League of Revolutionaries for a New America

Race & Class

National Education Committee
League of Revolutionaries for a New America

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Excerpt: Race in America: A Changing, but Central Question

…Quantitative changes in the economy are incremental, but as they accumulate, they force social changes that appear suddenly and as crisis. Social ideas do not evolve as a reflection of the evolution of the economy. The ruling class will not allow them to do so. The old ideas serve a very important role as a reactionary counter balance to the emergence of revolutionary new ideas. Such old ideas, the hangovers from previous periods, have played a very special role in disorienting radical movements in our country. There is much we must learn from history in this regard.

At the center of these old ideas is the political concept of race and how to deal with it. The question of race was the central issue in preventing the American people from achieving their goals in the Revolutionary War. Those goals, enshrined in our documents of the Revolution, were unattainable for the mass of white toilers while a quarter of the working class was in chains. The question of race was central to frustrating the popular aims of the Civil War. Before abandoning the goal of breaking the political back of the planters, the American people first had to abandon the vision, “And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.” Playing the race card did this.

The question of race was also the central issue that prevented the breakout of the union movement in the 1930’s and 40’s. There was no way to advance and secure the unions without organizing the South. The unions could not or would not take this step. The alternative was to create the conditions for the trade unions to become something akin to a labor front and an appendage of the State Department. Revolutionaries and people of good will fought every step of the way, but the lack of understanding of the political rather than biological nature of the race question led to their defeat.

As we enter this new epoch of transformation, the race question again presents itself as a changing but central question. This time we dare not fail.

Discussion

- Old ideas function as a reactionary counter balance to the emergence of revolutionary new ideas. How?

- The political concept of race and how to deal with it has prevented virtually every popular, radical and working class movement from achieving their aims and goals. How? Please give examples
Excerpt: Program of the Dispossessed is Key to Victory of Revolution

… Despite the fact that the Civil War was a war between two contradictory wings of the bourgeoisie, that is between the industrial bourgeoisie and the agrarian bourgeoisie, it was one of the truly great revolutions in history. When that war ended, it ended with the greatest expropriation of property the world had ever known, the greatest redistribution of wealth that had ever taken place up until that time. It expropriated $4 billion in slave property and returned it to the slaves themselves.

The general conditions of the working class and the possibilities they faced were decisively and materially changed by the Civil War. However, they weren't changed ideologically. The concept of races - superior and inferior races - was not destroyed with slavery. The second class citizenship of the Freedmen was accepted by the militant workers and it spelled the doom of the movement.

All kinds of social elements are drawn into the revolutionary process. One of the contradictions of revolution is that the most consistently revolutionary class is always the least prepared to carry out the revolutionary work. They are uneducated, they are disorganized, they are fighting one another. Therefore, it is almost impossible for elements of the revolutionary class to act to seize actual control of that revolution. Who seizes control of that revolution are groupings that are articulate, that have the ability to publish books, that can speak and write. This social element takes partial, compromised positions. They take partial positions because whereas they were opposed to the existing conditions, they only wanted partial resolutions to these existing conditions. They did not want to do away with the totality of the existing conditions. They wanted to reform these existing conditions within the revolution.

This period of our history proves that if the revolutionary mass does not take the program of the most oppressed and exploited section of society as the program of the revolution it cannot succeed. The only consistently revolutionary class in the 1865 to 1872-73 period was comprised of the Freedman and those landless whites that happened to gravitate around them. This revolutionary class could not live without the breakup of the plantation system and the seizure of power of at least the workers and the petty bourgeoisie, (petty bourgeoisie being the tradesmen, small farmers and small producers). Despite the tremendous revolutionary history they had in Austria, and in Germany, and in France, to some degree in England, the workers in the United States never understood or they rejected the idea that they had to take the program of the Freedman as the program of the revolution.

Now let's look at the other lesson of this period. If the revolutionary classes do not reject the social ideology of the their enemy they cannot win.

I want to restate that the line of march is the dialectic of change in objective conditions and the subjective response of the masses and, conversely, how the results of the mass response immobilizes or frees up the objective conditions for further motion. There
is no separation between the objective and the subjective process. One absolutely influences the other. The objective process is definitely impacted by what people do.

During the period the objective situation was moving rapidly towards a democratization of the country. It was stopped and once it stopped, the reaction took over. Despite the tremendous upheavals, the workers never gave up the social or political ideology of the capitalists and they never took the program of the Freedman as their program. The result was the concentration of the wealth in the hands of the few. The Robber Barons did not rise from nowhere. They arose from the inability of the mass of the American people to democratize this country and redistribute its wealth at the end of the Civil War. Here, we see how the objective process can be turned, terminated, or accelerated by the subjective.

Discussion

• “The general conditions of the working class and the possibilities they faced were decisively and materially changed by the Civil War. However, they weren't changed ideologically.” Why? What was the result?

