

# Trayvon Martin Case: Black Oppression and Gun Laws in America

On February 26, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was gunned down in cold blood by a racist vigilante in Sanford, Florida. For six weeks, state authorities allowed the killer, George Zimmerman, to walk the streets. Amid an outpouring of nationwide protest sparked by Martin's parents' desire merely to see Zimmerman forced to answer charges in court, he was finally indicted for second-degree murder on April 11 and jailed. With Zimmerman's arraignment scheduled for May 8, he has been released on a \$150,000 bond.

After Zimmerman's arrest, the liberal bourgeois press breathed a collective sigh of relief, concerned that black people, for whom this country remains the same "American nightmare" described by Malcolm X nearly 50 years ago, weren't buying the myth of a "post-racial America." Black *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow, who has often compellingly described the racist workings of the criminal justice system, declared: "The wheels of justice are finally turning.... In this case, America seems to be finally getting it right because equal justice under the law is one of her greatest ideals" ("Justice for Trayvon," 13 April).

*There is no justice for the black masses in racist America!* Like countless black men, women and children before him, Trayvon Martin was the victim of a capitalist system that was built on slavery and is maintained on a bedrock of black oppression. Since the beginning of the year, the list of black people killed by cops includes Ramarley Graham in the Bronx, Stephon Watts and Rekia Boyd in the Chicago area, and Dane Scott Jr. in Oklahoma. This time it was wannabe cop Zimmerman, rather than the police themselves, who targeted Trayvon and pulled the trigger. We can't predict the outcome of Zimmerman's trial—if one actually takes place. But until America's capitalist rulers are swept away by proletarian socialist revolution, there will be no justice for Trayvon Martin nor for the multitudes of black and Latino youth, who on a daily basis are stalked by the cops, stopped, frisked, beaten and, if they survive the encounter, framed up and railroaded to prison hell.

It took some weeks before Trayvon's killing was widely known. Then what followed was an outpouring of goodwill for the family and protests tying the killing to the racist victimization of black youth everywhere. His parents, Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton, made the rounds of news shows. Hip-hop/reggae artist Wyclef Jean composed a song for Trayvon. Hoodies were widely worn on campuses and even in churches to protest racist profiling. Sympathetic accounts were initially



Getty

**April 1 Miami rally: Trayvon Martin killing has become focus of anger over murderous racist violence. Rekia Boyd, shot by off-duty Chicago cop, died on March 22. Ramarley Graham was gunned down by cops in the Bronx on February 2.**



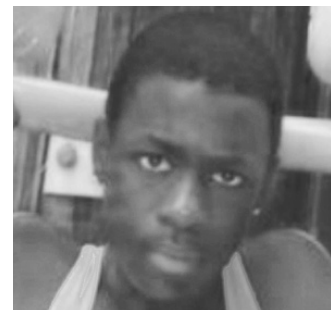
Martin Family

Trayvon Martin



no credit

Rekia Boyd



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Ramarley Graham

## No to Gun Control! Down With Racist Vigilantism!

splashed on newspaper front pages across the country, some of which alluded to the routine cop terrorization of ghettoized youth.

But more recently, a vicious racist backlash has been gaining steam. Efforts to portray Trayvon Martin as a thug proliferated, starting with the release of school records showing that he had been temporarily suspended for having some marijuana residue in a baggie inside his book bag. The Web site of right-wing

columnist Michelle Malkin posted a picture, falsely identified as Trayvon Martin, of a shirtless black teen with his boxers hanging out of his pants flipping the bird to the camera. Meanwhile, reactionary media mouthpiece Ann Coulter has denounced press coverage of calls for Zimmerman's arrest as "a lynch mob." Amid the media blitz equating black youth lifestyles with criminality, an eighth-grade teacher in Michigan was fired for encouraging students to plan a

wear-a-hoodie-to-school day in honor of Martin and advocating they raise money for his family.

### Gun Control Kills Blacks

Providing some high-toned fuel for the racist backlash was a *Wall Street Journal* (6 April) opinion piece, "The Exploitation of Trayvon Martin," by black conservative Shelby Steele, who argued: "America has greatly evolved since the

*continued on page 4*

## Black History Forum



## For Black Liberation Through Socialist Revolution!

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# “Young People, Study Politics!”

## From May Day Speech by Leon Trotsky

Below is an excerpt from a 1924 speech on the eve of May Day delivered to young Communist workers and Red Army veterans by Leon Trotsky, co-leader with V.I. Lenin of the October Revolution of 1917. May Day originated in the 1880s in the U.S. with the struggle for the eight-hour day and was soon adopted by the Second (Socialist) International as an annual workers celebration. However, the Second International would go on to definitively betray the interests of the working class when its parties (with the notable exceptions of the Russian Bolsheviks, Serbian Social Democrats and the Bulgarian “Narrow” Socialists) supported their “own” bourgeois rulers in the interimperialist World War I. To this day, the struggle for the eight-hour day remains a vital task of the labor movement in the U.S. and elsewhere, as workers are increasingly driven by the capitalists to risk life and limb by working eleven- and twelve-hour days or taking multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Trotsky’s speech addressed the need for political and technical training of young workers and soldiers in the Soviet workers state, which throughout its existence faced imperialist powers intent on its destruction. Trotsky was Soviet Commissar of War at the time, but he would soon be driven from that position by the developing bureaucracy under J.V. Stalin. The speech appears in Trotsky’s *Problems of Everyday Life* (Monad Press, 1973).

\* \* \*

Who inaugurated the celebration of May Day thirty-five years ago? The Social Democrats. Who is at the head of the German Republic? The Social Democrat Ebert. What is the point? The point is that the new revolutionary generation of the working class in Europe is growing more and more thoroughly filled with hatred for the rule of the bourgeoisie, and that

over there in Europe, democratic Menshevism is the last instrument the bourgeoisie has for keeping the working masses down.

And we see that those very governments that reproached us communists for openly saying that only the transfer of power into the hands of the working people could abolish the rule of capital, those very same governments that belong to the parties that inaugurated

which we must absorb from our earliest years, because national chauvinism and national hatred are the poison with which the bourgeoisie pollutes the minds of the working people? I demand to know where this slogan of the May Day celebration has been put into effect more fully than in our country. I have been in Caucasia, that backward region. There are three main republics there and dozens of backward

What is it spending on arms? It is spending 1,150 million gold rubles a year. That is four or five times as much as we spend. Britain has 40 million people, we have 130 million. MacDonald may say that we are the poorer country and so, of course, we spend less. But, Comrades, if we are the poorer, that means that we are threatened by greater danger, for throughout history it has always happened that rich peoples, led by their rich ruling classes, have conquered and subjected poorer and more backward ones. China will not fall upon Britain and the United States, but the wealthy United States and Britain may crush China.

If we did not have Soviet power—the power of the workers and peasants, of the Communist Party boldly marching onward to battle—our country, weakened and exhausted by the imperialist war, would long ago have been torn to pieces by the barbarians of world imperialism. And when those very same Mensheviks reproach us for giving military training to our young people, for building the Red Army, when they tell us: “You, too, are militarists,” then it is sufficient for us to contrast the states that surround us with the first republic of labor in the world, surrounded for the last seven years by irreconcilable and ruthless foes.

If they are recognizing us now, and if we are carrying on negotiations in London today, it must not be supposed that the world bourgeoisie has become better disposed towards the republic of workers and peasants. A change of tactics does not do away with the hatred felt by the bourgeoisie of all countries for the republic where the rising generation of working people is growing up in a new atmosphere, with new ideals—for we are overthrowing the old ideals in so far as we are teaching the young generation to have confidence in the power of the world working class. The world bourgeoisie will never reconcile itself to this. ■



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

**Chicago, 4 May 1886: Workers gunned down by police in Haymarket Square amid struggle for eight-hour day, marking origins of May Day.**

the May Day celebrations, are forbidding the workers to go into the streets with the slogans of international brotherhood and the eight-hour working day. And the same telegrams report that the German Young Communists, the young people of Germany and those of France, too, are nevertheless doing all they can to be able to go out into the streets of their cities with slogans of protest and struggle.

What are these slogans? The slogan laid down for May Day thirty-five years ago—the eight-hour working day—was achieved almost everywhere in Europe after the war; but in recent years the working day has been lengthened. If there were a country that had the right, if there were a working class that had the right to demand of itself and of its sons a working day longer than eight hours, then it would be our country, exhausted and devastated, working not for the bourgeoisie but for itself—and yet in our country the eight-hour working day remains a precondition, based on the laws of the republic, for the moral and spiritual advance and development of the working masses.

And on May Day we hurl this fact in the face of Europe’s capitalist, lying, thoroughly hypocritical bourgeois democracy. What sort of democracy is it for the working people if they are merely promised the eight-hour working day? And what of the fraternity of the peoples, respect for the working people of other nationalities, who speak other languages, fraternal feelings



Basil Blackwell, Inc.

**Red Army commander Leon Trotsky rallies troops, 1920.**

## Letter

## On Stand Your Ground Law

3 April 2012

Dear WV,

I am troubled by a new position taken up in WV#999 in the article on the racist murder of Trayvon Martin. While upholding the basic Marxist position of opposing gun control (i.e. the bourgeoisie’s monopoly of violence), we say “we oppose the ‘stand your ground’ law, which, in removing retreat as a criterion for self-defense, sanctions vigilantism, including murder.”

As we state in the Programmatic Statement of the Spartacist League/U.S.: “We vigorously oppose calls on the capitalist state to pass laws against ‘extremists’ (e.g., demands to ‘ban the Klan’).” Our answer to racist vigilantism is “for the perspective of labor/black mobilizations, centered on the social power of the trade unions, to stop KKK/Nazi terror... [And] stand for labor-centered mobilizations to protest particular police atrocities.”

The “stand your ground” law in Florida has nothing to do with the state’s monopoly of violence. If a black man, under Florida law, were to lethally shoot a racist vigilante when he “reasonably believes that such force is necessary to prevent imminent death or great bodily harm to himself”, could not the “stand your ground” law be used in his defense? What “sanctions vigilantism” is decaying capitalism. In this country no inves-

tigation, no police reform, no law, no federal intervention, no black president will rid this country of racist vigilantism, repression and murder. Nothing short of integrated proletarian leadership premised on the understanding that black freedom requires smashing the capitalist system and the establishment of an international socialist planned economy, can eradicate racism, poverty and hunger from the planet.

Comradely,  
Martin B.

**WV replies:**

The objections raised by our subscriber Martin B. are answered in this issue’s front-page article. ■

### CORRECTION

Our front-page article on Trayvon Martin in WV No. 999 (30 March) contained some factual errors. Trayvon Martin was taller, not shorter, than George Zimmerman and 20, not nearly 100, pounds lighter. We also stated that Zimmerman made 46 calls to 911 this year. According to a correction in the *New York Times* (6 April), the calls were made over the course of about eight years.

## WORKERS VANGUARD

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# Revitalize the Unions! For Class-Struggle Leadership!

