeois standards, economically backward. It retained significant remnants of the slave system. The Civil War, America’s second bourgeois revolution, had smashed the slave system, paving the way for the development of industrial capitalism in the U.S. as a whole. But after the betrayal of



Beinecke Library

**Jamaican-born poet Claude McKay at Communist International’s Fourth Congress in Moscow, 1922.**

Reconstruction by the Northern bourgeoisie, “the Negro was left in the South in the indefinite position of semi-slavery, semi-serfdom and semi-wage slavery” as then-Trotskyist Max Shachtman put it in his 1933 piece “Communism and the Negro” (reprinted by Verso in 2003 as *Race and Revolution*).

Sharecropping and tenancy formed the labor backbone of Southern agriculture. The sharecropper worked in lieu of wages for a share of the cash crop and “furnishings” (food allowance, housing, etc.). The tenant farmer worked land on which he paid ground rent with a share of the crop in lieu of cash. Sharecroppers and tenants found themselves more in debt every year, and could not leave the land until they had paid off their debts. Even when cotton prices rose, they were cheated by white landowners and merchants. According to Sitkoff, “Over two-thirds of the black farmers cultivating cotton in the early thirties received no profits for the crop, either breaking even or going deeper in debt.”

Sitting atop all this was the system of Jim Crow. Designed to prevent blacks from voting, becoming educated or fighting for their rights, Jim Crow was the systematic legal segregation of black people in the South, enforced by legal and extralegal violence. When blacks did challenge Jim Crow—either by personally refusing to follow its rules or, more rarely, by organizing—they faced racist terror, whether by the local sheriff or the Klan (who were often one and the same). At least 3,000 black people were lynched between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the dismantling of Jim Crow in the 1960s. Shachtman summarized the position of black farmers in 1933:

“In a word, to all intents and purposes hundreds of thousands of Negroes in the South today occupy, both in economic as in the political sense, the position of serfs and peons, tied to the land, life



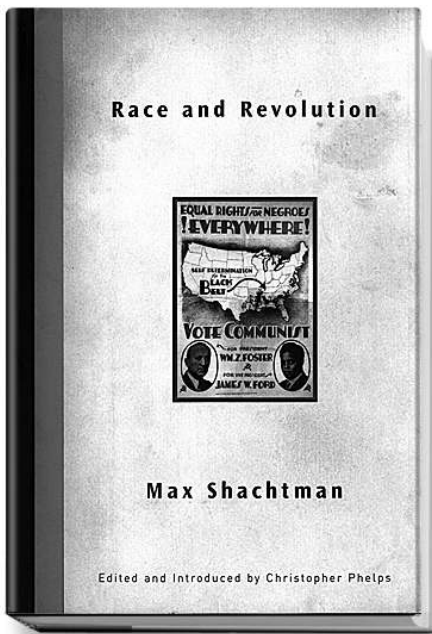
Schomburg Center

Melvin B. Tolson

and limb at the disposal of the landlord, whose semi-feudal sway is maintained with the aid of the sheriff, the courts, the elaborate system of social and political discrimination, and, when necessary, the law of Judge Lynch. The white sharecroppers and tenants are not very much better off.”

Poor white farmers were also horribly oppressed economically. Southern agriculture remained dependent on the cash crop cotton and cheap labor, and where cheap labor is in abundance technology will lag. In 1929, less than 10 percent of all Texas farms had tractors. The rural South was still mired in primitive farming techniques, illiteracy and poverty. During the 1930s, the price of cotton plummeted. In 1929, cotton sold for 18 cents per pound; in 1933, for less than 6 cents per pound. By the Depression, with the South sinking further and further into misery, the ruling class as a whole was desperate to modernize this decrepit system, which could only be done under capitalism through the immiseration of untold numbers of black and white rural toilers.

The United States in the 1930s was an advanced industrialized capitalist country with a powerful working class. By the



“Communism and the Negro,” written by then-Trotskyist leader Max Shachtman in 1933 (published by Verso in 2003 as *Race and Revolution*), emphasized that black workers would be vital part of working-class movement. Right: Packinghouse workers strike in Chicago in late 1930s. CIO organizing drive built mass industrial unions by uniting black and white workers.

Depression, textile, iron, coal, steel and chemical industries were developing in the South. In the North, powerful industrial unions formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) that broke away from the ossified American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions. The CIO organized all workers in a particular industry, regardless of their ethnicity or race—a significant improvement from the color bar of many AFL unions.

In the 1930s, large sections of the industrial working class in the U.S.—black and white, native-born and immigrant—became more militant and radical, fighting to build the CIO, often under the leadership of Communists and other leftists. However, thanks in large part to the Stalinists and social democrats, the incipient radicalization of labor was diverted into Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Democratic Party. During the Second World War, the Communist Party subordinated the struggles of workers and black people to U.S. imperialism’s war effort, falsely portraying this interimperialist war as a struggle against fascism. In contrast, the Trotskyists, while standing for the unconditional military defense of the Soviet degenerated workers state during World War II, opposed all the imperialist combatants in that carnage—a position for which Trotskyists were imprisoned in 1941 under the Smith Act.

### Who Was Melvin B. Tolson?

Every reviewer gives passing mention to the movie’s insinuation that the real-life Melvin B. Tolson was a “Communist,” “radical” or “self-described socialist.” During the 1930s, Tolson had his feet in two different worlds—one foot was in the world of the aspiring black middle class of Wiley College, and the other foot was in the world of the black dispossessed masses of the rural South. In the 1940s and later, Tolson was most famous for his poetry, including “Dark Symphony” (1939) and *Harlem Gallery* (1965). In the early 1930s, he lived in Harlem while working on his Columbia University master’s thesis on the Harlem Renaissance. There he met black radicals like poet Langston Hughes, who would be his life-long friend. He taught English and speech at Wiley for over 20 years. In 1947 he moved to Langston, Oklahoma, where he taught at Langston University and was mayor from 1954 to 1960. He died in 1966.

During the Depression, Tolson not only sympathized with radicalism but courageously struggled to implement his radical ideals in the Jim Crow South. There is no concrete evidence of what, if any, political organization Tolson joined in the 1930s. One historian argued that “although he heard the siren song of communism and felt that capitalism was the great force pulling his people down, he never joined the Communist Party and remained loyal to the social gospel of the Methodist Episcopal Church” (Gail K. Beil, “Melvin B. Tolson—Texas Radi-



CIO

cal,” in *The East Texas Historical Journal* [2002]). In the 1930s and 1940s, Tolson had a column in the *Washington Tribune*, “Caviar and Cabbage,” that gives a sense of his politics. In 1939 he wrote:

“The Negro would not have escaped from chattel slavery if it had not been for radicals of all classes, isms, ologies, and sects. Don’t forget that. For 150 years before the Civil War, radicals kept up a continuous fight for Negro freedom. Many of them were lynched....

“After the World War, white radicals came to the defense of the Negro in larger and larger numbers.”