• If the revolutionary classes do not reject the social ideology of their enemy they cannot win.
Excerpt: New Form of Racism Emerging

...Change in social motion is difficult to grasp because the content begins to change before the form. What revolutionaries must grasp is that a new form of racism is developing, directed against an emerging new class that includes the “ghetto blacks,” the “illegal immigrant” and the white, so-called “trailer trash.” In other words, the class and cultural differences with the ruling class, not color, is emerging as the ideological basis for the savage economic assault against the poor.

...An economy cannot stand alone. There must be a political structure that protects it, including laws, ideas and institutions. The struggles that are taking place today are over how to guarantee that the economy can continue to develop. All kinds of ideas are created, reshaped or thrown out according to whether they politically facilitate the development of the economy.

The concept of race, like any other political concept, has always served the needs of the economy. It changes with every change in the economy, because the economy demands that change if it is to move forward.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two or three Blacks were lynched each week in the South. Lynching was seldom applied to Blacks until after the Civil War. Up to that time, almost all those who were lynched were white. There were changes in the economy and the Blacks had to be driven back into some kind of semi-slavery in order to maintain the profitability of the southern economy, which was absolutely indispensable to the northern textile industry and the U.S. economy overall.

...Racism in America has been directed against the Irish, the Native Americans, the Latin Americans, and the Asians among others. Most of all it has centered on the African Americans because it is a political question. Politics is the art of the class struggle. Nothing could be more artful than to use a myth to convince literally millions of people to do harm to themselves in the interests of the people they are struggling against. Yet this is precisely what has happened in our history. It happened because the American people became convinced that they were dealing with a biological rather than a political question. We emphasize this point because the great economic and political changes taking place are having a profound effect on the politics of race and color.

There was a time when a person's race depended on where they were born, not the color of their skin. Race became a color question when the African slave trade enslaved all kinds of different nationalities whose common characteristic was their color. This linking of color and race for capitalist exploitation was further consolidated and spread through the worldwide expansion of imperialism.

We also must never forget that the brutality of racism was not always directed solely by color differences. The racist nationalism of the fascist Japanese government against the peoples of Asia, or the slaughter and enslavement of the Slavic peoples by fascist Germany are only recent examples. In history we see racism in a religious garb as well.
The thing that is clear is that racism, no matter its veneer, facilitates exploitation and is an integral part of capitalism. Therefore, as the needs of capitalism change, the forms of racism will change to accommodate it.

…this dangerous situation facing the African American poor is not happening in a vacuum. It is part of a process that is pulling millions of all colors and nationalities into poverty. Today, the economy is losing millions of jobs. Nearly 50.7 million Americans, or one in six, are without healthcare. An estimated 50 million people struggled to put food on the table last year. The demand at food banks is up. One in four children is hungry. Growing numbers of Americans are going without other necessities such as water and heat in their homes.

But it is not simply the growth of poverty that is significant today. And the results of the process are broader than the social problems caused by racism. It is acknowledged now that, in fact, the so-called white underclass is larger and growing faster than the Black. What we are dealing with is not an “underclass,” but a new class. Today, this new class has already formed a new economic section of the working class and it is in the process of creating a new social and political entity.

…The concept of race based on color has to go out the window, just like the concept of race based on geographic locale had to go out the window. It is not possible to have a Black president and sustain the idea of color-based racism.

But we do have racism. But it’s more and more being shifted into economic status. More and more if you are part of the America where your parents didn’t have a job, you don’t have a job, you went to a school where you can barely read and write – you might have the same skin color, but you are not the same as others who are not in that situation.

…The ruling class uses the particular weapons of history against the different sections of the new class, but the ruling class is aiming its fire at anyone — regardless of color — who presents a threat to the existing order. They are attempting to stigmatize and isolate the new class as a class.

…Two contradictory processes are developing simultaneously in America today. Under the pressure of economic privation there always will be a tendency for any oppressed or defenseless person to shift the blame to someone else, rather than attack the overwhelming power that is hurting him or her. We are going to see different sections of this new class fighting each other.

At the same time, the commonality of their economic situation is going to compel them to unite, if only at first on specific issues. As the foundation for color-racism is being destroyed there is a growing economic attack against the new class — on their education, their housing standards, their job benefits, an attack on the very infrastructure of their lives. There is no way for them to resist this kind of pressure unless they seek out and find a political expression for the objective reality of their changing lives.

We are dealing with a political question. The new class is already forming along the line of a unity based on what is practical and real and possible. But ultimately, it cannot
carry out its historic mission unless it becomes conscious of that mission, unless it understands itself as a class, unless it sees its common interests as a class. This is the revolutionaries’ role, to illuminate the meaning of the current struggles in order to develop the consciousness, the thinking, the sense of self the class must have to carry out its mission. Strategy, direction, vision and the diverse ways in which the revolutionaries disseminate and share this message all turn on an accurate assessment of the race question as it is today in America.

Discussion

• “The concept of race, like any other political concept, has always served the needs of the economy. It changes with every change in the economy, because the economy demands that change if it is to move forward.” Can you give historical examples of this?