## Transit Workers Under the Gun

### New York City

Emboldened by the anti-union offensive against public employees in Wisconsin, Indiana and many other states, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) has in its crosshairs the 34,000 NYC subway and bus workers organized in Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100. With negotiations over the union contract that expired on January 15 dragging out, the transit bosses have not wavered in their major giveback demands: a three-year wage freeze, the near-doubling of worker-paid health care costs and the creation of additional workforce tiers. From slashed wages and looted pensions to massive job cuts, public workers in New York and across the country are facing similar attacks carried out by both Democrats and Republicans.

But Local 100 is not just any municipal workers union. For more than a century, New York's mass transit system has been integral to the city's economy. To this day, commerce in the financial center of U.S. imperialism remains heavily reliant on the dense subway and bus network and the commuter rail lines that feed it. When transit workers withhold their labor, it causes a crisis for the city bosses.

A transit strike in 1966 brought the bosses and bankers to their knees, winning a pension for workers after 20 years of service and setting the standard for better wages and working conditions throughout the city. It reduced the New York State Condon-Wadlin Act, which banned strikes by government employees, to a paper tiger. Strikes in 1980 and 2005, deemed "illegal" by the capitalist rulers but widely popular among working people and the poor, also put the union's might on display. However, the TWU tops caved in to the bosses and their political and judicial enforcers, folding the strikes as the bourgeoisie was really beginning to feel the pinch.

Today, Local 100 finds itself in a weakened state, thanks in no small part to the disastrous policies of its leadership. The union is still deeply fractured from the betrayal of the 2005 strike, which was called off by Local 100 president Roger Toussaint without a contract in hand or an amnesty protecting strikers and the union from the reprisals that soon followed. Recently, Toussaint and his successor as Local 100 president, John Samuelsen, have taken to pleading their grievances against one another through interviews with the *Wall Street Journal*, the house organ of the capitalist class enemy.

Samuelsen goes so far as to disavow the 2005 strike, declaring it "detrimental to the union's ongoing ability to organize members in a fight-back." It is all too typical of labor's misleaders to renounce strikes and other tools of labor struggle, which are central to the very existence of unions. Consequently, in New York transit workers face the losing proposition of either binding arbitration, where the bosses call the shots, or a negotiated sellout in the stalled contract talks.

Against this backdrop, it is not uncommon to hear transit workers question the value of even having a union. It is a mistake to identify the unions—the basic defense organizations of the working class—with their pro-capitalist misleadership, whose policies impede the ranks from resisting



WV Photo

**Above: NYC transit workers protest MTA giveback demands, December 15. Right: TWU Local 100 president John Samuelsen (at left) with MTA head Joe Lhota.**

Costanza/NY Daily News



the attacks of their exploiters. While those like Toussaint and Samuelsen may have their differences on secondary matters, the union bureaucrats are in full agreement on the essentials, namely, adherence to the capitalist profit system. Politically, this is expressed through support to the Democratic Party, which no less than the Republicans is a party of capitalist rule.

The unions, which have been gravely undermined by the labor tops, were built through fierce class battles involving mass pickets and secondary boycotts in defiance of anti-labor laws and court injunctions. Revitalizing them will take the same kind of hard class struggle. And that will pose a fight to oust the hidebound labor officials and replace them with a new leadership, one that understands that the working class and the capitalist class have no common interests. Such a class-struggle leadership would play a crucial role in building a workers party that fights for a workers government.

### Why Workers Risked Their Lives for a Union

The TWU's own history shows that a union makes a life-and-death difference in the workplace. Before the TWU was forged in the 1930s, the largely immigrant, mainly Irish workforce was subject to poverty-level wages, brutal management practices and deadly conditions. Seven-day workweeks and split shifts spanning 14 hours were commonplace. Dozens of transit workers died on the job each year. With the union, workers won a means to wrest a living wage from the transit bosses, beat back punitive measures and assert some control over safety.

The establishment of the TWU as an industrial union was the culmination of many decades of bitter struggle. Beginning with organizing drives by the Knights of Labor at the end of the 19th century, trolley, bus and subway strikes

pitted workers against the owners of the private lines that evolved into the current municipal system. Strikers risked their lives in pitched street battles with cops, company agents and National Guardsmen.

Organized by Mike Quill as well as other Communist Party (CP) supporters and Irish Republicans, the TWU emerged amid the outpouring of class militancy across the country that would give rise to the CIO. Erupting in the period of the Great Depression, this militancy reflected a broader social ferment out of which a workers party could have taken root. But the very leaders of the new industrial union movement, not least the CP Stalinists, crippled it through their support to Roosevelt's Democratic Party and its "New Deal coalition."

Quill himself was repeatedly elected to the New York City Council as a part of the New Deal coalition. He continued his political service to the ruling class in the post-World War II Cold War against the

Soviet Union, breaking with the CP and launching an anti-Communist purge of the TWU. Throughout Quill's career, he worked in cahoots with the city's Democratic Party machine. It is no accident that the first citywide TWU strike coincided with the inauguration of liberal Republican mayor John Lindsay in 1966.

On the eve of the strike, Quill ripped up an anti-strike court order. He is especially known for going to jail rather than calling off the strike, proclaiming, "The judge can drop dead in his black robes." The union returned to work only on the condition that there would be no reprisals, forcing the government to revoke its threats to fire strikers under the Condon-Wadlin Act. Soon after, the law was repealed. However, Republican governor Nelson Rockefeller announced that he was "determined that this should never happen again," and in 1967 the Taylor Law was enacted, substituting massive fines of union members and the union itself for mass firings as penalties for striking.

Backed by the rest of labor, strike action by transit workers, teachers, sanitation or other public workers could render the Taylor Law a dead letter. In the course of such a struggle, the unions would need to draw behind them the ghetto and barrio poor, who suffer disproportionately from the service cuts that accompany the attacks on public workers. Mobilizing the power of labor to champion the interests of the oppressed would also strike a blow against the racial and ethnic hostilities whipped up by the rulers to divide and weaken working people.

### The Sellout of the 2005 Strike

The December 2005 strike was reluctantly called by the Toussaint leadership, which was caught between an intransigent MTA on the one side and a restive membership on the other. Unfolding at the height of the holiday shopping season, the walkout stunned the arrogant capitalist rulers and drew immediate blowback from the government. As Democratic state attorney general Eliot Spitzer moved to issue a series of Taylor Law injunctions, a chorus of bourgeois politicians and their media mouthpieces railed against the strikers. Billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg called strike leaders "thugish" in a clear attempt to stir up racist animosity against Local 100, whose membership is heavily black and immigrant, and its leader Toussaint, who was born in Trinidad.

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## WORKERS VANGUARD

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# Trayvon...

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1960s. There are no longer any respectable advocates of racial segregation.” His conclusion: “Blacks today are nine times more likely to be killed by other blacks than by whites,” so why not “a movement against blacks who kill other blacks”? Bill Cosby chimed in by telling CNN that the debate over Trayvon Martin’s killing by a neighborhood watch volunteer should be focused on guns, not race.

These despicable comments by Cosby, who likes to lecture black people that they’re responsible for their own oppression, were echoed in one way or another by a cadre of liberal pundits and black Democratic Party politicians railing against the proliferation of guns. Liberals are especially trying to steer opposition to Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law, under which Zimmerman claimed self-defense, into assaults on the Second Amendment right to bear arms. This view was expressed by labor bureaucrat George Gresham of SEIU 1199 in the “Union Matters” column in the *Amsterdam News* (12 April), in which he called to put on trial “Florida’s shoot-first ‘Stand Your Ground’ law and the dangerous prevalence of handguns in our nation.”

In “Trayvon Martin: Killed for Being Black in America” (WV No. 999, 30 March), we explained why as Marxists we oppose Florida’s Stand Your Ground law, “which, in removing retreat as a criterion for self-defense, sanctions vigilantism, including murder.” At the same time, we stressed that “the working class and the black population must zealously defend the Constitutional right to bear arms, a product of the Revolutionary War against British colonial rule.” Upholding the right to armed self-defense, Marxists oppose gun control laws, which are a means to enforce a monopoly of violence in the hands of the capitalist state. Gun control leaves guns in the hands of cops, criminals, vigilantes and Klansmen. Gun control kills, and it kills black people in particular.

In the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, the most democratic period for black people in America’s history, many recalcitrant Southern state governments tried to outlaw possession of firearms by blacks. In response, the federal Freedmen’s Bureau widely distributed circulars that read in part, “All men, without distinction of color, have the right to keep arms to defend their homes, families, or themselves.”

The Northern bourgeoisie, acting on its class interests, went on to make peace with the Southern planters, and blacks were forced into backbreaking labor on the land as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Following the end of Union Army occupation of the South during Reconstruction, naked white-supremacist rule was restored. Jim Crow segregation was enforced by police-state repression, supplemented by the extralegal terror of the Ku Klux Klan. As race-terror swept the South in the late 19th century, anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells wrote:

“The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense. The lesson this teaches and which every Afro American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have



William Loren Katz Collection

a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.”

—quoted in *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* (Jacqueline J. Royster, ed. [1997])

Black self-defense has historically been met with frenzied state repression. The earliest 20th-century gun control laws were passed in states like South Carolina, Tennessee and Mississippi as a way to disarm blacks in the face of KKK terror.

An article by Jill Lepore in the *New Yorker* (23 April) aptly points out, “In

**Left: Anti-lynching militant Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) stressed need for black people to own guns.**

**Right: Self-defense group organized by Robert F. Williams to fight KKK terror in Monroe, North Carolina, 1957.**

Marzani & Munsell



was called, in the age of the Moynihan report, the ‘Negro problem.’ The regulations that are part of these laws—firearms restrictions, mandatory-sentencing guidelines, abolition of parole, and the ‘war on drugs’—are now generally understood to be responsible for the dramatic rise in the U.S. incarceration rate.”

## “Stand Your Ground”: License to Kill

Florida’s Stand Your Ground law eliminated the historic requirement that in order to claim self-defense, a person facing deadly force must first try to remove

lation, pioneering mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenders and “three strikes” laws.

Over 20 state governments, centered on the states of the slaveholders’ Confederacy, have passed such laws, with bipartisan support. In doing so, they certainly did not have *black* self-defense in mind. A case in point occurred in 2005 in Georgia, a “Stand Your Ground” state. John McNeil, a black man, was rushed in front of his home by a white man who had been threatening his family with a knife. McNeil fired a warning shot but his assailant continued toward him. McNeil fired again and killed him. Initially, he was not charged in the killing. But prosecutors went after him a year later, and now McNeil is serving a life sentence.

In Florida and other states, possessing firearms is illegal for minors as well as for adults who have been convicted on drug charges or were, as youths, judged delinquent on such charges. Under racist U.S. “law and order,” these categories are overwhelmingly applicable to black people. Since he was under 18, Trayvon Martin had no legal right to be carrying a firearm, and thus no right to use one in self-defense. If he had been armed during his encounter with George Zimmerman, he might be alive today. But in this racist society, his survival may also have been a ticket to prison and possibly death row.

## Material Roots of Black Oppression

Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton have seized on Trayvon Martin’s killing to trot out the call for a “new civil rights movement,” towing the reformist “socialists” in their slipstream. For decades, Jackson and Sharpton have promoted themselves as spokesmen against racist abuse and police attacks in order to douse the flames of struggle and divert anger among black people into Democratic Party electoral politics and illusions in the capitalist “justice” system. And this is precisely their intention in regard to protests over the Martin killing. Jackson declared at a press conference last month, “I would hope that movement would turn into Trayvon Martin voter-registration rallies.” Sharpton chimed in by telling a convention of his National Action Network on April 11, “We must make the justice system work. Otherwise the movement is for nothing.”