—“The Negro and Radicalism,” *Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the Washington Tribune, 1937-1944* (1982)

The son of an itinerant Methodist minister, Tolson was an eclectic Christian socialist. He wrote: “Jesus didn’t believe in economic, racial, and social distinctions.... You talk about Karl Marx, the Communist! Why, don’t you know Jesus was preaching about leveling society 1,800 years before the Jewish Red was born?” Tolson may have found some consolation in his Christian beliefs, but in reality religion is, to use Marx’s phrase, the opium of the masses. In place of the struggle for socialist revolution, it substitutes a quest for eternal salvation to be found in a mythical “afterlife.”

In the 1930s, Tolson was involved in organizing sharecroppers, though not much is known about this. According to Robert M. Farnsworth, one of Tolson’s biographers, “Sometime in the thirties, he actively organized sharecroppers, both white and black, in southeastern Texas. He protected his wife and family from the details of his activities, but they knew he was involved” (Afterword to *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*).

What little screen time *The Great Debaters* gives to the sharecroppers’ struggle is sanitized to give credence to liberal and reformist pressure politics. There is the scene of sheriff-led vigilantes breaking up a sharecroppers’ meeting, burning down the meeting place and later beating information out of one sharecropper that leads to the arrest of Tolson. In the movie,

Professor Farmer reclaims his dignity, and the respect of his son, by coming to Tolson’s aid while black and white sharecroppers protest outside the jail. The CP’s *People’s Weekly World* (5 January) hailed this scene, declaring, the “Rev. Farmer stands tall as a man of the people.”

If anything, this scene *underplays* the danger of organizing black farmers in the South—and hence Tolson’s courage. In the fall of 1919, amid numerous anti-black race riots throughout the country, white sheriff’s posses and federal troops in Phillips County, Arkansas, killed as many as 300 black sharecroppers over several days who had organized to demand that white landowners pay them a fair price for cotton. After the massacre, the local and state government arrested hundreds, and 12 blacks were sentenced to death. (This is described in the recent book by Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation* [2008].)

At the same time, this scene misrepresents the role of the black petty bourgeoisie (represented by Farmer Sr.) under Jim Crow. While most rankled under the humiliation and oppression of Jim Crow, others materially benefited from segregation and opposed militant struggle. One can look at the fate of Clifford James, a supporter of the Communist-organized Share Croppers Union (SCU) in Alabama. After being attacked by a deputy sheriff and other whites, James walked to the hospital of the Tuskegee Institute, which had been founded years earlier by Booker T. Washington. After dressing James’s wounds, the doctor notified the sheriff, who threw James in jail, where he died!

### Struggles in the “Black Belt” South

There are several other dramatic scenes in *The Great Debaters*. One example is a closing scene of the debate with Harvard, in which Farmer Jr. argues that it is “a right, even a duty to resist” unjust laws

*continued on page 6*

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Communist Organizing...

(continued from page 5)

“with violence or civil disobedience. You should pray I choose the latter.” This message of the fictionalized debate is clearly intended for today’s consumption, to read back the pacifism of Farmer and Martin Luther King Jr. into the 1930s. Blacks fighting against Jim Crow and capitalist exploitation in the South did not live in a peaceful world: they faced a campaign of terror, both legal and extralegal. The right to armed self-defense was key to the fight for black rights. Black veterans, including from both world wars, were often in the forefront of struggles against Jim Crow and of the Southern civil rights movement in the 1950s.

Furthermore, the movie distorts the facts of the debate. As Timothy M. O’Donnell, a professor at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia, pointed out in a review of the movie, not only was the culminating debate at the University of Southern California and not Harvard, “the 1935 Wiley team debated the national intercollegiate debate topic about arms sales to foreign countries and not segregation or civil disobedience;

had ignored the special oppression of black people. Most early trade unions linked to Samuel Gompers’ AFL organized only skilled, white workers—or, if they accepted black members, organized segregated locals. Trade-union bureaucrats like Gompers and right-wing social democrats like Victor Berger were openly racist. Socialist Party (SP) leader Eugene V. Debs and others in the left wing of American socialism rejected racist ideology and stood for working-class unity. But Debs did not actively promote the fight for black equality, seeing it as a diversion from the fight for workers interests. Debs famously declared that socialism had “nothing special to offer the Negro.”

The infant American Communist movement, which split from the SP in 1919, also failed to pay attention to the fight for black liberation. As James P. Cannon, an early Communist leader and later the founder of American Trotskyism, noted, the Communist International (Comintern) in Lenin and Trotsky’s time forced American Communists to address the question of black oppression:

“The influence of Lenin and the Russian Revolution, even debased and distorted as it later was by Stalin, and then filtered through the activities of the Communist Party in the United States, contributed more than any other influence from any

Arkansas farm workers listening to speaker at meeting of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, circa 1934.

Encyclopedia of the American Left



U. of North Carolina

they debated both sides of the proposition, not just the side of truth and justice.... Finally, by all accounts, Farmer was—if anything—the alternate in the match against USC—and never did have the opportunity to give the ‘winning’ last rebuttal.” Nor does the movie mention the fact that Farmer later served as Assistant Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under Richard Nixon!

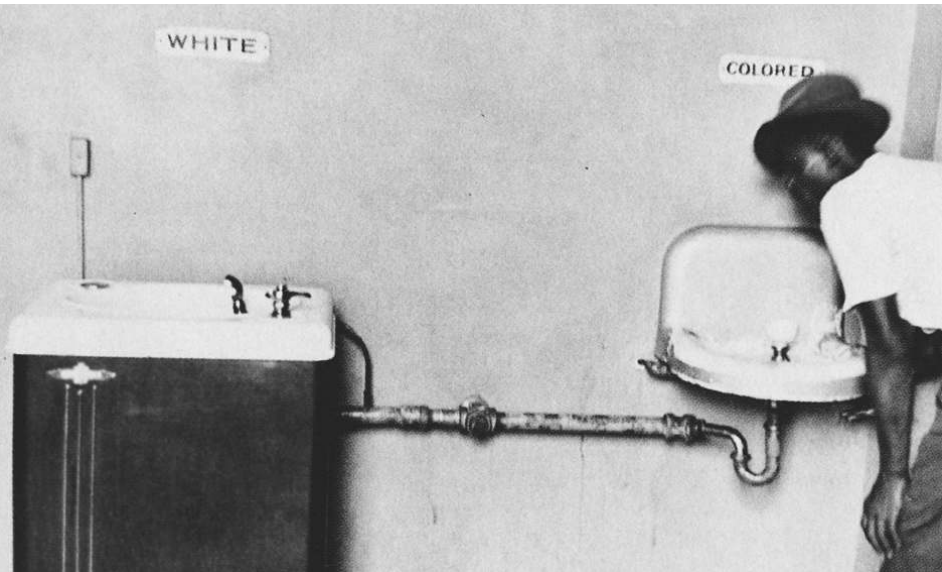
Communists were in the forefront of fighting for black workers and farmers and against racial oppression and lynch law terror during the 1930s—putting this struggle on the agenda for the first time since the Populist movement in the 1890s and trying to link it to the newly formed industrial unions. For decades, most of the American labor movement and the left

source to the recognition, and more or less general acceptance, of the Negro question as a special problem of American society—a problem which cannot be simply subsumed under the general heading of the conflict between capital and labor, as it was in the pre-communist radical movement....