• “Nothing could be more artful than to use a myth to convince literally millions of people to do harm to themselves in the interests of the people they are struggling against.” Why?

• Racism, no matter its veneer, facilitates exploitation and is an integral part of capitalism.

• But we do have racism. But it’s more and more being shifted into economic status.

• “Two contradictory processes are developing simultaneously in America today.” What are they? What is the role of the new class? What is the role of revolutionaries?
Excerpt: Race in America: A Changing, but Central Question

…As the economic basis of segregation weakened, so did the social and political cohesiveness of the African-American community. To the degree that segregation weakened, the African-American community, as such, disintegrated. As possibilities developed, the better situated Black upper class moved away from the ghetto and became a part of the Anglo-American bourgeoisie. In the main, they continue to pander to the Black masses, since they still need a social base for their economic and social advancement. Actually, the two classes have little in common, and both sides are accelerating the drift toward class orientation.

A broad strata of civil, military, and police officers and corporate, educational, and government officials are Black, giving the impression that there is an end to segregation, and the struggle around class has taken the place of the struggle around race. Some revolutionaries hold to the idea that race is still the predominant factor. Others are dropping the question of race and declaring that today there is only the question of class. Race and racism are political weapons to facilitate class exploitation and should never be placed in opposition to class. It is not a question of either/or. Both factors are at play, and the question is which factor predominates under what circumstance and in which direction the general motion is going.

There is no question that the old-style segregation and lynch-mob form of racism has declined. Race is a political factor and must change its form to function in changing circumstance. Today, the salient aspect of the social struggle is the intensifying war against the new proletarian class created by electronics. For historical reasons, the most vulnerable sector is Black. The Draconian slashing of the so-called safety net has been accomplished by presenting it as a Black thing. The attacks against education and health care are always carefully couched in terms of race.

This political maneuvering is taking place within the reality of a growing social consciousness within this new proletarian class. The ruling class cannot abandon the weapon of race, since it is historically evolved and an integral part of American politics.

While remaining fully conscious of the viability of the race question, we revolutionaries concentrate on the question of class, which is the arising and progressive aspect. There has never been a complete separation of the workers according to color. The decline of the racial designation of work and the commonality of unemployment is creating opportunities for class solidarity on an entirely new level. Previously, what unity there was, was built around common problems in the shop. Today we can speak of building class unity – something far beyond workplace problems and in the arena of political struggle.
Discussion

- Race and racism are political weapons to facilitate class exploitation and the goals of the ruling class. Race and racism should never be placed in opposition to class.

- Race is a political factor and must change its form to function in the new changing circumstance. Today, key aspect of the social struggle is the intensifying war against the new proletarian class created by electronics.
Excerpt: Charlottesville – No Going Back

…the battle lines have been drawn. There is no going back. Both during, and after Charlottesville, we see a tremendous outpouring — a passionate, intense striving for social unity — that is making a clear break with the past and its old divisive ideas of white supremacy, bigotry, and racism. People by the tens of thousands are coming out all over the country, and the world, to take a stand: an injury to one is an injury to all. We stand in unity and solidarity with all of our sisters and brothers who suffer from exploitation and oppression.

The fascists are not simply the racist gangs, like those we saw in Charlottesville; they play their role. The real threat is the ruling class. It cannot bring back jobs or prosperity, with an increasingly laborless economy that is irrevocably broken. The ruling class understands that, in order to control a working class in rebellion against its conditions, they must transform the State into a direct, brutal dictatorship, a militarized police state. Trump plays his role by clearing the way for a section of the American people to accept fascist solutions.

The fascist offensive is an attack upon the lives of the workers. Millions of working people of all nationalities and colors are seeing their jobs eliminated, or reduced to contingent low-wage labor, leading to families being thrown out onto the streets. The response of the ruling class to the growing hunger is to cut food stamps. Millions more are being denied access to health care. For many more an education is becoming unattainable. The demands for a decent life are at the heart of the outrage around the country and the world, and this is the essence of the fight against fascism today.

The impulses toward unity and the deep morality of our class must be infused with the knowledge that the world they are already fighting for is possible today. They must come to see that achieving this vision will take transforming society in their own interests, and that class unity is a condition of them moving toward that end.
Discussion:

• The ruling class is a threat: they must transform the State into a direct, brutal dictatorship, a militarized police state.

• The demands for a decent life are at the heart of the outrage around the country and the world, and this is the essence of the fight against fascism today.

• Class unity is more possible today than ever, for objective and subjective reasons. Objectively, the equality of poverty is a growing, material reality. Subjectively, ideas of equality have taken root among the masses in our country as never before.

The long nightmare of conquest, division and exploitation is reaching its end!

Reading List
http://rallycomrades.lrna.org/2012/05/new-form-of-racism-emerging/
http://www.lrna.org/archive/rally/15.04/rc.15.04.program.html
http://rallycomrades.lrna.org/2013/01/race-and-the-new-class/
http://rallycomrades.lrna.org/2017/08/editors-charlottesville-no-going-back/