Singing the same tune are the reformists of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). In an article headlined “Building a New Movement for Racial Justice” (*Socialist Worker* online, 18 April), the ISO calls for organizing to demand “justice and accountability when African Americans are brutalized—or worse—by police.” The hard fact is that the police are “accountable” only to the capitalist ruling class that employs them to repress the working class, black people and other minorities through organized violence.

Sharpton, Jackson and others have likened Trayvon Martin’s killing to the 1955 lynching in Mississippi of 14-year-old Emmett Till for the offense of appearing to whistle at a white woman. The lynching became a catalyst for the civil



Oklahoma Historical Society

**Tulsa, 1921: Armed white civilian stands over body of victim of racist riot, as blacks are incarcerated at Convention Hall.**

the nineteen-sixties, gun ownership as a constitutional right was less the agenda of the N.R.A. [National Rifle Association] than of black nationalists.” In 1965, the New York City Council passed a bill especially to keep Malcolm X from carrying a carbine for his protection; he was assassinated shortly afterward. In 1967, the California legislature banned the carrying of a loaded gun after a demonstration by the Black Panthers, who were legally carrying guns, at the state capitol in Sacramento. The Panthers had been patrolling the Oakland ghetto, where police terror was rampant.

The state’s ban was followed by gun control laws nationwide, especially after the ghetto upheavals that broke out following Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968. As Lepore notes, gun control, “along with a great deal of subsequent law-and-order legislation, was intended to fight crime, control riots, and solve what

himself, if feasible, before himself using such force. Passed in 2005 amid a campaign to “get tough on crime”—code for targeting black people—the law is an open invitation to just the kind of racist vigilante violence that killed Trayvon Martin.

To see the racist intent of Florida’s law, one need look no further than its authors. The law was drafted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a right-wing think tank founded in 1973 by Paul Weyrich, who was also a founder of the Heritage Foundation and, with the reactionary religious bigot Jerry Falwell, co-founder of the Moral Majority. ALEC has been the driving force behind the voter ID laws that are intended to overwhelmingly disenfranchise black people and the poor and has played a key role in expanding the burgeoning prison popu-

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# Racist Vendetta Against Homeless Mother Free Tanya McDowell Now!

On February 22, Tanya McDowell, a black homeless mother, was sentenced to prison by a Connecticut judge for “stealing” education for her son. McDowell had used her babysitter’s address in a Norwalk housing project to register her son for kindergarten, but officials in that town deemed her a resident of Bridgeport. So last year they unleashed vicious cop-judicial retribution. First McDowell was arrested for “grand larceny” for trying to get her son out of the decrepit Bridgeport schools. Then, after her case attracted national sympathy, police busted her for selling drugs to an undercover cop. McDowell’s lawyer protested that she had been entrapped by police in retaliation for the uproar over her initial arrest. Gwen Samuel, founder of the Connecticut Parents Union, which has backed McDowell’s case, said that local authorities “were going to look for anything” to nab her. “It could have been jaywalking.”

Facing the threat of well over 15 years in prison if convicted at trial, McDowell pleaded guilty to both the grand larceny and drug charges, mandating a minimum of five years in prison and a commitment to pay up to \$6,200 in “restitution” to Norwalk. Such coercive plea-bargaining is standard operating procedure in the mass incarceration of black people in capitalist America. Under the U.S. system of “justice,” nearly all cases never go to trial, with prosecutors piling on charges to pressure defendants to plead guilty to lesser ones.

McDowell was victimized for doing what countless parents do to try to get access to quality schools. This impoverished single mother bravely told the sentencing judge, “Who would have thought that wanting a good education for my son would put me in this predicament?” The



**Bridgeport:  
Tanya McDowell  
at March 27  
sentencing in  
Superior Court.**

stark fact is that under this decaying capitalist system, McDowell’s case harks back to the laws of the Old South, where it was a crime to teach slaves to read and write.

The persecution of Tanya McDowell is shot through with class privilege and racist contempt. The coastal region of Connecticut from Bridgeport to the Norwalk area has the highest level of income disparity in the entire country. Norwalk is part of a cluster of towns centered on Greenwich, home to many fabulously wealthy households. While downtown Norwalk sports hip restaurants and luxury boutiques, Bridgeport is the corpse of a former industrial center with block after block of deserted factories, its desperate population scraping by on less than half the per capita income of Norwalk’s residents.

While blacks and Latinos make up nearly a quarter of Connecticut’s population, they are overwhelmingly concentrated in run-down areas like Bridgeport,

which is over 70 percent black and Latino. Residency requirements and the fact that education funding is based on local property taxes are integral to the class divide and segregated reality of public schools. As we wrote in our previous article on McDowell’s case, “This is the real crime in the eyes of the bourgeois Norwalk city fathers: Tanya McDowell and her son actually tried *to get out* of Bridgeport’s rotten schools instead of staying ‘in their place’” (“Homeless Mom Faces 20 Years for Putting Kid in Good School,” WV No. 980, 13 May 2011).

Last June 7, hundreds rallied in support of McDowell at an “Equal Education for All” protest called by the NAACP in front of the Norwalk elementary school where her son had been enrolled. That support largely dissipated following her arrest on drug charges. The call to free Tanya McDowell should be taken up by all opponents of racist injustice, all oppo-

nents of the capitalists’ war on labor and the poor. McDowell’s victimization in the racist “war on drugs” is commonly the fate of minority women as well as men. In 2010, black women were incarcerated at nearly three times the rate of white women. We call for the *decriminalization of drugs* as part of our opposition to all laws against “crimes without victims”—such as drug use, prostitution, gambling and pornography—which are at bottom designed to maintain social control.

Although the “war on drugs” was launched by Republican president Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s, it was a *bipartisan* campaign. Among its most vociferous supporters were black Democrats like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, who made common cause with the police—the biggest purveyors of racist terror in the ghettos and barrios. Last year, Sharpton showed up at the June 7 rally for McDowell, only to throw her under the bus. Sharpton told ABC News (13 June) that her son “should be treated like any other kid if their parent didn’t live in the district,” contemptuously adding that Tanya McDowell might be “unfit to be a mother.”

The Democrats and Republicans are but dual parties of a capitalist system that has consigned Tanya McDowell and countless others to the scrap heap. The depth of racist oppression in this country is expressed in astronomical unemployment rates for black people, especially youth, decrepit ghetto housing and schools, rampant police terror and the consignment of over 1.6 million blacks and Latinos to America’s hellhole prisons. That nightmarish reality is an essential feature of U.S. capitalism—a system that must be swept away root and branch through workers socialist revolution. ■

rights upheavals that rocked the Jim Crow South and reverberated throughout the U.S. As we explain in depth in the article on page 6 of this issue, the heroic struggles to break the color bar were channeled by the liberal civil rights leadership into reliance on the capitalist courts and the Democratic Party. Legalized Jim Crow was dismantled, but this development did not—and could not—address the poverty, unemployment, rotten housing, segregated education and rampant cop terror that afflict the bulk of the black population. These conditions are materially rooted in the U.S. capital-

ist system, in which the mass of the black population is segregated at the bottom of society.

Black oppression will be smashed only when the capitalist profit system is overthrown by the multiracial working class and replaced with a planned, socialist economy, in which the productive wealth of society will be used to satisfy human needs. Opposing this revolutionary perspective, liberals and reformists reduce the struggle against racist violence and misery to simply combating racial prejudice and stereotypes—i.e., the ideological *reflections* of black oppression. Thus,

at an April 11 panel discussion in Chicago with Jesse Jackson’s Operation Push and others, the ISO’s Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor declared: “The stereotypes about Black youth that are generated from officially sanctioned racial profiling and from the overrepresentation of young Black people in the criminal justice system because of racism and corruption among police and in the courts has [sic] created the conditions under which something like the murder of Trayvon Martin and the murder of so many others happened” (*Socialist Worker* online, 16 April).

Such liberal notions were refuted more than half a century ago by American Trotskyist Richard Fraser. In his 1953 lectures titled “The Negro Struggle and the Proletarian Revolution” (printed in “In Memoriam: Richard S. Fraser,” *Prometheus Research Series* No. 3 [1990]), Fraser noted that for bourgeois moralists the source of the exploitation of labor

was “the greed of the capitalist.” Karl Marx, he pointed out, proved that “it was not greed but property relations which make it possible for exploitation to exist.” He continued:

“When applied to the Negro question, the theory of morality means that the root of the problem of discrimination and white supremacy is prejudice. This is the reigning theory of American liberalism and is the means by which the capitalists throw the responsibility for the Jim Crow system upon the population as a whole. If people weren’t prejudiced there would be no Negro problem. This contention is fundamentally false.”

Fraser concluded: “Education against prejudice has its importance in the Negro struggle. But only the destruction of the economic and social foundation upon which prejudice is built will eliminate it. This will be accomplished only by the socialist revolution.” The Spartacist League is committed to forging the revolutionary workers party that is necessary to achieve this goal. ■

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# For Black Liberation Through Socialist Revolution!

The following is a presentation, edited for publication, by Spartacist League spokesman Diana Coleman at a February 25 forum in Los Angeles.

So it is Black History Month, and even though we have a black president sitting in the White House, things look bleak for the masses of black people and, indeed, all working people. The world has been plunged into an economic crisis the likes of which have not been seen since the Great Depression. Wall Street was bailed out to the tune of trillions of dollars by the Bush White House and the Democratic Party administration of Barack Obama, while the working class, black people, Latinos and the poor were made to foot the bill.

Unemployment, housing repossessions, poverty, homelessness, hunger, mass incarceration, the disappearance of the pensions that people thought they had, the ever-increasing price of a college education—all of this particularly impacts black and Latino people. The National Urban League, a fairly conservative, business-oriented black group, wrote a report last year called, “At Risk: The State of the Black Middle Class” whose conclusion was: “Our analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics will clearly establish that whether one looks at education, income or any other meaningful measure, almost all the economic gains that blacks have made in the last 30 years have been lost in the Great Recession” that started in December 2007.

Meanwhile, U.S. imperialism rampages around the world from Iraq to Afghanistan to Libya, maybe Iran next, leaving death and destruction in its wake. And if that’s not enough, Obama is ramping up the war on civil liberties at home and has deported more immigrants than Bush ever did. As Mumia Abu-Jamal, former Black Panther and America’s foremost class-war prisoner, stated, “All of this under the authority of the nation’s first Black president, who, despite his blackness is but a Clinton clone. A servant of big business, and a cudgel against the Black Movement.” Never has it been clearer what a losing strategy it is to ally with the class enemy, in this case the Democratic Party of capitalism, racial oppression and war. We definitely need a revolutionary workers party and some hard, integrated class struggle around here.



Birmingham: Protest against segregation at high school, early 1960s.