“Everything new on the Negro question came from Moscow—after the Russian Revolution began to thunder its demand throughout the world for freedom and equality for all national minorities, all subject peoples and all races—for all the despised and rejected of the earth.”

—“The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement,” *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (1962)

Prior to 1930, the CP had less than 200 black members, but that year 1,000 black people joined the party. The CP was



Elliot Erwit

Jim Crow South: Segregated drinking fountains in North Carolina, 1950.

active in numerous struggles. One of the most famous was the Scottsboro Case, in which Communists led the struggle to free nine black youths who were framed up in 1931 for raping two white girls on a freight train and were jailed in Scottsboro, Alabama. Despite their clear innocence, a local court found eight of them guilty and sentenced them to death. (The judge reluctantly declared a mistrial for the ninth, since seven members of the jury had insisted on the death penalty even though the prosecutor had asked for life imprisonment because he was a 13-year-old; nonetheless, he remained in jail until 1937.) The CP, through its defense arm, the International Labor Defense, rapidly rallied to the defense of the Scottsboro youths and turned their case into an international symbol of the horrors of Southern lynch law. (The Scottsboro defendants were not executed, but were given long prison sentences; the last of the defendants was not pardoned until 1976.)

CP work among black people in the early 1930s took place in the context of the so-called “Third Period,” in which the Stalinists declared that the final collapse of capitalism was imminent and that reforms were no longer possible. As it did on all questions, the Stalinization of the Comintern led to disorientation on the black question. The 1928 Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, applying the dogma of “two-stage revolution” to the so-called “Black Belt” in the American South, promulgated the slogan of “self-determination” for the (nonexistent) “Negro nation.” This was nonsense. Black people are not a nation that is being forcibly assimilated, but an oppressed race-color caste forcibly segregated at the bottom of American society. Black struggles have historically been for integration, not separation. As we wrote in “The CP and Black Struggles in the Depression” (*Young Spartacus* No. 25, September 1974):

“While the CP of this period was deformed by dishonesty, political zig-zags and egregious departures from Marxism, nonetheless in the area of black work the 1930’s represents the CP’s heroic period. Despite the erroneous ‘Black Belt’ theory and the call for ‘Negro self-determination’ in this territory (a call which was never raised agitationally but remained part of the CP’s written propaganda), the CP’s work in practice combined a proletarian orientation with an awareness of the strategic need to fight racial oppression throughout all layers of American society, especially to address the problems of poor and unemployed blacks.”

Heroic Communist Work in the South

*The Great Debaters’* fleeting images of Tolson’s organizing highlight the difficulties and dangers of organizing sharecroppers in the Depression South. Both the Socialist and Communist parties attempted to organize tenants and sharecroppers to demand better pay and treatment from landowners and merchants. Both faced bloody repression from those who wanted to prevent black and white sharecroppers from organizing. The most famous of these groups is the SP-led Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU), which was heavily backed and financed by liberals and the clergy. Under the

tutelage of SP leader (and Presbyterian minister) Norman Thomas, it reached national prominence, including by lobbying President Roosevelt’s administration for reforms.

The STFU laid claim to be the first fully integrated Southern union. But the STFU’s concept of integration was for whites to hold primary leadership while blacks held secondary positions. If whites objected to a common union local with blacks, they were allowed to set up whites-only locals. As Shachtman, in “Communism and the Negro,” noted of the Socialist Party: “The fact that the Negro masses in the United States occupy a special position, that they constitute a distinct racial caste of pariahs, is conveniently ignored by the Socialist theoreticians.” The STFU never raised a single demand in support of black rights. The 1934 founding of the STFU was a godsend for the liberals, clergy and petty-bourgeois black leader-



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Communist Party campaign poster, 1932. Despite CP’s erroneous theory of black “self-determination,” Communist militants fought for integration and against racist oppression.

ship seeking to dampen the seething discontent rising up in the South.

For its part, the CP built the Share Croppers’ Union, which organized thousands of evicted black farmers as well as cotton pickers and was largely centered in Alabama. The struggle to organize the SCU was conducted in a state of perpetual civil war with both “legal” and extralegal armed vigilante groups. For example, in 1931 at Camp Hill, Alabama, the local sheriff led a posse and attacked a meeting on union organizing and the Scottsboro Case. The same posse also attacked the home of a local sharecropper leader. In 1932 the SCU was again in a defensive battle when a local landlord attempted to seize the property of an indebted sharecropper in Reel-town, Alabama. Determined SCU members fought off the local sheriff and his posse.

By 1935, the SCU claimed some 12,000 members; when it tried to merge with the STFU, the Socialist leaders refused out of anti-Communism. The SCU not only fought to free the Scottsboro youths, it

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also raised demands for social equality, equal pay for equal work (including for women), improved schools and extension of the school year, abolition of poor farmers' debt and resurrected the emancipated slave demand of 40 acres and a mule. As a black-led union, the SCU also sought with great difficulty to recruit rural whites to its ranks. It was of significance that in counties where the SCU was active, the CP would receive hundreds of votes within an all-white electorate when elections were held. Those impoverished whites who dared not join a black-led union demonstrated their solidarity by voting for the CP candidates when and where they could.

### The New Deal in the Rural South

After the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Stalin and the Comintern soon abandoned the sectarianism of the "Third Period" and sought desperately to form class-collaborationist popular-front alliances with "progressive" elements of the bourgeoisie. As Leon Trotsky emphasized, the Popular Front was not a tactic, but an expression of the anti-revolutionary program of Stalinism, tying the working class and oppressed to their exploiters under a bourgeois program in order to prevent proletarian revolutions. The American version of the Popular Front meant seeking alliances with the pro-capitalist CIO union bureaucrats like John L. Lewis and the capitalist Democratic Party of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt's New Deal, today hailed by most liberals and leftists, was an attempt to protect U.S. capitalism against the growing radicalization and labor struggle. New Deal reforms such as the National Labor Relations Act, which made it easier to organize CIO unions, or the Works Progress Administration, which carried out public works, were aimed at stabilizing capitalism by tying the new, powerful industrial unions to the capitalist system.

Key to Roosevelt's plan was forging the "New Deal coalition," which included pro-Communist labor organizers, liberals and black leaders in the North, and racist Dixiecrats and Klansmen in the South. The role of Communists and unionists was to be a loyal opposition to "progressive" capitalists like Roosevelt. The end result of their work was to tie workers and the oppressed tighter to their class enemy, the bourgeois Democratic Party, and stave off the independent political organization of the working class. To this day, the trade-union bureaucracy and black misleaders, dutifully tailed by the fake left, still push support to the Democratic Party "lesser evil." By helping to tie the new CIO unions to the Democratic Party, and using its considerable authority among blacks to support Roosevelt and U.S. imperialism in World War II, the CP played a crucial role in protecting the capitalist system and channeling dissent back into bourgeois politics. This is the real crime of the Stalinist CP, which betrayed the revolutionary aspirations of its working-class base.

