

The Goal of a Cadre Group is Class War

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There have been two main discussions on the list recently. One has been over the September 11 events, the other over race traitor vs. settler analyses of white supremacy. Although these discussions have been independent of each other, for the most part, we would like to suggest that there is a common thread to them. Specifically, the argument that the September 11 events were justifiable attacks on an imperialist state and the argument that colonialism is the key to understanding race in the U.S. both lack a class analysis. We believe, however, that a class analysis is central to understanding the significance of the September events as well as the American racial order-and therefore to the building of a revolutionary cadre group. Further, we believe it is our position on class rather than on terrorism or white supremacy that fundamentally distinguishes our (Ruckus's) politics from other positions taken on this list.

Terror and class war

The American left has shown a surprising lack of attention to class in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. This is evident in two common left responses to 9-11 and the war on Afghanistan. The first response is to denounce the United States government and detail its crimes against the Afghan people and Third World nations. These analyses are generally true; some of them are even useful (see www.counterpunch.org for the best of them). But ticking off a list of imperialist atrocities committed by the U.S. is not a class analysis, nor does it provide any insight on how to end this war-and begin the class war. This is evident in that this approach has failed to provide any alternative to current American antiterrorist policy other than to call for some vague and toothless international tribunal to indict Osama bin Laden and bring him to "justice."

The second position, expressed by several people on this list, is to assert that terrorism against the U.S. is a justifiable tactic against an imperialist state. As J- wrote on this list, "When the 3rd world attacks the 1st world I will always support the 3rd world. When the poor attack the rich I will always support the poor. I will accept even the excesses of these attacks."

J-'s post prompted a heated exchange on the list. Much of the debate focused on political violence and posturing, whether terrorism is a legitimate tactic, and whether the attacks killed elites or working people. We don't think these are the fundamental issues. Generally, there is no "pacifism as pathology" problem on this list. Political posturing is also not what's at stake here. Nor is the debate about the class composition of who was killed. Poor people always die disproportionately in wars, even just ones.

Instead, we believe the key issue is class. Specifically, those who see the September 11 attacks as justifiable aggression against an imperialist state lack a class analysis of the forces attacking the U.S. and express a deep skepticism that the American working class will ever have revolutionary potential.

Terrorism is random attacks on civilians with no intention to achieve power or gain a military advantage. Its function is precisely to terrorize. It may or may not be performed by a state; thus it includes Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip and the U.S. bombing of Iraq as well as Al Qaeda's recent attacks. The problem with terrorism from our perspective is that it usually stems from either the lack of a mass base by the organization carrying it out or an anti-humanitarian impulse that reflects the organization's reactionary politics. The Symbionese Liberation Army launched attacks and kidnappings in the U.S. with the intent of promoting class struggle, but they were driven to engage in terrorism because they completely lacked a mass base for their politics.

Al Qaeda, on the other hand, clearly represents a mass base, but their politics are more akin to fascism than to revolutionary struggle. This is evident not only in their politics but in the source of their support: lower-middle and working class Muslims in the Middle East and Western Asia who face uncertain futures and/or a shaky class status. In other words, precisely the strata Hitler recruited from.

Support for terrorism reflects an all-too-easy belief that any attack on imperialism is progressive. But we revolutionaries don't face a battle between rich and poor or imperialist and anti-imperialist. Instead, we face a three-cornered fight: neoliberalism vs. a fascist/fundamentalist resistance to it (Al Qaeda, Pat Buchanan, etc.) vs. a revolutionary response (the Zapatistas, etc.). We have to fight on two fronts, just like the Spanish anarchists (against Franco and liberals/Communists) and the Russian communists (against Germans and the Czarists).

Support for terrorism also reflects a deep pessimism regarding the American working class. It implicitly assumes that Americans are inherently imperialist, therefore any sort of attack against them is justified. This sounds radical, but what this position really does is avoid the difficult work of building a movement. It positions American revolutionaries as cheerleaders for heinous acts rather than agitators whose goal is to organize a revolutionary American proletariat.