Moore/Black Star

## — Part One — Contradictions of the Civil Rights Movement: A Marxist Analysis

There can be no justice, equality or freedom for black people in racist capitalist America. When I was in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s, there was no lack of dedicated people. What was lacking was the Marxist program that could show the way forward to black liberation. So this forum today will take up the dead end of both the liberal leadership of the civil rights movement and the black nationalist organizing in Detroit of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

### Revolutionary Integrationism

Let me make some general points on the black question. From the formation of the Spartacist tendency in the early

1960s, we have stood for the perspective and program of revolutionary integrationism. This position is counterposed to both the liberal reformist response to black oppression and to all political expressions of black separatism. The liberation of black people from conditions of racial oppression and impoverishment—conditions inherent in the U.S. capitalist system—can be achieved only in an egalitarian socialist society. And such a society can be achieved only through the overthrow of the capitalist system by workers revolution.

We have described the black population in the U.S. as an oppressed race-color caste. We noted in “Black and Red” (*Marxist Bulletin* No. 9, “Basic Documents of the

Spartacist League”) that “from their arrival in this country, the Negro people have been an integral *part* of American class society while at the same time *forcibly segregated* at the bottom of this society.” Thus blacks face discrimination, in different degrees, regardless of social status, wealth or class position. Blacks are today still an integral and strategic part of the working class, despite unemployment and mass incarceration.

James P. Cannon—the founding leader of American Trotskyism—described the crucial intervention of Lenin and Trotsky’s Communist International in driving home the centrality of the fight for black freedom to proletarian revolution in the U.S. Cannon emphasized that “everything new and progressive on the Negro question came from Moscow, after the revolution of 1917, and as a result of the revolution.” Further, he said that Lenin and the Russian Revolution “contributed *more than any other influence from any 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” (“The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement,” in *The First Ten Years of American Communism* [1962]).

The current expression of the concept of revolutionary integrationism derives from the ideas of Richard Fraser, a veteran Trotskyist who made a unique Marxist contribution to the understanding of American black oppression and struggle in the 1950s. Fraser began from the premise that black people, whom he described as “the most completely ‘Americanized’ section of the population,” were not an oppressed nation or nationality in any sense. Crucially, black people lacked any material basis for a separate political economy. Whereas the oppressed nations and nationalities of Europe were subjected to forced assimilation, American blacks faced the opposite: forcible segregation. Hence, in the struggle against black oppression, the democratic demand for self-determination—separation into an independent nation-state—just didn’t make sense. Fraser wrote in “For the Materialist Conception of the Negro Question” (printed in *Marxist Bulletin* No. 5 [Revised], July 1994):

“The goals which history has dictated to them are to achieve complete equality through the elimination of racial segregation, discrimination, and prejudice. That is, the overthrow of the race system. It is from these historically conditioned conclusions that the Negro struggle, whatever its forms, has taken the path of the struggle for direct assimilation. All that we can add to this is that these goals cannot be accomplished except through the socialist revolution.”

### Emergence of the Civil Rights Movement

So these are our starting points. Two events in 1955 are often referred to as having started the civil rights movement. These are the murder of Emmett Till and Rosa Parks’ refusal to move to the back of the bus. Till was a black 14-year-old from Chicago whose family sent him down to Mississippi to stay with relatives for the



AP photos

Some 250,000 turned out in Chicago for 1955 funeral of Mississippi lynching victim Emmett Till, shown in photo with his mother, Mamie.



summer. Within days of his arrival, young Emmett was kidnapped, tortured and brutally murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman.

After Till's murder, his mother mounted a courageous campaign to ensure that the world saw the stark reality of race-terror by displaying her son's mutilated body at his funeral. More than 100,000 people waited in line at a Chicago church to view Till's open casket. So shocking was the horribly mutilated body that an estimated one out of five individuals needed help out of the building. This, along with Rosa Parks' defiant stand in Montgomery, Alabama, in December of that same year, was key in galvanizing many thousands to join the burgeoning civil rights movement.

The civil rights movement did not just fall from the sky. The urbanization and industrialization of the American South during and after World War II began to create concentrations of black workers. By 1960, some 42 percent of the Southern black population lived in urban centers, compared to less than 15 percent in 1890. The material conditions of Southern blacks had changed, and this fundamentally eroded the Jim Crow system of segregation—a system based on police/Klan terror aimed at atomized rural sharecroppers.

By the mid 1950s, black anger and the changed conditions gave birth to the civil rights movement—a movement whose core activists were, at the beginning, black proletarians, many of them veterans of World War II or the Korean War. But the organized working class was not an active force in the civil rights movement. Except for a few heroic efforts undertaken by reds, the impressive unionization drive of the 1930s did not breach the Mason-Dixon Line separating North from South.

The first CIO initiative to organize the South, in 1941, was scuttled by the labor bureaucracy to show their support to the imperialist war. A second attempt, launched in 1946 as “Operation Dixie” (a disgusting name that foreshadowed its collapse), was shipwrecked on the shoals of the red purges, racism and the CIO bureaucracy's ties to the Democratic Party. I think that this vacuum of leadership was an important factor in allowing the upsurge of protest unleashed by the movement to be contained within the conservative channels defined by the black preachers.

From its onset, the civil rights movement was dominated by a black middle-class leadership allied to Democratic Party liberalism. The aim of this leadership—whose most effective exponent was Martin Luther King Jr.—was to pressure the capitalist state, especially the Democratic Party administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s, to grant formal, legal equality to blacks in the South. Working to keep the civil rights movement within the confines of bourgeois reformism and the Democratic Party were Walter Reuther, United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucrat and premier witchhunter—he took the lead in expelling Communist Party-led unions from the CIO—and A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Socialist Party, assisted by other elements of the decomposing American social democracy like Bayard Rustin and Michael Harrington, as well as by the Stalinized Communist Party.

The civil rights movement has become so mythologized that I barely recognize it when people talk about it—and I was there. To the liberals and reformists, King was the messianic leader of the movement who everyone followed and adored. Not true! There was a political, left-right division in the civil rights movement with King on the right and SNCC and Malcolm X, in his own way, on the left. To the reformists like the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Party for Socialism and Liberation, and Workers World, King was becoming some kind of revolutionary in his final days.

A leaflet by the ISO in L.A. titled, “The Real MLK: Against War” says: “Come celebrate Black History Month with a discussion that aims to recapture King's *real* legacy, and the relevance of his struggles



Danny Lyon photos

**Above: SNCC organizers near Albany, Georgia, 1963. Below: National Guard brutalizing SNCC activist during desegregation struggle in Cambridge, Maryland, May 1964.**



against war, poverty, and racism today.” Well, they can have his legacy of pacifism and liberalism. Workers World cites the “transformative” last year of King's life, during which it claims he “had come around to the understanding that merely altering the appearance of the capitalist system would in a short time amount to little more than a cruel betrayal of the fierce urgency to change the system” (*Workers World* online, 3 September 2008). They add: “This contradiction pushed King toward...an anti-capitalist struggle.” Michelle Alexander, an outraged liberal protesting the mass incarceration of blacks in her book *The New Jim Crow*, cites the “revolutionary potential” of the “human rights movement” that King championed at the end of his life.

Although King went to Memphis to support black union members and spoke out in moral opposition to the war in Vietnam, his basic politics never changed; to the end, he never wavered in his reliance on the capitalist Democratic Party and the strategy of pressure politics. And for all those various leftists who think the answer is a new civil rights movement, the real question is why did such tremendous efforts yield such meager results. Yes, the civil rights movement ended Jim Crow segregation and made the South look somewhat more like the North. Yes, there is a black overseer in the White House and we have Oprah Winfrey. But really—it did not end hellish conditions in the ghettos, the mass unemployment, the mass incarceration or the police brutality that are the everyday realities of life for black Americans.

### Liberal Pacifism vs. Armed Self-Defense

I do want to make the point that the civil rights movement really was a mass movement, and it defined a whole generation of young people, black and white. You could watch TV and hundreds of thousands of black people marching for the right to vote or the right to use public facilities and then see them set upon by police dogs, fire hoses, tear gas and every kind of police brutality and mob violence. The book *Local People, The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* by John Dittmer

gives you a visceral sense of how many local black people were killed fighting for civil rights. NAACP's Medgar Evers, killed in 1963, was the best known, but only one of many. The eruption of black struggle shattered the Cold War/McCarthyite climate of the early 1950s and set the stage for the New Left student radicalism of the 1960s.

When I was 17, I decided I should get involved and joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in late 1963 or early 1964 in San Francisco. I participated in various mass demos protesting racist job discrimination—at the Sheraton Palace Hotel, at Lucky's (now Albertsons) and on Auto Row. Now I wonder about that last one—for the right of blacks to be car salesmen? But these demos drew thousands because there was ferment in the North as well as the South. In the summer of 1965 I decided to go down South for the second Freedom Summer. In its mass support, in the aspirations for freedom and equality which it generated among black people, and in bringing into existence a whole generation of young radicals, the civil rights movement had a revolutionary potential. It was this potential that the liberals and reformists derailed.

Let me start with the Montgomery bus boycott that ensued when Rosa Parks

courageously refused to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus in 1955. The figure who Rosa Parks turned to first and who first dominated the Montgomery action was not a preacher but a longtime trade unionist, E.D. Nixon of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (and the NAACP). MLK came to the fore for security reasons, presumably as someone who was more educated-sounding and generally more respectable.

Under the influence of Bayard Rustin, MLK came to embrace pacifism and non-violence. Bayard Rustin was also influential in helping King and others set up the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) on the basis of pacifist “direct action.” King wrote, “We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we will not obey your evil laws. We will soon wear you down by pure capacity to suffer.”

As a moral philosophy, this is disgusting. But the real point is that this was a political strategy. King and the SCLC looked to the Northern liberals of the Democratic Party, the federal government, the federal courts and federal troops to come to the aid of black people in the South. When later the question of nonviolence versus the right to armed self-defense was debated, it wasn't really the question “Do you have the right to defend your family against the Klan” but whether you were for armed self-defense for a *mass movement* which embraced millions and was confronting the capitalist state.

It was a debate that revealed your attitude toward “the system” or the “white power structure” or whatever other terms were current for the American capitalist state. “Armed self-defense” was really a way to say that you had the right to revolution, the right to overthrow the white racist government which oppressed black people. MLK was really pledging allegiance to the government. So nonviolence versus armed self-defense became the way the question of reform versus revolution was posed in the civil rights movement.

The buses were integrated in Montgomery after the long bus boycott, and King was riding high on his pacifism and “soul force.” But Montgomery blacks were left to face the racist backlash, courageously, but tactically and politically disarmed. The KKK came out of their holes, black churches were bombed, buses were burned. Even King's house was dynamited. But angry blacks who rose to King's defense were told by King to love their enemies. Rosa Parks was blacklisted and hounded out of Montgomery, eventually moving to Detroit where she worked for black Democrat John Conyers.

### SNCC and “Black Power”

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was a youth group that emerged out of the lunch counter sit-in movement which swept Southern black campuses in 1960. It was formed under the auspices of King's SCLC. It accepted nonviolence in its founding statement, as their name indicates. The initial goal was formal, legal equality, or “Northernizing

*continued on page 8*



JFK Library

**June 1963: Martin Luther King Jr., UAW's Walter Reuther (front row, right) and other liberal civil rights luminaries pose with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon Johnson after White House meeting.**

# Black History...

(continued from page 7)

the South,” and they started with the same strategy as King. You know: have a non-violent demonstration, get your head beat in by racist Southern sheriffs, scandalize the nation, force the federal government to send in the troops. So SNCC activists started out with the illusion that the U.S. government was on their side. But they soon learned the truth the hard way.