In the South, the Popular Front was especially criminal. New Deal policies hurt black sharecroppers directly. The Agricultural Adjustment Act paid farmers not to farm in order to eliminate excess supply and raise food prices. In 1933, ten million acres of cotton were destroyed and six million pigs were killed in an attempt to stabilize the capitalist market. That the bourgeoisie would do this in the middle of a worldwide Depression speaks volumes about the irrationality of the capitalist system. In the South, this meant paying the white landlords while black tenants and sharecroppers starved. There is no official count of the thousands of poor black and white families driven off the land and into starvation as a result of Roosevelt's New Deal alliance with Jim Crow Democrats in the South, the Dixiecrats.

Black people in the 1930s correctly saw the Democratic Party as the party of the old slavocracy and Jim Crow. Though by the end of Reconstruction the Repub-

licans had abandoned their short-lived commitment to black rights, pursuing their class interests as a party of big business, they were still seen as the "Party of Lincoln" and a lesser evil to the Democrats. In the 1932 elections, over two-thirds of black voters voted Republican. But by 1936, 76 percent of black voters in the North voted for Roosevelt, thanks in part to illusions in the Democrats pushed by both the trade-union bureaucracy and the CP.

Speaking of the South, where the Democratic Party was openly segregationist and supported Jim Crow, the CP Central Committee's Southern representative argued: "It is entirely within the field of practical politics for the workers, farmers and the city middle class—the common people of the South—to take possession of the machinery of the Democratic Party, in the South, and turn it into an agency for democracy and progress" (quoted in Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* [1990]). Seeking a popular-frontist bloc with Democrats in the South, the CP liquidated the SCU in 1937 and retreated from the struggle in rural areas. (The SCU's agricultural worker members were urged to join a CIO union, and its tenant farmer members the National Farmers Union.) For example in Alabama, CP work became centered on the Birmingham "Right to Vote Club," which was dedicated to voter registration and educa-



Striking UAW workers at American Axle, April 2008. Multiracial proletariat, under revolutionary leadership, has power to smash capitalist exploitation through socialist revolution.

tion in the Deep South, where blacks had long been disenfranchised.

### The Civil Rights Movement

Much of the acclaim for *The Great Debaters* involves depicting the debate team as precursors to the civil rights movement a decade later, a link that James Farmer makes clear. In the movie, he is shown witnessing the racism of Jim Crow, and then, in the last debate, defending nonviolent protest. At the end of the film, we are told that he was a leader of CORE, an early civil rights group. Presumably, then, the civil rights movement represented the culmination of the struggle to eliminate racial injustice and uplift the "talented tenth."

The courageous struggles of the black and white foot soldiers of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s played an instrumental role in overturning Jim Crow. The creation of a Southern black proletariat fundamentally eroded Jim Crow segregation, which was based on the isolation and powerlessness of blacks in the rural South. The bourgeoisie eventually acquiesced to legal equality in the South, in part because, as protesters showed the world the reality of America's democratic pretensions at home, Jim Crow became an embarrassment to U.S. imperialism's posture as the defender of "democracy" and "human rights" in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, the industrial and military powerhouse of the non-capitalist world.



During Harlem cop riot in 1964, Spartacists initiated rally in New York City garment district to mobilize labor in defense of ghetto masses.

The struggle for black equality was intersected by growing domestic opposition to U.S. imperialism's losing counterrevolutionary war against Vietnam's workers and peasants. The potential for a revolutionary transformation of American society was palpable. But from its onset,

Lyndon B. Johnson to grant formal, legal equality. Yet the myth of the civil rights movement as monolithically pacifist and dominated by King ignores that the struggle against segregation also produced more militant forces, such as Robert F. Williams, who advocated and practiced armed self-defense (see, for example, "Robert F. Williams: Fighter Against Klan Terror," WV No. 737, 2 June 2000).

In the 1960s, the Spartacist League, despite our small forces, intervened into the civil rights movement and put forward the perspective of a class-struggle fight for black freedom. As we said in our Programmatic Statement, "For Socialist Revolution in the Bastion of World Imperialism!":

"In our intervention into the civil rights movement, the Spartacist League raised the call for a South-wide Freedom Labor Party as an expression of working-class political independence and the need to mobilize the labor movement to fight for black emancipation. This was linked to a series of other transitional demands aimed at uniting black and white workers in struggle against the capitalist class enemy, like organizing the unorganized and a sliding scale of wages and hours to combat inflation and unemployment. We called for armed self-defense against racist terror and for a workers united front against government intervention, both in the labor movement and in the use of federal troops to suppress black plebeian struggles. This program is no less urgent today."

The bankruptcy of the liberal program of the civil rights movement's leadership was revealed when the movement swept out of the South and into the North, where black people already had formal legal equality. The struggle for a fundamental change in conditions of life in the ghettos

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# We Are the Party of the Russian Revolution

We print below, edited for publication, the second part of a presentation by comrade Victor Gibbons, given in Los Angeles on 10 November 2007 in commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Part One of this presentation was published in WV No. 924, 7 November.

## PART TWO

Leading the fight against the Stalinist degeneration of the world's first workers state, which was created by the 1917 Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition upheld the revolutionary-internationalist program of V.I. Lenin's Bolshevik Party. Central to the program of Trotsky's Fourth International was the *unconditional military defense* of the Soviet degenerated workers state against imperialism and capitalist counterrevolution and the call for *proletarian political revolution* to oust the Stalinist bureaucracy and restore working-class political power in the USSR.

A crucial turning point in the fate of the Soviet Union—and world history—proved to be the war in Afghanistan during the 1980s. In December 1979, Leonid Brezhnev's Kremlin had intervened militarily into Afghanistan to shore up a strategically important client state along the southern border of Soviet Central Asia. The modernizing bourgeois-nationalist regime in Kabul had repeatedly requested Soviet aid against a reactionary Islamic insurgency—backed and armed by the U.S.—which had taken up arms against the regime's modest social reforms, especially those that improved the horribly oppressed condition of Afghan women.

In dreadfully backward Afghanistan, the Red Army represented the only real basis for social progress. A Red Army victory and a prolonged occupation of the country posed the extension of the social gains of the October Revolution to Afghanistan, transforming it along the lines of Soviet Central Asia.

It should have been easy for any leftist to see that it was necessary to take the Soviet side in this war. The war was *doubly* progressive on the part of the USSR, defending both the fate of women and elementary social progress in Afghanistan, as well as defending the Soviet Union's strategic southern flank. Against the solid front that ran from the imperialists to their "left" drummer boys, the



East Berlin, 3 January 1990: Spartakist speaker addresses ICL-initiated 250,000-strong united-front demonstration in Treptow Park against fascist desecration of Soviet war memorial and in defense of East German and Soviet workers states. Inset: Spartakist Workers Party poster during March 1990 East German election reads, "No to Capitalist Reunification!"

international Spartacist tendency (predecessor of the International Communist League) declared: "Hail Red Army in Afghanistan! Extend social gains of the October Revolution to Afghan peoples!"