Settlerism and class

In a Sept. 19 message, H- asked whether political unity for the cadre organization we propose needs to be based strictly on a race traitor or settler analysis of white supremacy. This is an excellent question. Our answer is that differences between the race traitor and settler analyses of race are not nearly as significant as are their differences over class. Basically, settlerism is deeply skeptical that an American working class exists or can ever be revolutionary. For example, here's what M- wrote in a September 13 post:

“The BTR statement is predicated on two fundamental political errors. First, it situates ‘whiteness’ exclusively in relation/opposition to Blackness and racial slavery. Second, it proposes a strategy based around the notion of an ‘American working class’ as an agent of revolutionary change. These positions discount the central importance of land and of settler colonialism in the creation of capitalism and of white supremacy. Whiteness developed, (and not only in America or the US), not only out of race-based chattel slavery, but out of the conquest and settlement of a vast land mass and the genocidal annihilation of its people. Empire was a project not solely of the ruling class but of other classes whose relationship to the means of production was and is mediated not only by white skin privilege but by a social relationship among people and between people and nature based on private ownership of land, and particularly of the private expropriation of commonly held land and of OTHER PEOPLE'S LAND.”

The task of a revolutionary organization, according to this perspective, is to create a movement against colonialism that will return “other people's land” to them. It does so by demonstrating solidarity with indigenous peoples, defending their sovereignty over ancestral lands, and fighting against “settlerism, colonialism, and imperialism/capitalism,” to again quote M-.

We agree that colonialism and imperialism have been devastating forces throughout the globe. We also agree that indigenous sovereignty must be respected and, where possible, reestablished. But the central difficulty with his argument is that it doesn't know what to do with the white working class specifically and the American working class generally. According to settlerism, the

white working class is inherently reactionary: as settlers, their primary interest is in seizing land and exploiting the labor of colonized peoples. As such, it will never be a revolutionary force. To the extent that peoples of color in the U.S. consent to and profit from the global system of colonialism/imperialism, they are part of the problem, too.

The purpose of a cadre group given this analysis is to act in solidarity with colonized peoples, not to build a working class movement. In fact, settler ideology sets itself firmly against building what Marx calls a “class-for-itself” (i.e. a working class that understands its oppression and is united in fighting against it) because white workers are irredeemable settlers who will only act in the interests of colonialism and never in the interests of humanity. A few “exceptional” whites may decide to join the fight against colonialism, but the white working class cannot be won over as a class. They are inherently reactionary: once a settler, always a settler.

This is the heart of our disagreement with M-. Simply put, we believe that white workers in particular and the American working class in general can be won over to revolutionary politics, while he doesn't. Granted, the white working class has been a reactionary force historically, but it's not inevitable that they will always act this way. That's one of our tasks as revolutionaries: to convince whites to surrender their privileges and fight for freedom.

We believe it is not in the long-term interests of the white working class to be white. Our goal is not to win over a few “exceptional” whites to anti-fascist or national liberation struggles. We want to crack the white monolith and blow it open, not because “whiteness” explains how race functions every where in the world (it doesn't) nor because the white working class is the “most important” section of the working class (it isn't). We want to blow it open because it's the central obstacle preventing the creation of a unified revolutionary proletariat in the United States. Whiteness is like having the emergency brake on when you're in first gear. It's hard to move forward, but when you turn it off you can do 75 in no time.

We want to build a revolutionary working class in the United States. We believe that the purpose of a cadre group is to encourage the development of such a movement. This requires a belief that working class whites and Americans generally are not inherently reactionary, that they can be won over to the cause of freedom if they surrender their privileges, and that doing so is vital to the world's freedom, given the U.S.'s central position in global capitalism. Those who are skeptical of the possibilities of class politics in the U.S. don't think this kind of movement is possible. We share many of the anti-imperialist and settler-based criticisms of this society, but we absolutely do not share their pessimism in organizing a revolutionary class-for-itself in the U.S. We wish those who believe “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” or in the settler analysis luck in their efforts, but these are not our politics. Nor are they the kind of politics than can lead a successful revolutionary movement.

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This essay was written in response to various debates over the “Bring the Ruckus” document on an email list, particularly over the meaning of September 11 and the nature of white supremacy in the United States.

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