As Marxists, we know that the bourgeois state is not neutral but an organ for the oppression of the working class and the black masses by the capitalist class. The essence of the state is armed bodies of men—cops, prisons, courts, National Guard and army—used by the ruling class to suppress the working class. As SNCC’s organizing among the black masses repeatedly brought things to the flash point, the government rushed in their black sellouts to cool it down, their CIA agents to co-opt it, their courts to indict it, and their troops to crush it.

From Little Rock in 1957 to Birmingham in 1963, federal troops were only brought in when black people began to defend themselves and fight back. When the troops were brought in to “protect” the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery march, they were conveniently withdrawn as the protesters reached Montgomery, leaving the marchers to make the return journey defenseless in the face of beatings and shootings. Through bitter experience, SNCC activists learned that white liberal leaders like the Kennedys and Hubert Humphrey were a lot closer to the Southern Democrats—Dixiecrats like Senator Eastland from Mississippi—than they were to the civil rights activists.

So it was that within six years SNCC would enrage the liberal establishment by calling for “black power,” and shortly thereafter H. Rap Brown, the last chairman of SNCC, would be proclaiming that “violence is as American as cherry pie.” It is useful here to make a comparison between Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and SNCC. SDS started out as the student group of the League for Industrial Democracy. Moribund by 1960, the LID had served as a handmaiden of the U.S. government in the left and labor movement. Populated by “State Department socialists” such as Norman Thomas and Michael Harrington, the LID also counted among its members Victor and Walter Reuther—social-democratic anti-Communists personifying the link between the labor movement and the Democratic Party—and Bayard Rustin.

Under the impact of the Vietnam War, SDS dropped its anti-communist clause, started organizing against the war, became anti-imperialist as they understood it, opposed to the Democratic Party at least empirically, with many moving toward Maoism. Needless to say, LID disowned them. Similarly, the SCLC was also pretty appalled by what they had given birth to in SNCC. And as I give a few examples of the conflicts, you will notice that the same names keep turning up—MLK, of course, but also Walter Reuther, Bayard Rustin, Hubert Humphrey, A. Philip Randolph.

In 1961-62, SNCC organized black people in Albany, Georgia, in a very popular, all-sided attack on segregation. It would really heat up, and then MLK would come in for a weekend and, to the dismay of the SNCC activists, declare a truce. It was really getting heavy; the KKK was mobilizing, etc. It came to a head when the cops attacked a rally outside a black church and black youth began to fight back by throwing bricks and bottles. King declared a “day of penance” for the horrible crime of black people actually daring to defend themselves against police brutality; SNCC refused to condemn the action and started referring to King as “De Lawd.” It was not meant as a compliment.

In 1963 at the famous March on Washington, SNCC saw how the whole liberal establishment and particularly the liberal wing of the trade-union bureaucracy were used to keep the lid on the civil rights



Bettmann

**Bogalusa, Louisiana, 1966: Charles Sims of Deacons for Defense and Justice organized armed self-defense against Klan. Spartacists raised money for Deacons while advancing revolutionary integrationist program.**



movement. James Forman, an early head of SNCC, in his autobiography *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* commented bitterly: “Originally planned as a march for jobs and freedom, with the emphasis on black people and their demands, the March on Washington of 1963 turned into a victory celebration for the Kennedy administration and its supporters.” He went on: “The sellout leadership of the March on Washington was playing patsy with the Kennedy administration as part of the whole liberal-labor politics of Rustin, Wilkins, Randolph, Reuther, King, the Catholic and Protestant hierarchy.”

It was this group, after Kennedy read them the riot act, that put pressure on SNCC chairman John Lewis to tone down his criticism of the Democrats, which he did. Here is his conclusion, which got censored: “We cannot depend on any political party, for both the Democrats and the Republicans have betrayed the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence.” He also had to delete a section that referred to marching through the South “the way Sherman did,” even though he insisted this time it be nonviolent. I guess they thought even the mention of General William T. Sherman’s name might alienate the Dixiecrats that the Kennedy administration was trying so hard to keep in the Democratic Party.

So the whole thing was changed into a giant liberal prayerfest, channeling the masses back into the Democratic Party while the U.S. government filmed the event for foreign consumption to prove how democratic the U.S. was. This was an important aspect: Jim Crow and the well-publicized racist violence in the South had become an embarrassment overseas as American imperialism sought to posture as the champion of “democracy” in the Cold War, particularly in competition with the Soviet Union in Africa and Asia. It was this, and the fact that Jim Crow segregation had become an anachronism, that made the U.S. government eventually acquiesce to the demand for legal equality in the South—but not without a lot of hard-fought struggle.

### “I Have a Nightmare”

Although at this point they could censor SNCC, they sure couldn’t censor Malcolm X, who contemptuously referred to the March on Washington as “a picnic, a circus” and, most famously, “the Farce on Washington.” In our statement on Malcolm X’s assassination that we printed in *Spartacist* (No. 4, May-June 1965; reprinted in WV No. 997, 2 March), we referred to him as a “heroic and tragic figure.” He was never a Marxist and saw society as race-divided, rather than class-divided. Not surprisingly given his background, he had no understanding

of the strategic role of the working class and the vanguard role to be played by the black proletariat. As well, he commenced his public life in the Muslim movement with all its irrational religiosity and racial mysticism. *But* he became the American truth-teller, who with passionate oratory exposed the hypocrisy and lies of both capitalist parties and advocated the right of armed self-defense.

In response to MLK’s bleating about “I have a dream,” Malcolm said: “And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare” (“The Ballot or the Bullet”). He spoke for many in SNCC. By the time Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, many civil rights activists did not mourn for this chief of U.S. imperialism, who had ordered the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and sent the Green Berets



Bob Adelman

**Protesters raise portraits of civil rights martyrs Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman at 1964 Democratic National Convention, where Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party unsuccessfully tried to unseat Dixiecrat delegation.**

to Vietnam. They agreed with Malcolm, who had the guts to say that it was a case of the “chickens coming home to roost.”

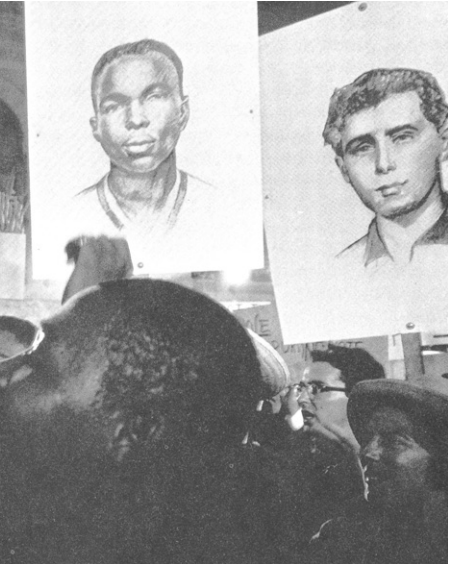
It is interesting that it is particularly Malcolm’s trenchant criticism of the American system that makes Manning Marable in his biography, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, most uncomfortable. Marable calls Malcolm’s remarks on the Kennedy assassination “offensive” and his remarks on the March on Washington a “gross distortion of the facts.” Marable has a photo of Malcolm X observing a joint session of the New York State Legislature. It is captioned: “As his political thought developed, Malcolm came to believe that blacks could work within the system to improve their lives.” This is Manning Marable, social democrat, not Malcolm X. Marable’s overall conclusion is that Malcolm “became an icon of black encouragement” and this came to be

expressed “in the successful electoral bid of Barack Obama in 2008. Malcolm truly anticipated that the black electorate could potentially be the balance of power in a divided white republic.” [For our review of this book, see “Manning Marable’s *Malcolm X: A Liberal’s ‘Reinvention’*,” Parts One and Two, WV Nos. 997 and 998, 2 March and 16 March.]

Many SNCC activists started wearing “I have a Nightmare” buttons after that. In 1964, SNCC had students, mostly white, come down from the North for the first Freedom Summer to help organize a voter registration drive. As Clayborne Carson makes clear in his definitive book on SNCC, *In Struggle*, the Kennedy administration tried to persuade civil rights groups, including SNCC, to move away from direct action and do voter registration. They even used liberal anti-Communists like the CIA-connected Allard Lowenstein to try to keep the movement within mainstream politics and isolate and red-bait the militants. (We had an excellent obituary for Lowenstein called “No Tears for Allard Lowenstein!” [WV No. 253, 4 April 1980].)

But in the end the voter registration drive hardly had the effect the liberals were expecting. In Mississippi, it was very dangerous; this was the summer Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner were killed. SNCC organized 80,000 blacks who were refused the right to vote to sign protest ballots. SNCC took these protest ballots and formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). With Fannie Lou Hamer, a local woman at the head of it, they tried to get seated at the 1964 Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City in place of the all-white Jim Crow delegation from Mississippi.

They really got shafted—and not just by the Dixiecrat Southerners either, but more particularly by the Northern liberals. The MFDP was offered a rotten compromise whereby it would get two at-large seats and the entire Dixiecrat delegation would be seated. The list of usual suspects—King, Reuther, Rustin—was there to browbeat SNCC and the MFDP into accepting the compromise. Lyndon Johnson even offered Hubert Humphrey, who was considered a great liberal (we



Bob Adelman

**Protesters raise portraits of civil rights martyrs Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman at 1964 Democratic National Convention, where Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party unsuccessfully tried to unseat Dixiecrat delegation.**

referred to him as a “liberal rat” in the WV obituary), the vice-presidential nomination if he could keep the MFDP from getting seated.

This time SNCC and the MFDP weren’t going to be intimidated, and they turned the deal down flat. James Forman of SNCC, who was there, came to this conclusion: “No longer was there any hope, among those who still had it, that the federal government would change the situation in the Deep South.” Malcolm X spoke eloquently to the illusions in the Democratic Party when he said, “Either party you align yourself with is suicide because both parties are criminal. Both parties are responsible for the criminal condition that exists.”

### SWP’s Criminal Abstentionism

One SNCC project that resulted from the growing disillusionment with the



Democratic Party was the attempt to organize an independent party in Lowndes County, Alabama, called the Black Panther Party. Although narrowly based on a single impoverished county, it was important because it was organized *in opposition* to the Democrats and openly advocated armed self-defense. This inspired the Black Panthers in Oakland, California. It also helped inspire the Spartacist League's call for a "Freedom-Labor Party," which took this a step further by attempting to link the exploding black struggle to the *power of labor*.

After the debacle at the Democratic National Convention, SNCC went into a prolonged political crisis. They rejected liberalism as they understood it but had no coherent program to replace it. It was around this time that I went to Mississippi for the second Freedom Summer in 1965. Not surprisingly, it was politically confusing and frustrating. At first I thought it was just my project in Gulfport that was disorganized, but in retrospect it was clear that SNCC was politically coming apart at the seams.