The 1979 Red Army intervention into Afghanistan cut against the grain of the Stalinists' nationalist dogma of "socialism in one country." Our internationalist line, aimed squarely against the CIA-backed *mujahedin*, at the same time promoted political revolution against the Kremlin bureaucracy.

During the onslaught of the war hysteria cranked out by the U.S. ruling class—beginning with Jimmy Carter's "human rights" demagoguery and escalating to Ronald Reagan's crusade against the Soviet "evil empire"—a defining moment took place for the left internationally. Much of the left rushed to embrace what was the biggest "covert" CIA operation in history. The lackeys of imperialism did not give a damn about the genuine progress that the Soviet presence from 1979-89 *did* start to bring about for Afghan women, any more than they care today about the living hell women have been thrown back into by the triumphal march of imperialism and the Islamic cutthroats that they spawned in the region.

Left apologists for U.S. imperialism's holy war against the USSR and progress

in Afghanistan screamed bloody murder over purported Soviet violations of Afghanistan's supposed "national rights." But Afghanistan is not a nation. It is a feudal-derived state that is a mosaic of nationalities, ethnic and tribal groupings. And, in any case, this is beside the point. Even if Afghanistan were a homogeneous nation, revolutionary Marxists would have supported the Soviet Union's armed intervention since the furthering of social revolution, including defense of the USSR against capitalist imperialism, stands higher than the bourgeois-democratic right of national self-determination.

The war in Afghanistan would prove to be a watershed. The Stalinist bureaucracy's treacherous withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 was the direct precursor to capitalist counterrevolution in the Soviet Union itself. As I will explain below, we fought for an internationalist response to help defeat the Afghan reactionaries. We said it would be better to fight against imperialism there than against counterrevolution in Moscow—and we were proved very right.

### Bourgeoisie, Social Democrats Promote Counterrevolution in Poland

In the early '80s, another anti-Communist campaign was waged around events in

Poland where striking workers lined up behind an opposition composed of reactionary ultranationalists, Catholic clerics and pro-capitalist social democrats. Significant sections of the working class were mobilized against the Stalinist bureaucracy through *Solidarność*, a "trade union" sponsored by the CIA, West European social democrats and the Vatican. In the U.S. and West Europe, the trade-union bureaucracy went whole hog in mobilizing support for *Solidarność*.

The ascendancy of *Solidarność* was a direct consequence of the political bankruptcy of Stalinism. In Poland in 1956, 1970 and again in 1976, proletarian upheavals were headed off as the bureaucracy each time put forward a new leader or new promises for a better deal. At the same time, the Polish Stalinists strengthened the Catholic church in various ways, including by perpetuating a landowning peasantry. By the late 1970s, having been disillusioned three times with "national-liberal" Stalinism, significant sections of the Polish working class became susceptible to being organized in *Solidarność*.

At its first national congress in September 1981, *Solidarność* consolidated around a program of open counterrevolution. Its call for "free trade unions" was a war cry of Cold War anti-Sovietism. In regard to the Stalinist-ruled workers states, we have historically fought for trade unions that are independent of bureaucratic control and are based on the principle of defending the workers state and its collectivized economy. *Solidarność* also called for "free elections" to the Sejm (parliament), a program of capitalist restoration under the guise of a parliamentary government.

We described *Solidarność* as a company union for the CIA and bankers. Stressing the need to unconditionally militarily defend the Polish deformed workers state against capitalist restoration, we raised the call "Stop *Solidarność* Counterrevolution!"

When in December 1981 the bid for power by *Solidarność* was spiked by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, we unconditionally defended that measure as a means to defend the workers state and buy time for the formation of a Trotskyist party. By contrast, much of the left backed *Solidarność*. At the same time, we warned that the Stalinists were capable of selling out the Polish workers state to capital-

Planeta



Soviet military intervention in 1979 opened road to emancipation of Afghan women (left, in Kabul march). Spartacists hailed Red Army in Afghanistan, called for extending gains of October Revolution to Afghan peoples. Above: Photo distributed by CIA-backed *mujahedin* cutthroats shows the murder of a "Communist high school teacher" in Afghanistan.



DPA



ism—and that is exactly what happened. In 1989, the Polish Stalinists ceded governmental power to Solidarność, which had won a landslide electoral victory that June. Thus Solidarność formed the first of the capitalist-restorationist regimes in East and Central Europe.

In Poland today you can see the result of capitalist counterrevolution: whole parts of the Polish economy—mining, heavy industry and textiles—have been massively destroyed. Unemployment—largely nonexistent in the period before 1989—hovers around 20 percent, and there are hardly any unemployment benefits. Women’s rights have been rolled back and a reactionary clerical capitalist government established.

**The ICL and the Struggle Against Capitalist Counterrevolution**

The fact that the Soviet Union was able to recover from the utter destruction caused by the Nazi invasion during World War II—and become an industrial and military superpower—was further testimony to the superiority of the collectivized planned economy. However, the Soviet economy—its level of productivity and technological base—necessarily continued on the whole to lag behind the advanced centers of the capitalist West. Over the next decades, the Soviet Union was subjected to the unremitting pressures of imperialism—not only military encirclement and an arms buildup aimed at bankrupting the Soviet economy, but also the pressure of the imperialist world market.

Trotsky had explained that the Stalinist bureaucracy was capable of extensive economic growth. The Kremlin oligarchy could and did expand the Soviet economy by crudely transplanting capitalist production methods and even entire factories from abroad. But it was incapable of consistently raising the overall level of technology and labor productivity. As Trotsky put it in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936): “Under a nationalized economy, quality demands a democracy of producers and consumers, freedom of criticism and initiative—conditions incompatible with a totalitarian regime of fear, lies and flattery.”

Although the planned economy proved its superiority over capitalist anarchy during its period of extensive growth, as the need for quality and intensive development came to the fore, the bureaucratic stranglehold more and more undermined the economy. By the 1980s, the cumulative effects of Stalinist mismanagement and parasitism had brought the USSR’s once explosive growth rate to just a few percentage points a year, and then none at all.

The bureaucratic caste in the Kremlin was no longer able to simultaneously fund defense spending, maintain the steady postwar rise of Soviet workers’ living standards, and invest in new industrial technology. A change of course was inevitable. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power with his slogan of *perestroika*, a program of “market reforms” intended as a whip to spur worker productivity and enterprise efficiency. This was linked to a policy of *glasnost* (which means “openness”). The attempt to restructure the Soviet economy through so-called “market socialism” signified a transition away from central planning in favor of market mechanisms for running the economy. This led to a deepening of social inequalities and a strengthening of forces pushing for the restoration of capitalism.

These reforms were combined with increased diplomatic conciliation vis-à-vis imperialism under the slogan “new thinking” in foreign policy. When, in early 1989, the Soviet bureaucracy under Gorbachev withdrew Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the vain hope of winning the good graces of the imperialists, we denounced this as a crime against both the Afghan and Soviet peoples—as has been amply verified by subsequent events.

