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The American Intifada

Noel Ignatiev

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This essay was written in the fall of 1991, six months before the Los Angeles uprising, for a New Politics symposium on the question "Is There Life after the AFL-CIO?" In it, Ignatiev considers how white supremacy has shaped American social democracy and fragmented the revolutionary potential of the American working class. The editors of New Politics, who solicited the piece, chose not to publish it. This version appeared in the first issue of Race Traitor.

Just about the time the Democratic Reform Progressive Concerned Rankand-File Fightback Caucus ousts the last remaining clique of right-wing bureaucrats from local union office, unions as we know them will cease to exist, and the radicals of various stripes who placed their hopes on union reform will be left in undisputed possession of a dead horse.

The strength of unionism was a component of a social democratic compact, the American Historic Compromise. Since white supremacy was the cement that held it together, it is fitting that the black workers led in toppling the deal; but they were not alone. The working class used the gains of a period of accumulation to launch a struggle that went beyond unionism. New forms emerged, based upon shop floor

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organization, direct action, and community solidarity. The struggle was against the capital relation itself and it invaded all spheres. If Dodge Main and Lordstown were the high points of the conflict at the point of production, they cannot be understood apart from Watts, Columbia, and Attica.

Because the unions could no longer discipline the workers in the mass production industries, the employers withdrew their support for the collective bargaining system and began a new round of union-busting, computerization, and relocation; the amount of functioning plant and equipment they were willing to scuttle in the search for a more malleable labor force is the exact index of their fear of the working class.

In America, the comic futility of the Democratic Party, and in Europe, the course of French Socialism as well as the defeat of the Party of Austerity, Swedish Section of the Second International, herald the bright future of social democracy, which is brought closer by the integration into the world market of the low-wage areas formerly (or still) ruled by communist parties. (This does not rule out the possibility of the Democrats returning to office and repeating the whole dreary cycle, until they are dispersed by a Nazi corporal and nine soldiers or something else.) “For the rest,” wrote Hegel,

it is not difficult to see that our epoch is a birth-time, and a period of transition. The spirit of the time, growing slowly and quietly ripe for the new form it is to assume, disintegrates one fragment after another of the structure of its previous world.¹

The old is dying and the new has not yet been born. The paradox of the moment is that, while social democracy can no longer call forth the energies of the revolutionary class, the

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005, 75.

circumstances it is not surprising that we see through a glass darkly. Nonetheless, the rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.

forms of activity that anticipate the new society do not yet constitute a visible alternative. Where to look for them?

For most of the four centuries of its existence, capitalism has meant one or another form of bound labor: slavery, indentured servitude, apprenticeship, prison labor, peonage, and so on. The formally free, waged proletariat prevailed only in some branches of production in a few countries for a certain period. The political forms associated with “free” labor—the electoral franchise and collective bargaining—have been exceptions in history. Now as capital dissolves the large concentrations of workers in the mass production industries, “once again, the physiognomy of the world proletariat i.e., that of the pauper, the vagabond, the criminal, the panhandler, the street peddler, the refugee sweatshop worker, the mercenary, the rioter” and the prison rebellion, squatting, and the food riot become the characteristic forms of proletarian resistance.² The intifada is the mass strike of our day.

Are there any hints of an approaching American intifada? I cite three.

1. A few years ago, in some cities, jobs in the fast-food industry that traditionally paid the minimum wage were going begging despite a wage rate in some cases as high as \$5.50 per hour. The increase in the minimum wage, which the unions had sought without success, the black youth who normally filled those jobs accomplished by direct action. Those young people are the sector of American society least touched by official institutions. No one knows how they communicated and enforced agreement among themselves as to what constitutes an acceptable wage, whether they boycotted the jobs entirely or worked them only long enough to buy a new pair of hundred-dollar sneakers or sunglasses, but their

² The quote is from Midnight Notes Collective, *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1972–1992*, New York: Autonomedia, 1992, 321.

ability to act cohesively means that the forces of the intifada are gathering.

2. Numerous observers have identified as a product of oppression the high proportion of children of black mothers born out of wedlock. It is more than that. The large numbers of young women who are having children despite the absence of a husband with a dependable wage are doing so with full knowledge of the consequences; they are aware, from observation, that raising a child on welfare closes off their chances of escaping the poverty that surrounds them. To give birth under those circumstances must be viewed, therefore, as a choice—to link their future and that of their child with the community they belong to, above all with the women in it, rather than to pursue the limited opportunities for upward mobility that exist. It is a decision not to rise out of the working class but with it—a display of the kind of solidarity essential to an oppressed class preparing to assert itself.
3. Years ago I knew a Chicago steelworker whose son liked to throw rocks at the buses that carried black workers to the mill. “I asked the kid,” he recounted, “what do you want to bother the niggers for? They’re just going to work.” What led that young man, just out of high school, to elevate the white supremacy his father took for granted into a program for militant action? It was the knowledge that he would never get the sort of decently paying, fairly steady job his father held—or the fear that he would. Many like him, for whom traditional union white supremacy with a human face can no longer deliver the goods, are turning toward national socialism.

I am aware of the pathological elements present in each of the examples I have cited. As currently manifest they are, at best, negotiations. Each, however, represents a departure from the

conventional wisdom of reform, and each expresses a deeply felt sentiment that a total change is necessary.

As I write these lines, two items come to my attention. The first is a reference, in the *New Yorker*, of September 23, 1991, to black youth as “Brooklyn’s intifada.” The second is a fundraising letter from a civil rights group which recently won a \$12,500,000 lawsuit against Tom Metzger, head of the fascist organization, White Aryan Resistance (WAR). Since Metzger’s personal fortune consists of a modest home, the legal strategists expected the suit to put him out of business. WAR, however, responded to the court decision with a declaration of war against the white liberal judges who uphold the system. This in turn led to the appeal for funds.

What clearer confession of futility than an appeal for donations immediately following a successful multimillion-dollar lawsuit?

Only the vision of a new world can bring the angry proletarians who make up the WAR constituency together with the Brooklyn intifada. The black proletariat forms the historical antipode to capital. When the workers of the world learn to say, as did The Commitments, “I’m black and I’m proud”—the modern rendition of “Workers of all countries, unite!”—then the new world will be at hand. Will they learn it? No one can say; but one thing is certain: no regenerated social democracy, no bigger and better welfare state, can compete with WAR for the allegiance of the alienated, dispossessed white youth.

The alternatives are the society of freely associated labor or barbarism. There is no longer a difference between reform and revolution. Put another way, no serious reform is possible without the overthrow of capital. The question is not how to defend the interest of the workers against the multinational corporations, but how to maximize the revolutionary potential of the working class. Today the proletariat is subordinated to capital, and the expressions of its potential class rule are sporadic, fragmented, and imbricated in retrograde tendencies. Under these