There was a lot of discussion about confronting the underlying economic and social reality of black oppression, North and South, but no consensus on how to *do* that. Like many others, I believed that black oppression was an integral part of “the system,” but the only two answers I heard in SNCC were MLK liberalism or an incoherent black nationalist separatism. Being a red-diaper baby, I knew the answer had to have something to do with Marxism, but of a more radical kind than my parents’ stodgy, pro-Democratic Party Communist Party (CP) variety. I would have been *so* happy to meet a real Marxist who understood how black oppression fit into capitalism and had a revolutionary strategy for its overturn. Indeed, after that summer I began to hang out in Berkeley checking out the left groups. I will comment that the CP was never on my list. I knew very little about their history and their betrayal of black struggle, particularly during WWII, but I knew they supported the Democratic Party and that was enough for me.

The absence of the left in the Southern civil rights movement was far from accidental and had, indeed, been a major element in the fight by the Revolutionary Tendency (RT, forerunner of the Spartacist League) in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). In the U.S. at the time of the civil rights movement, the SWP was the only organization, at least formally, with an authentically revolutionary program based on Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. However, by the early 1960s, ground down by the isolation and McCarthyite witchhunting of the 1950s, the SWP had lost its revolutionary bearings. The party's qualitative departure from its erstwhile revolutionary working-class politics began around 1960, when it slid into the role of uncritical cheerleaders for the petty-bourgeois radical-nationalist leadership of the Cuban Revolution. The SWP thus abandoned the centrality of the working class and the necessity of building Trotskyist parties in every country.

The abandonment of the fight for Marxist leadership of the black struggle in the U.S. was the domestic reflection. The SWP leadership willfully abstained from the civil rights movement while cheerleading from afar for both the liberal reformism of King and the reactionary separatism of the Nation of Islam. Against this, a 1963 RT document stated:

“The rising upsurge and militancy of the black revolt and the contradictory and confused, groping nature of what is now the left wing in the movement provide the revolutionary vanguard with fertile soil and many opportunities to plant the seeds of revolutionary socialism. Our task is to create a Trotskyist tendency in the broad left wing of the movement, while building that left wing.... We must consider non-intervention in the crisis of leadership a crime of the worst sort.”

—“The Negro Struggle and the  
Crisis of Leadership,” reprinted  
in *Marxist Bulletin* No. 5  
(Revised)

It really *was* a crime, because the civil rights movement offered a short-lived



New York Times

**Plaque memorializes  
four girls murdered  
in 1963 Klan  
bombing of  
Birmingham church  
that served as  
organizing center  
for Martin  
Luther King Jr.**



UP

opportunity for even a small revolutionary party to make a historic breakthrough. By the early 1960s, a large and growing current of young black militants was breaking to the left of the liberal reformism and pacifism of Martin Luther King but had not yet latched on to separatist ideology. These young militants were experienced in struggle and were leading a mass movement that included large numbers of black workers. Won to a Leninist-Trotskyist vanguard party, they could have changed the course of history. This was an opportunity missed.

Over the next year or so, members of the RT were expelled from the SWP. The early Spartacist tendency then actively intervened in the civil rights struggles in the South as well as the North, raising demands such as for a Freedom-Labor Party, for a Southern unionization drive backed by organized labor nationwide, and for armed self-defense against the Klan. Our forces, however, were very small and predominantly white. And the main body of young black activists was rapidly moving toward separatism.

## Second Freedom Summer

Let me talk about some of my own experiences in Gulfport, Mississippi. Going to Mississippi and the Deep South was like entering a police state. I will not give the whole story of my trip down there except to say that hitchhiking part of the way there was not the smartest move. Anyhow, everywhere along the highways of Mississippi you would see big billboards urging you to join the White Citizens' Councils and preserve the Southern way of life. (The Citizens' Councils were basically Klansmen in suits.)

When I and the other young white woman with whom I was traveling got to New Orleans, we needed to find the bus station. She, being naive, asked a black teenager for directions. While he was politely answering this question, a big pickup truck drove up on the sidewalk, almost running a couple of people down, and this old white guy started shouting, "Is that boy bothering you?" and various other racist remarks. We just tried to calm him down and get ourselves and the black kid out of the situation in one piece. This gives you a sense of how hard the race lines were, and this was in downtown New Orleans, not rural Mississippi.

We didn't do much voter registration in Gulfport, having learned something from the previous year's Democratic Party Convention. We decided to concentrate on lunch counter sit-ins. When our integrated group wasn't served at a lunch counter, we organized demos, first a small one of our project members and then bigger and bigger ones of black youth, mostly teenagers, to demonstrate in front of the store. We were surrounded by a screaming racist

mob. Each day our forces became bigger, but so did the mobs. The cops would come in their squad cars, which had Confederate flag license plates on the front, and laugh at the whole scene.

Luckily there was a longshore union in Gulfport, a segregated, black local of the International Longshoremen's Association. I heard there were negotiations with the union president, the mayor and the chief of police. The union president said that if we were killed or arrested, the longshoremen would go on strike and shut the port. Well, that worked! We weren't arrested or killed and the lunch counter began serving blacks.

I wish I could have met these longshoremen. They were just the power in the background, but I was impressed with them. SNCC didn't know what to do with them, but it seemed to me that there must be some left group out there who knew how to organize the power of labor. In the Spartacist League's successful anti-Klan united fronts, I saw that power consciously mobilized in the fight for black freedom.

## “Every Dime Buys a Bullet”

When I was in Mississippi, pacifism was wearing pretty thin. First of all, the Los Angeles Watts upheaval broke out. Martin Luther King said that “as powerful a police force as possible” should be brought to L.A. to stop it. SNCC activists on my project cursed King for that. To SNCC members like me he was a sell-out. James Forman commented that “the Mississippi Summer Project was clearly a popular struggle. It confirmed the absolute necessity for armed self-defense.” We experienced that, too. Worried about the threats to our house in Gulfport, we moved out for a while. With another young white woman, I went to stay with a friendly black family. They kept insisting that there would be “no violence, no violence.” When I looked around the room, I could see that every guy there was holding a rifle or a shotgun. I just thought, “Well, this is the kind of ‘nonviolence’ I’m for!”

The white SNCC worker I drove back to California with at the end of the summer had spent his time in the Mississippi Delta. They had encouraged black people to vote and assured them they would provide protection if they did. He spent every night up touring the black section of town with several guys and some shotguns watching for nightriders or Klansmen. As we have always said about gun control, “If guns are banned, only the cops and the Klan will have guns.”

In fact, armed self-defense was considerably more popular than people now realize. There was the courageous Robert F. Williams, Marine veteran and author of *Negroes With Guns*, in Monroe, North

Carolina, and the Louisiana-based Deacons for Defense and Justice. Williams, who as head of a local NAACP chapter organized armed self-defense against the Klan, was disowned by the national NAACP and hounded out of the country by the FBI. The Deacons for Defense also protected civil rights activists. The Socialist League raised money for the Deacons for Defense, with the slogan “Every Dime Buys a Bullet.”

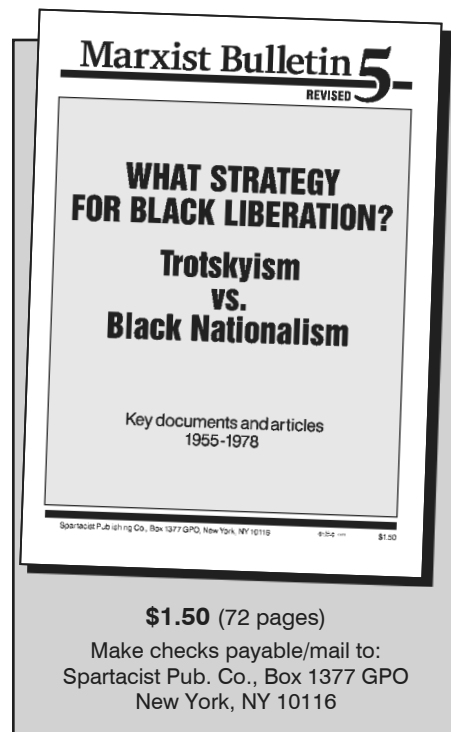
At one point, the people on my project insisted that we talk to the FBI. As a red-diaper baby, I was horrified, but I couldn't convince my co-workers not to do it. I was always convinced that talking to them set us up for the bomb threats that made us have to move out and stay with the black family.

The illusions in the FBI were part of the illusions in the federal government. In fact, the FBI rode with the Klan! In the '60s, FBI informers held top-level leadership roles in the Klan. In 1965, nearly 2,000 of the FBI-estimated 10,000 Klan members were their own informants; that is one out of five! The Klan couldn't move without the FBI knowing it beforehand. They weren't there to disrupt the Klan; they were loyal dual members of both organizations.

The most notorious FBI “informant” in the Klan was Gary Rowe, who was involved in the infamous 1963 church bombing in Birmingham that killed four little black girls. He was also in the car, and may have been the actual triggerman who shot down civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo on the highway outside Selma, Alabama, after the troops were removed from the Selma-to-Montgomery march. This was government policy directed not just by J. Edgar Hoover but by liberals like Kennedy. As an arm of the state, the FBI’s mission was to derail, disrupt and “neutralize” black and red organizations. And if that meant cooperation with the Klan, then that’s what it meant.

Finally I will comment that one of the other SNCC projects I liked was a little library that we ran out of our small office. We had been sent a book collection by liberals in the North. Since the public library had only been open to blacks for one year in Gulfport, it was still pretty dangerous for a black person to go there. So our library was much appreciated and everyone was very careful to return the books. When things were slow, I read up on black history, trying to work my way through W.E.B. Du Bois on Reconstruction. I also read Booker T. Washington's autobiography. I had never heard of him before, but I was immediately horrified at his apologies for segregation and his opposition to the fight for equality. I announced to my fellow SNCC members that he was nothing but an Uncle Tom. For years I thought this was the basic position of leftists, black and white. Can you imagine my surprise to see that today black intellectuals are trying to rehabilitate Booker T. Washington. [See "'Separate but Equal' Poison: The Rehabilitation of Booker T. Washington," WV No. 1000, 13 April.]

[TO BE CONTINUED]



# Transit Workers...

(continued from page 3)

On the picket lines, transit workers were pumped up, solid and determined. Other city workers with expired union contracts intently followed the strike. The shutdown of transit drew support from working people across the city and beyond at a time when U.S. imperialism was waist deep in its occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and outrage at the racist abandonment of black people after Hurricane Katrina was still simmering. Pickets were cheered in poor and working-class areas near maintenance barns and bus depots. As revolutionary Marxist leader V.I. Lenin commented a century ago, whereas liberals “tell the workers: ‘You are strong when you have the sympathy of “society”,’ the Marxist tells the workers something different, namely: ‘You have the sympathy of “society” when you are strong”’ (“Economic and Political Strikes,” May 1912).

Strike headquarters should have dispatched flying pickets to shut down the Long Island Rail Road, Metro-North, New Jersey Transit and PATH commuter lines, cutting off public transport in and out of Manhattan. That did not happen. By the second day of the strike, the Local 100 leadership was under mounting pressure not only from the class enemy but also from numerous labor officials to throw in the towel. The city union tops let Local 100 hang out to dry, refusing even to mouth support for the strike, while the scabherders of the TWU International told strikers to return to work.