The reason Gorbachev threw Afghan-



Above: Spartacist demonstration against Solidarność at its offices in teachers union headquarters in New York City, September 1981. Below: Nat Weinstein (left), founding leader of Socialist Action, joins anti-Communists in 1981 promoting Polish Solidarność, company union for CIA, Vatican and Wall Street. Time magazine exposé on “Holy Alliance” between Pope and Reagan for counterrevolution.



stan to the imperialist wolves by withdrawing the Soviet Army was not that the USSR was militarily defeated in Afghanistan. That is a Cold War myth manufactured and marketed by the CIA and its media chorus. Today the imperialists’ spies and diplomats who ran the operation readily concede that the high point of the *mujahedin* insurgency was in 1980. From then on, the mullahs were consistently “getting beaten” and “are not strong enough to hold or deny territory to the Soviets” (quoted in Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*).

One’s blood boils reading the Politburo records of the generals and party bosses wrestling with the Afghan dilemma. Gorbachev ruled out extending the gains of the October Revolution to the Afghan peoples. Soon after coming to power he lectured the Politburo that, “after all, it’s not socialism we want there.” He stated in 1986 that “the USSR does not intend to remain in Afghanistan and does not seek a ‘breakthrough to warm seas’ [of the Indian Ocean].” Gorbachev was countering those who chafed at the humiliating retreat he demanded by evoking the Stalinists’ shared renunciation of the struggle for world revolution. But it was not just Gorbachev personally who betrayed the masses of Afghanistan for the sake of appeasing Ronald Reagan. No wing of the bureaucracy had an alternative to Gorbachev’s attempt to reduce the Soviet military budget and its commitments through a vain attempt to appease imperialism.

Just days before Gorbachev pulled the last Soviet units out of Afghanistan, the Partisan Defense Committee—the class-struggle, non-sectarian legal and social defense organization associated with the Spartacist League—sent a 7 February 1989 letter to the Afghan government offering to organize an international brigade to fight to the death to defend the right of women to read; to defend freedom from the veil and the tyranny of the mullahs and the landlords; to defend the

introduction of medical care and the right of all to an education.

Unfortunately, the Afghan government declined our offer. They asked instead that we raise funds internationally for the civilian victims of attacks by the CIA’s cutthroats in the Afghan city of Jalalabad. We took up this cause and raised over \$40,000 from all around the world. In immigrant communities, at factories, workplaces and union halls, and among foreign students, people who keenly knew what a victory of the *mujahedin* would mean donated generously. We also sent a press representative to Jalalabad to help break the imperialist information blockade. You can read about this in our bound volumes of *WV* for 1989-90; see, for example, “Afghanistan: Scenes of Civil War—Exclusive Photographs from Our Correspondent,” *WV* No. 484, 1 September 1989.

Had our proposal for fighting internationalist brigades taken shape, it could have had a real impact on the Soviet veterans of the Afghan war, whose socialist aspirations had been rekindled by their internationalist service. It could have helped to galvanize their real but partial and unfocused opposition within the USSR to Gorbachev’s betrayals. Reports emerged stating that “Soviet veterans of the Afghanistan war have asked the Central Committee of the CP to be allowed to return there with a voluntary division” to fight the counterrevolutionaries (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27 July 1989). This mood was particularly felt by Soviet veterans coming from Central Asia, who in Afghanistan had battled the very slavery that the 1917 October Revolution had saved their grandparents from. The Soviet soldiers who had been told, and rightly believed, that they were fulfilling their internationalist duty in fighting against the reactionary Afghan *mujahedin* on the USSR’s southern border, were now maligned at home as “war criminals” who had supposedly perpetrated “Russia’s Vietnam.”

Now we have authoritative records

kept by participants in Politburo meetings that show Gorbachev’s humiliating orders to “get out!” of Afghanistan. This evoked resistance all the way up to the Politburo, although in the end they bowed to Gorbachev. Had the beginnings of a Soviet Trotskyist party been crystallized in 1989—had our brigades helped to serve as a catalyst for this—history might have taken a very different path. Instead, Gorbachev’s ignominious pull-out from Afghanistan only served to instill a sense of defeatism and demoralization among the Soviet masses.

**Proletarian Revolt Against Stalinist Regime in China**

During the 1980s, the influence of petty-bourgeois democrats and nationalists increasingly gained strength throughout most of East Europe, with the notable exception of East Germany. In July 1989, Gorbachev disavowed Soviet “interference” in the Eastern bloc countries. At the same time, as part of his market restructuring, he announced that the Soviet Union would now sell oil and raw materials to the East European deformed workers states at world market prices for hard currency—i.e., no more subsidies. Gorbachev was offering up East Europe to the imperialists. The fate of the East European and Soviet workers was thus posed: either proletarian political revolutions to defend and extend the gains embodied in the collectivized economies, or capitalist counterrevolution and all-sided social devastation.

The first sign of political revolution in this period appeared not in East Europe but in China. In May-June 1989, a protest initiated by students in Tiananmen Square in Beijing won widespread support among workers, who were furious at growing economic inequalities, rampant corruption and endemic inflation encouraged by Deng Xiaoping’s “market socialist” economy. Under Deng, during the preceding decade, agriculture had been decollectivized and centralized economic planning had been weakened. The “iron rice bowl” of guaranteed lifetime employment and social benefits for workers was becoming rusted out.

Groups of young workers joined the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square, which spread throughout the country. As we wrote at the time, “It was the beginnings of a working-class revolt against Deng’s program of ‘building socialism with capitalist methods’ which gave the protests their mass and potentially revolutionary nature” (“Defend Chinese Workers!” *WV* No. 480, 23 June 1989). Initially, both rank-and-file soldiers and some senior military commanders refused to carry out orders to suppress the protests.

The two weeks during which the army refused to implement martial law were a critical juncture. There was a political vacuum. Even a tiny Chinese Bolshevik organization could have played a significant role in 1989, especially during those two weeks. The situation in which working people were beginning to take control of the cities in their own hands needed to be developed into a fight for political power. Deng was finally able to find military units willing to suppress the protests. This was directed primarily at the working class rather than at the student protesters. The key factor in China in 1989 was the absence of a revolutionary leadership.

**Nascent Proletarian Political Revolution in the DDR**

The events in China were echoed in Central and East Europe, specifically in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) or East Germany. The broadening crisis there led to growing weekly demonstrations in October against the Stalinist regime of Erich Honecker. Gorbachev and the Soviet Army command in the DDR refused Honecker’s request to use troops against the protesters. The unlamented Honecker regime fell in late October. On November 4, a million-strong

*continued on page 10*

Russian Revolution...

(continued from page 9)

demonstration took place in East Berlin. Five days later the Berlin Wall came down.

Today we are constantly subjected to bourgeois propaganda that depicts all East Germans at that time rushing out to embrace West Germany and capitalist reunification. This is a big lie. The mass of workers, students and soldiers wanted to save the DDR from the collapse caused by the bankrupt Stalinist rulers. They marched under banners saying, "For Communist Ideals" and "Against Privileges."

This was the setting in which we launched the largest and most important effort in the history of our tendency. Comrades, whether they knew German or not, volunteered from all around the world to fly into Germany. In December 1989, we began publishing a near-daily press: *Arprekorr* (Workers Press Correspondence). We turned our readers' circles into a series of Spartakist-Gruppen (Spartacist Groups). *Arprekorr* took on a life of its own. Comrades would hit a new city and discover our press and leaflets had preceded us.

We called for proletarian political revolution in the East and socialist revolution in the West, as the road to a red, soviet Germany in a Socialist United States of Europe. We called for the founding of workers and soldiers councils. We unconditionally opposed capitalist reunification with imperialist West Germany.

We also directed propaganda and slogans to soldiers in the East German National People's Army (NVA). Some units and soldiers committees of the East German army responded to our propaganda and circulated *Arprekorr* in the barracks. The West German bourgeoisie and U.S. imperialists moved to spike the nascent political revolution by fomenting German revanchism. Neo-Nazis incited provocations against the soldiers of the Soviet garrison, which was the decisive military force in the DDR.

We countered this right from the start by massively distributing greetings in the name of the insurgent German workers fighting for political revolution to our class brothers and sisters in the Soviet Army Zone. We saluted them and invited them to join us to celebrate the New Year in the Soviet custom of *Novogodnyaya Yolka*. We also distributed greetings to Cuban, Vietnamese and other foreign workers in the DDR.

The principal stalking horse intervening in the DDR for capitalist reunification was the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). At the same time, the key obstacle to fighting against capitalist reunification was the ruling East German Socialist Unity Party (SED), because many had illusions that it would defend the DDR. Under pressure from below, the SED convened an emergency congress



Beijing: Workers and students fraternize with troops called in to suppress 1989 Tiananmen uprising, which marked incipient political revolution against Chinese Stalinist regime.

in December 1989 and added to their old name Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). The SED-PDS, as it was now called, promised to oppose a "profit-dominated capitalist society." It simultaneously advocated market-oriented reforms and praised West German chancellor Helmut Kohl's program for "confederative structures," which in reality served to incorporate the DDR into capitalist West Germany.

The SED-PDS leadership took the decisive steps toward disbanding the *Betriebskampfgruppen* (factory militias). These had been the voluntary, armed, factory-based militias for defense of the DDR under the political leadership of the SED. Established after the 17 July 1953 pro-socialist workers uprising in East Berlin against Stalinist rule, these militias were intended by the bureaucracy to be used against any future workers uprising. But it became clear that many workers in the *Kampfgruppen* did not take kindly to the idea of being used in that way. The *Kampfgruppen* had the real potential in November 1989 to become a crystallizing point for proletarian political revolution against the bureaucracy in defense of the DDR—so, the Stalinists dissolved them and thus disarmed the working class.

We called for a new Leninist egalitarian party to fight for the revolutionary reunification of Germany and "No to the Sellout of the DDR!" We emphasized: "For an Effective Planned Economy Through Workers Democracy!" Meanwhile, *Arprekorr* (19 December 1989) argued for the potential of workers political revolution in the USSR:

"All these aims must be combined with a vigorous offensive for a comparable proletarian political renewal in the Soviet Union so that a far larger combined economy in transition from capitalism to socialism may defend itself against the fifth column of social democrats, restorers of capitalism, and large masses of the intelligentsia who imagine, sometimes foolishly, that they will acquire the

soft lives of the new capitalist masters. In the short run, look not to the West but to the East!"

The Fight for a Red Germany of Workers Councils

The validity and necessity of this perspective were soon borne out. In late December, the neo-Nazis went so far as to desecrate the Soviet monument in East Berlin's Treptow Park. This monument honors the Red Army soldiers who fell liberating Germany from the Nazi scourge.

Spartakist



ICL literature table at May 1991 meeting of Soviet officers and soldiers in former DDR to commemorate anniversary of Red Army victory over Nazi Third Reich.

The ICL initiated a united-front demonstration against this provocation. In essence, this was a call to defend the DDR and the Soviet Union. The response to our call ran deep and wide. It compelled the ruling Stalinists to join in the mobilization for the demonstration on 3 January 1990. One leader of the SED-PDS, Lothar Bisky, told us, "You have the workers." He didn't mean that we had them organized in our ranks (yet); rather, that our program was articulating the aspirations of the pro-socialist workers. The potential for the explosive growth of a Trotskyist party was real.

The turnout to the demonstration showed the face of the nascent proletarian political revolution. Treptow Park was filled to capacity with over a quarter-million workers, soldiers of the DDR and USSR, immigrant workers and students. At this mass demonstration, for the first time in the history of the Stalinist-ruled Soviet bloc, the ICL was able to present its Trotskyist program in counterposition to the Stalinists' betrayals of the DDR.

In the face of organized heckling by Stalinist hacks, comrade Renate Dahlhaus declared:

"Economic absorption and political incorporation by stages—which West German imperialism, aided by the SPD, seeks—can turn this political revolution into a social counterrevolution. This must not happen!... "Our economy is suffering from waste and obsolescence. The SED party dictatorship has shown that it is incompetent to fight this.... The fight for the power to make these decisions and to run this country must lie in the hands of workers councils so that rational decisions satis-

factory to the majority can be arrived at. This can only be done through open and sometimes painful debates before the whole people. Perhaps our example will encourage the Soviet Union to take the same road."

Our program was beginning to take on living form in the struggles of the masses. In many instances, the SED-PDS tops had more knowledge about this than we did at the time. Thus, unbeknownst to us, in the days prior to the Treptow demonstration, a series of mutinies broke out in various DDR garrisons.

Gorbachev saw the historic importance of Treptow too—from his own treacherous point of view. Later, on 8 November 1999, he declared on German TV:

"We changed our point of view on the process of unification of Germany under the impact of events that unfolded in the DDR. And an especially critical situation came about in January. In essence, a breakdown of structures took place.... This began on January 3 and [went] further almost every day.... This was...like a torrent of fiery lava: the current was flowing."

The Stalinist betrayers from Moscow to Berlin moved swiftly to head off further revolutionary developments. The SPD, howling at our exposure of their counter-revolutionary intentions, castigated the ruling SED-PDS on national TV for sharing a platform with the Trotskyists. The capitulating Stalinists quickly aimed their political fire at us and made any further actions like Treptow "verboten." Gorbachev immediately summoned Helmut Kohl to Moscow. He gave the green light for capitalist *Anschluss* (annexation). The West German bourgeoisie threw 20 billion deutschmarks toward annexing East Germany and

promised to make the ostmark equivalent to the West German deutschmark. DDR elections were moved up by several months and every CIA Cold War party, agency and priest came flooding in from the West to bury the banner of Treptow and raise in its place the flag of the Fourth Reich, the Greater German Fatherland.