By issuing anti-strike injunctions and fines, the courts provided an object lesson in their role as part of the repressive capitalist state apparatus, together with the cops and prisons. Even as it was feeling the pressure from the capitalist state agencies, the Local 100 bureaucracy remained firmly committed to its class-collaborationist strategy. For the umpteenth time, it trotted out Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association president Pat Lynch as the union’s “ally,” reinforcing the suicidal notion that the cops, whose job is to break strikes and terrorize the ghettos, are fellow workers. Local 100 officials went on to endorse Democrat Spitzer, the single person most responsible for bringing the hammer down on the TWU, in his gubernatorial bid the following year.

After barely 60 hours, the TWU leadership folded the strike with no real gains to show for it. The sellout encouraged Spitzer and the courts to slam individual strikers and Local 100 with heavy fines. The Toussaint leadership only complained about the “excessive” character of the state’s vendetta against the unions. A substandard contract was eventually forced on transit workers through a nearly year-long arbitration process after they first voted it down. With the union in retreat, the automatic dues checkoff was punitively taken away by the courts in June 2007. It was restored 17 months later only after Toussaint agreed

to sign a “no strike” pledge.

Ending the popular walkout as it was on the upswing had a corrosive effect on many workers, as the consciousness of labor’s power they acquired during the strike rapidly eroded. Moving from feeling strong on the picket lines to becoming increasingly cynical about the union, many drew the wrong lessons. Out of anger at Toussaint & Co., half the membership fell behind in their dues after the checkoff system was stopped. With one-third of the workforce still in arrears, the cohesiveness of the union has been torn and its financial resources diminished.

Across the country, the abolition of dues checkoff, along with “right to work” laws, is being wielded as a club against unions. When the capitalists and their state agencies take away dues checkoff, these efforts to bankrupt the unions must be combatted. But dues checkoff is actually a form of financial blackmail, leaving a union’s money in the hands of the bosses. The arrangement allows labor officials to evade the responsibility of facing the membership to collect dues. It also expresses the bureaucrats’ desire for harmony with the bosses, since mak-



**Bus workers picket at outbreak of powerful December 2005 transit strike. TWU tops folded on third day of strike, gravely weakening union.**

ing the companies the unions’ bankers undercuts the capacity to strike. Of course, the labor traitors are generally more interested in wasting the union war chest on electing capitalist politicians. Workers must fight for the unions to directly control dues collection.

### For a Class-Struggle Perspective!

The lie of the partnership of labor and capital preached by the TWU bureaucrats finds expression in their patriotic salute to U.S. imperialism’s “national interests” and their enlisting the union to act as an adjunct to the cops in the reactionary “war on terror.” In every election, the labor officialdom mobilizes votes for the Democrats, sowing the vain hope that these representatives of capital will come to the unions’ aid. Then like clockwork, TWU leaders dispatch teams to go to Albany and Washington to beg for mercy.

With Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo slashing the pensions of state employees, John Samuelsen has hailed the fact that transit new-hires were kept from suffering the worst of the cuts as vindication of such lobbying efforts. But the deal brokered for future transit workers is a concession by the union that further fragments an increasingly divided workforce. While many municipal new-hires will have to work to age 63 to retire, new transit workers retain the right to retire at full pension at age 55 after 25 years of service. However, they will pay more and get less than current transit workers. Refusal to sell out “the unborn” (future hires) was one of the issues that sparked the 2005 strike. Now the bureaucracy is packaging its betrayal of the same workers as a victory.

The Samuelsen leadership has also acquiesced to the reintroduction of the racist union-busting “workfare” program

first rolled out by the MTA in a deal cut with the union in the 1990s. The Work Experience Program (WEP) compels welfare recipients to do work normally done by TWU cleaners in exchange for their paltry government checks. Drafted into near slavery, the WEP workers are treated with racist contempt by the bosses. The TWU must fight to bring WEP workers into the union at full union pay, protections and rights. More broadly, the labor movement should fight for union control of hiring.

Class collaboration is the calling card of *all* wings of the TWU bureaucracy. Take, for example, Train Operators Chair and Executive Board member Steve Downs, who is supported by the fake-socialist outfit Solidarity. Downs was a founding member of the now defunct New Directions caucus, an instrument for promoting the careers of phony “militants” inside the union. Before helping propel Toussaint into office, for years New Directions brought court suits against their opponents in the union, treacherous actions that opened up the TWU to meddling and intervention by the bosses’ state. Continuing to do his part in chaining workers to the capitalist



Agins/NY Times

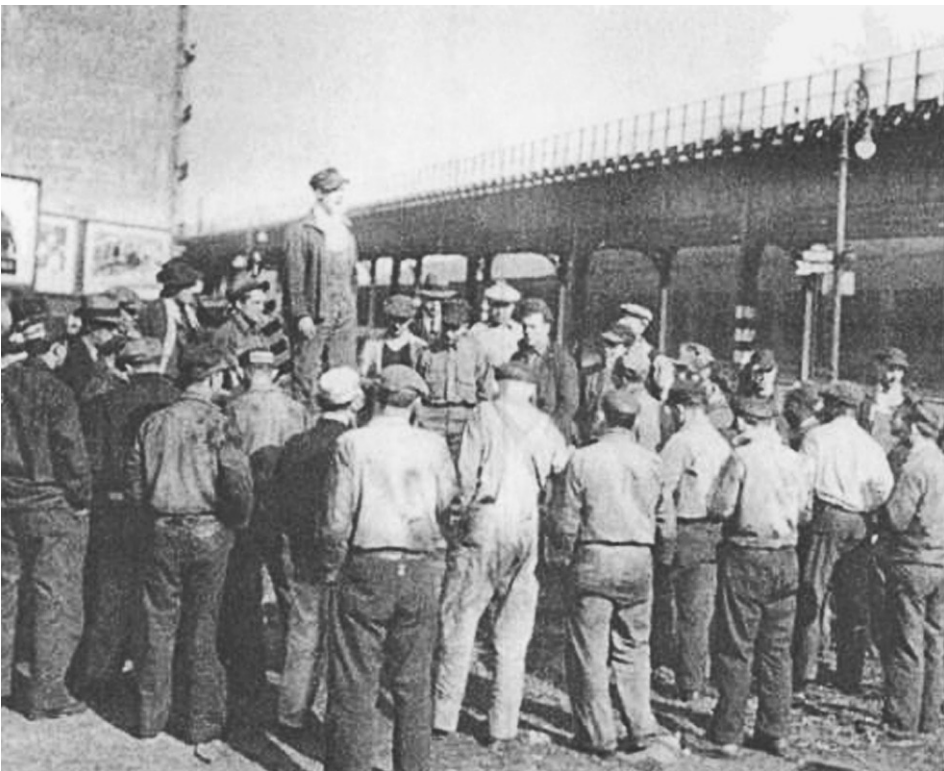
**December 2002: Then Local 100 president Roger Toussaint embraces MTA chairman Peter Kalikow after announcement of sellout contract.**

has meant engineering a bailout for the auto bosses that slashed workers’ wages, expanding domestic repression in the name of the “war on terror,” and raining devastation down on Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond. Alarmed by Obama’s waning popularity, the Local 100 tops were in the vanguard of those union officials who threw support to the Occupy protests last year. The labor bureaucracy sees in Occupy’s populism a vehicle to rekindle enthusiasm for the Democrats in the November elections.

The global economic crisis that set the current union-busting assault on public workers in motion is the product of the anarchic capitalist system of production for profit. From transit workers clinging to their pensions to families trying to keep their homes, working people are being sacrificed to the vultures of finance capital.

There is a burning need for a working-class counteroffensive—including a fight for free, quality health care and education for all, for all pensions to be guaranteed by the government, for free mass transit and other vital services. A struggle by public workers to defend their hard-won gains and expand social services could mobilize broad support among working people and the poor. A determined, militant campaign to organize the masses of unorganized workers would go a long way to breathing new life into the unions. In waging such struggles, the unions will have to champion the fight for black freedom and the defense of foreign-born workers, demanding full citizenship rights for all immigrants.

To transform the unions into class-struggle battalions will require breaking the chains that tie them to the exploiters, above all the support to the Democratic Party. The key to unchaining the power of the working class is the building of a revolutionary workers party. Such a party would not only fight against the immediate ravages of capitalism but also would lead the struggle to expropriate the parasitic bourgeoisie through socialist revolution, establishing a workers government where those who labor rule. ■



TWU

**1938: TWU organizer addresses lunchtime meeting across street from 207th Street shop in Manhattan.**

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# Down With French Colonial Repression!

## Youth Revolt on Island of Réunion

The following is a translation of a March 9 leaflet issued by the *Ligue Trotskyste de France*, section of the *International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist)*.

On the island of Réunion, a week of protests took place last month against high prices and racist colonial oppression—the daily lot of the majority, especially youth. Now the governor of this colony of French imperialism, the prefect Lalande, boasts about the results: 233 people arrested, 159 of whom were placed in police custody. Most of these are youth. Twenty people were put in jail, with sentences ranging up to three years (*Libération*, 27 February). Today, the island is no longer under the media spotlight, but repression has not let up: On March 1 three youth were sentenced to prison, one of them for one month and another for three, for having set fire to a trash can, which slightly damaged the door of a post office. A week later, a 36-year-old man was jailed for one month for throwing stones toward police. The police terror and speedy trials are reminiscent of the crackdown after the revolt in the French *banlieues* [suburban ghettos] in 2005, when youth rebelled against the racist police terror and oppression they experience daily under French capitalism. ***The LTF demands the immediate release of all youth arrested and imprisoned during the recent protests! Drop the charges! French troops, riot police: Out of Réunion!***

Given the contempt of the French bourgeoisie for the masses in Réunion, including youth, a social explosion was to be expected. Sixty percent of young people on the island are unemployed, and they simply see no future before them. With the economic crisis, the situation is getting worse. Half the population of Réunion lives below the poverty line. In France, the need for labor has been declining for several decades, and the racist rulers of decaying French imperialism do not intend to spend any money to educate and train young people in the colonies. The situation is the same for working-class youth in France, especially for ethnic and racial minorities. In Réunion, illiteracy is widespread, affecting nearly one in four adults. This is particularly due to the island's colonial status, under which French is the only



Bouhet/AFP

Youth protest in Réunion capital of Saint-Denis on February 23.



official language, despite the fact that Creole is the mother tongue of the majority of the population. “French only” is a racist language policy. ***For full equality of all languages, with no special status for French!***

What sparked the youth revolt in Réunion was in fact a protest by the National Federation of Truckers (FNTR), an employers’ organization, which blocked the fuel depot on the island to protest the exorbitant cost of petroleum products. The FNTR urged people to take to

the streets to help it confront the cops. This action against the price of gasoline spread like wildfire, and the protests and riots spread from one city to another. The trucking bosses soon distanced themselves from the youth and left them defenseless against repression. Just hours after its call to action, the FNTR made a deal with the prefect and began to call on the truckers to end the blockades.