We continued the fight into the elections, which had become a referendum on capitalist reunification. The Spartakist-Gruppen fused with the ICL's Trotskyist League of Germany to form the Spartakist Workers Party. We ran an electoral campaign for the East German legislature in March 1990. We proposed the following no-contest agreement: if an organization is prepared to say clearly, publicly, unambiguously and in writing that it opposes capitalist reunification, we would call on our supporters to vote for its candidates in places where we don't run, and the other party would likewise call on its supporters to vote for our candidates where it wasn't running. *Not one party* took up our offer! On the ballot, the Spartakist Workers Party stood *alone* as the party of the Russian Revolution, of proletarian political revolution against Fourth Reich capitalist restoration.

The election results registered the post-Treptow reactionary blitzkrieg: the Auschwitz bourgeoisie was the new master. The workers of East Germany, West Germany, of the USSR and of the whole world had suffered a historic defeat. But history also recorded that the ICL alone knew what to do, and acted on it.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

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# WORKERS VANGUARD

## Reactionary Ban on Same-Sex Marriage Passes in California

# Full Democratic Rights for Gays!

OAKLAND, November 15—Tens of thousands took to the streets in cities across the country today to protest the passage of Proposition 8, which overturned the legalization of same-sex marriage in California. The Spartacist League and Spartacus Youth Clubs joined in these and other protests with placards demanding: “Down with Prop 8! For the Right of Gay Marriage...and Divorce!”, “State, Church and Family: Holy Trinity of Women’s Oppression!” and “Don’t Crawl for the Democrats—Build a Workers Party!” As fighters for the socialist liberation of humanity, we are committed to full democratic rights for gays, lesbians and transgenders and support any legal advances that can be wrested from this cruelly bigoted society, including the right to marry. Since the November 4 elections, there have already been several legal challenges filed against Proposition 8, but the question still remains if the 18,000 same-sex marriages in California carried out in the last few months will be nullified.

Ballot initiatives banning same-sex marriage were also passed in Florida and Arizona on November 4, and more than 40 states now have bans on same-sex marriage. But California, where the state Supreme Court had legalized gay marriage last May, and which is seen as a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah by anti-gay bigots, was the central target in this offensive against gay rights. An unholy alliance of the Mormons, the Catholic church and evangelical Christians went on a rampage to get Proposition 8 passed.

An article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* (26 October) reported that Mormon church leaders “tapped every resource, including the church’s built-in phone trees, e-mail lists and members’ willingness to volunteer and donate money. Many California members consider it a directive from God and have pressured others to participate.” Millions of dollars were poured into television and radio ads proclaiming that if Prop. 8 failed, homosexuality would be taught in schools, and churches would be forced to carry out gay marriages. Recognizing that with Barack Obama’s candidacy black voters would turn out at the polls in record numbers, a big push was made to find allies among conservative black Baptist preachers. A full-page ad in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the city’s major black newspaper, urged a yes vote on Proposition 8 to restore “the sanctity of marriage.”

But perhaps the most effective campaign tool to boost Proposition 8 was making “robocalls” to people’s cell phones with recordings of Obama addressing a crowd with the declaration: “I believe marriage is a union between a man and a woman. Now, for me as a Christian, it is also a sacred union.” While proclaiming that he did not support Proposition 8 because it was “unnecessary,” Obama’s opposition to gay marriage is a direct echo of Bush and other fundamentalist Republican yahoos. This is hardly a first

for the Democrats. Bill Clinton signed the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act that pronounced, “The word ‘marriage’ means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife.” In the same year, he signed the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,” part of his ending “welfare as we know it” and consigning millions of impoverished women to the scrap heap.

Bigotry against gays flows from the repressive institution of the family, the root of the patriarchal subjugation of women that ensures both the “rightful” inheritance of property for the bourgeoisie and the raising of the next generation of wage slaves. The family is a key prop for the maintenance of capitalist rule, instilling conservative obedience to the “values” of bourgeois morality. Homosexuality is deemed “sinful” because it challenges the strictures of the monogamous, heterosexual family.

As communists, we fight for every possible democratic right, every form of social and political equality, including the right of gays to marry. At the same time, we recognize that gay marriage will not end the deadly prejudice and violence against gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders in this deeply homophobic and bigoted society. We fight for a society in which no one is forced into a legal straitjacket in order to get medical benefits, visitation rights, custody of children, immigration rights or any of the other privileges this capitalist society grants to those who are embedded in the traditional “one man on one woman for life” legal mold.

While organizers of the protests against Proposition 8 spoke of a revival of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, that generation’s calls for “free love” have now been replaced by Democratic and Republican Party fund-raisers, PTA meetings and weddings. This shift toward “holy matrimony” doesn’t sit well with everybody. As the great American writer Gore Vidal commented, “Since heterosexual marriage is such a disaster, why on earth would anybody want to imitate it?”

In the quest for bourgeois “respectability,” Gay Pride Day organizers have welcomed contingents of gay cops who spend a good part of their time busting “sex offenders.” These organizers have banned the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) from their marches, helping to promote the “anti-pedophilia” hysteria that targets all gays (as well as anyone else who engages in intergenerational sex). Today the protests against Proposition 8 came wrapped in red-white-and-blue appeals to “family values,” presenting same-sex marriage as just another take on such inane and insipid Americana as *Leave It to Beaver* or *The Donna Reed Show*.

We oppose all laws that enable the bourgeois state to regulate consensual sexual activity, including those that allow the government to exercise social control under the guise of “protecting children.” We are against reactionary “age of consent” laws that conflate consensual sex with violent crimes. We advocate the concept of effective consent, which means that as long as both parties consent to the act, nobody, least of all the state, has any right to tell them they can’t do it. We fight for free abortion on demand; if you can get pregnant then you should be able to get an abortion without parental consent, waiting periods or any other restrictions. (It’s a good thing that Proposition 4 in California, which would have restricted access to abortion for minors, was defeated.)

Placards at a November 12 New York City protest attacked Mormons for polygamy with slogans reading, “I Don’t Need 5 Wives, Just 1 Husband.” This plays directly into the hands of the reactionary witchhunters. Mormons should be left alone to practice their religion and live their private lives however they see fit. Our position for the right of gay marriage, like the rights of Mormon polygamists, stems from our opposition to government interference with the right of individuals to effect whatever consensual relations they see fit (see “Mormon Polygamists—Leave Them Alone!” WV No. 916, 6 June).

**Racism and Anti-Gay Bigotry**

With exit polls showing that some 70 percent of blacks in California voted in favor of Proposition 8, the media has been saturated with discussions over a “gay-black divide.” Blacks have been accused of turning their backs on “civil rights,” while one black lesbian in a column in the *Los Angeles Times* (8 November) opined that “white gays could afford to be singularly focused, raising millions of dollars to fight for the luxury of same-sex marriage.” Such vicious sectoralism—pitting oppressed sectors against one another—plays right into the hands of the capitalist rulers, who use morality and religion to perpetrate the oppression of black people and gays. According to one report, the “N” word was obscenely hurled against

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Oakland: Spartacists at November 15 protest against anti-gay Proposition 8. Sign at center reads: “Barack Obama—Next Commander In Chief of U.S. Imperialism, Enemy of World’s Working People!”



Los Angeles: Demonstrators against Proposition 8 march down Westwood Boulevard, November 6.