Youth as such have practically no social power. The labor movement of Réunion, as well as in France, must take up the fight against poverty and colonial racism imposed on the vast majority of islanders. There must be no illusions: if [Socialist Party candidate] François Hol-

lande is elected president in May, this will in no way alter the endemic poverty and the daily struggle for survival by the majority of the island’s population. The last major riots, in the neighborhood of Le Chaudron, took place in 1991 under [Socialist president François] Mitterrand, and the crackdown was as harsh as today.

Some 175,000 people from Réunion live in France, representing a quarter of the population of the island. They are integrated into the working class, mainly in transportation and hospitals. The French labor movement as a whole, not just workers from Réunion, must protest the repression in Réunion. The iron fist of the state comes down hardest on France’s colonial subjects, as well as on minority youth, Roma [Gypsies] and undocumented immigrants. But with the economic crisis and deepening poverty, the bourgeoisie continually adds to its arsenal of repression and renews its attacks against all workers, who are the only ones with the social power to paralyze the country and cut off the flow of profits by carrying out strikes.

Ultimately, the only way to eradicate poverty and colonial oppression once and for all is to fight for international socialist revolution and to build a revolutionary party that is determined to lead the working class to power. The fate of the socialist revolution in Réunion is indissolubly linked with the struggle of workers in France and nearby South Africa to overthrow capitalism. A new generation of militant leaders will arise from today’s social struggles and those to come. It is crucial to fight for the right of self-determination of Réunion and the other remaining French colonies. As we are opposed to French colonialism, we would be in favor of independence. But we do not demand it now because at present the Réunion islanders (like the people of Guadeloupe and Martinique) do not aspire to independence, fearing that, in this period of imperialist depredations, their already precarious situation would worsen.

Socialist revolution will lay the basis for a rationally planned economy to produce what is needed, instead of producing for profit. It will allow a qualitative development of the productive forces and open the way for economic development that will truly end the struggle for survival in countries under the jackboot of imperialism. ***For a socialist federation of Southern Africa! For the Socialist United States of Europe! ■***

## Haiti...

(continued from page 12)

disease is on the rise is a damning indictment of imperialism’s subjugation of the masses of the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa and Asia. As we wrote when a cholera outbreak ravaged Lima, the capital of Peru, in 1991:

“Virtually wiped out in the 20th century, large-scale epidemics of cholera have reappeared in direct proportion to the increasing poverty and backwardness inflicted by the Wall Street bloodsuckers upon their semi-colonial slaves.... “Cholera is not a natural disaster. Like the waves of famine lashing Africa in recent years, it is a manmade disaster. More specifically, this epidemic is a *capitalist* disaster. It is a direct consequence of imperialism, which squeezes the life out of the poor to fill the coffers of the capitalist bankers.”

—“Debt and Death in Latin America: Cholera and Capitalism,” WV No. 527, 24 May 1991

Cholera can be stopped by the introduction of the most basic public health measures. But such needs cannot be met

in impoverished countries like Haiti, devastated by plunder and brutal repression under imperialist subjugation. The only way out of the misery imposed on the Haitian masses lies in socialist revolution throughout the Caribbean and, crucially, in the North American imperialist heartland. The social base for workers revolution is exceedingly narrow in a country as destitute and ground down as Haiti. Struggles by the Haitian masses against imperialist depredation must be linked to class and social struggles in the neighboring Dominican Republic, where Haitians are a sizable component of the proletariat, and elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Our perspective—for a workers and peasants government in Haiti as part of a socialist federation of the Caribbean—is inextricably linked to the fight for the revolutionary overthrow of U.S. imperialism. In diaspora, Haitians, Jamaicans and others can play a crucial role as a bridge to the rest of the American proletariat, particularly to other black workers. The key is to build revolutionary workers parties—sections of a reformed Fourth International—to lead the workers in this struggle. ■

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# WORKERS VANGUARD

## UN Whitewashes Role in Epidemic's Outbreak



Ben Depp



Saman/Magnum

# Haiti: Cholera Scourge Continues

The outbreak of cholera that erupted nine months after the catastrophic January 2010 earthquake in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, has now killed more than 7,000 people, making it the largest current cholera epidemic in the world. Almost 500,000 people in this desperately impoverished country—some 5 percent of the population—have been infected since the start of the outbreak. The cholera bacteria, which had previously not existed in Haiti, was introduced by newly arrived Nepalese troops, part of the UN occupation force known as MINUSTAH that has occupied Haiti on behalf of the imperialists since 2004. The disease spread like wildfire due to the lack of a safe public water supply in the country, where untreated sewage is simply dumped into streams and gutters. Last month, as the rainy season began, the number of new cases suddenly rose again (to 77 per day) after declining since last summer.

MINUSTAH has always denied introducing the cholera bacteria to Haiti. However, there is now a mountain of evidence proving that UN troops did just that—and that UN officials have engaged in a deliberate and cynical cover-up of responsibility. UN officials obstructed a medical investigation of the outbreak by prohibiting Haitian health officials from entering the base where it originated to examine UN soldiers. They repeated the lie that the base used sealed septic tanks that were regularly emptied by a contractor. But shortly after the start of the outbreak, *Al Jazeera* filmed UN troops with shovels “working furiously to contain what looks like a sewage spill” and reported excrement from latrines flowing directly into the river bordering the base (*New York Times*, 31 March).

Despite that evidence, an official UN investigation last year concluded that the epidemic was “not the fault of, or deliberate action of, a group or individual.” Then, last August, researchers in Denmark using DNA analysis reported definitive evidence linking the Haitian cholera bacteria to bacteria in Nepal. The *Times* article reports that the same experts who had conducted the UN investigation now admit privately that the evidence that the cholera came from Nepal is “irrefutable.” But UN officials continue to stonewall. A spokesman for UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared early this month that it is “not possible to be conclusive about how

**Left: Sign at March 8 International Women's Day protest in Haiti reads, “Justice for Women Victims of Cholera—No UN.” Right: Cholera patients languish in hospital in Petite Rivière de l'Artibonite, November 2010.**

cholera was introduced into Haiti.” Needless to say, the UN's efforts to muddle and distort the data have undercut efforts to fight the epidemic.

The UN's responsibility in the outbreak and the subsequent cover-up has greatly deepened popular hostility to the imperialist occupation forces. On 9 December 2011, several thousand people demonstrated at a UN base in St. Marc demanding compensation for people infected with cholera. Renewed outrage against the occupation has also been fed by a video posted online last September showing Uruguayan troops from the UN contingent raping a young Haitian man.

Since 2004 there have been a number of demonstrations against UN “peacekeepers,” who have repeatedly backed violent assaults by the Haitian police on poor communities and on demonstrations against the masses' abject living conditions. In July 2005, hundreds of troops moved by land, sea and air into the Cité Soleil slum in Port-au-Prince, unleashing 22,000 rounds of ammunition and leaving scores of residents dead, including children. During hunger riots in 2008, UN troops fired on crowds, killing several demonstrators.

It was to shore up this bloody occupation force that Barack Obama dispatched 20,000 combat troops in the guise of a “relief effort” soon after the January 2010 earthquake. U.S. imperialism's reoccupation of Haiti aimed to secure military control and support the MINUSTAH force. In a 2008 diplomatic cable released last year by WikiLeaks, former U.S. Ambassador to Haiti, Janet Sanderson, emphasized that the UN force “is an indispensable tool,” producing “real regional security dividends for the U.S.” in “the hemisphere's most troubled country.” The elementary interests of the Haitian masses begin with the demand: *All UN troops out!*

### Hail Cuban Doctors!

Doctors from the Cuban bureaucratically deformed workers state played a crucial role in first identifying cholera in the town of Mirebalais in October 2010. They promptly sounded the alarm about the outbreak, thus lessening the death toll. “We knew cholera from school, but it was hard to believe and see it here because

Haiti didn't have it before” (*New York Times*, 7 November 2011).

The Cuban medical mission, which has provided vital aid for Haitians since 1998, has been highly praised for staying on the front lines to do what they could to fight the epidemic. While Cuban doctors were inundated with patients wasting away from uncontrollable diarrhea, many imperialist-funded aid organizations pulled out as the death rate started to peak late last year. As one UN official put it: “Half of the NGOs are already gone, and the Cubans are still there” (*New York Times*, 7 November 2011). Cuba has been working with officials from Haiti and some other countries to build, staff and equip dozens of small community hospitals and clinics, a measure of the quality of both its own public health system and its high-level medical training.

Cholera is a disease of poverty. Less than 12 percent of the Haitian population has access to potable water delivered through plumbing. Only 17 percent have access to what is termed “improved sanitation,” a category that includes simple pit latrines. Access to such minimal facilities has actually declined since 1990. Almost a third of Haitian children are chronically malnourished. According to UNICEF, malnutrition is responsible for about 60 percent of all deaths of Haitians under the age of 18.

Haiti's unspeakable poverty is a direct product of racist vengeance and imperialist ravages. The Haitian masses have been paying in blood for the revolution carried out under Toussaint L'Ouverture against the French colonial slavocracy over 200 years ago, which culminated in the first independent black state established in the modern era and inspired slave revolts across the Americas. This provoked a frenzy of racist hostility from both France and the then-slaveowning U.S. that has never really receded.

During the past century, the U.S. has repeatedly asserted its domination of Haiti's political and economic life. The U.S. occupied the country from 1915-34 and drowned an anti-imperialist revolt in blood. Washington then installed and propped up a series of brutal, corrupt bourgeois puppet regimes, most infamously that of François “Papa

Doc” Duvalier, who organized the Tonton Macoutes paramilitary thugs and oversaw the killing of 50,000 of his opponents.

Measures imposed by Washington on behalf of American agribusiness further aggravated the impoverishment of the country. In the 1980s, the U.S. pressured the Haitian government to wipe out Creole pigs, an important food source, and substitute U.S. pigs, which did not survive the tropical climate. Following a U.S. military intervention in September 1994, Haiti's production of rice was destroyed after the Clinton administration forced the country to drastically cut tariffs on imported U.S. rice. Haiti, which once imported only 20 percent of its food, now has to import most of its food, at much higher prices. This includes 80 percent of its rice, which was once grown in abundance. In recent years, the poorest Haitians have resorted to eating cakes of dried mud and sugar when prices for rice and other staples are high.

Today, more than two years after the quake, almost half a million displaced people continue to live in tents and tarp-covered shacks. In spite of the millions pledged and crocodile tears shed by the imperialists, almost nothing has been done to rebuild destroyed houses and what little infrastructure existed before the quake. A “recovery commission” headed by Bill Clinton that was supposed to oversee aid spending simply closed up shop last fall.

In January 2011, the Obama administration reversed a moratorium on expelling Haitians from the U.S., which was declared following the quake, and began deporting Haitians convicted of crimes, even minor ones, by the hundreds. Since most “criminal aliens” sent back to Haiti are immediately thrown into the country's overcrowded jails in the middle of the cholera epidemic, the deportations represent a potential death sentence. Indeed, journalists following up on the first group of 27 deportees, all of whom were imprisoned upon their arrival in Haiti, reported that one died of the disease within days of his expulsion from the U.S.

### Imperialist System Condemns Masses to Misery

The World Health Organization estimates that up to 120,000 people die of cholera every year internationally. The fact that this highly treatable and preventable

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