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Revolutionary Strategy Or Stagism?

Wayne Price

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The BRING THE RUCKUS (BTR) position paper proposes that the “priority” of its organization be the destruction of white supremacy. This is supposedly based on a “strategic argument.” It points out that white people have “special privileges... such as preferred access to the best schools, neighborhoods, jobs, and health care...and better treatment by the police,” among other advantages. This leads to white workers “agree[ing] to police the rest of the population,” and to politically “unit[ing]” with the ruling class against the rest of the working class. Unlike many, the Ruckusites do not deny the strategic importance of the working class, as the social force capable of stopping and starting the society. But they put aside class issues for now, while focusing on racial oppression as the immediately central issue.

Wooden, crude, workerists (of the mechanical Marxist or anarcho-syndicalist varieties) have advocated a two-stage theory: First a working class revolution is won, and then, second, racial issues are solved. BTR proposes a similarly wooden two-stage approach (the same thing upside down): First white

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supremacy is overthrown, and then, second, there is class unity which leads to a socialist revolution. Both of these stagist approaches are mechanical and unreal. In real life, issues are too intertwined and overlapping to be so split up into stages. Racism supports class exploitation and class exploitation creates racism — and both are supported by the oppression of women, and by other issues such as the destruction of the ecology.

That white workers have relative privileges compared to workers of color is true. But it is only half the truth. An analysis based only on this fact is completely misleading. It implies an inaccurate South African apartheid model for North America. In South Africa, a minority of the working class is white. Under legal apartheid, its main role was to support the white capitalists against the majority of African workers, whom it could be said to “police”. In return, it got specific privileges, such as virtually full employment.

Statistically speaking, in North America — and even just in the U.S. — the majority of the industrial working class happens to be European-American. White workers produce most of the surplus value pumped out of the North American working class. They include most of the very poor, most of the homeless, and most of those on welfare. They suffer most of the industrial accidents. None of which denies that African-American and Hispanic people are disproportionately among the most exploited sections of the working class.

To imply that the main role of the white workers is “to police the rest of the population” is completely wrong. The main role of the white workers, just like non-white workers, is to be exploited by the capitalist class. The so-called privileges of the white workers amount to being relatively less exploited, and less oppressed, than Black or Hispanic workers. But they remain exploited and oppressed.

The bloc between the white workers and the capitalist class has been a major obstacle to the creation of an independent

working class movement — as has been pointed out by many theorists. Due to its origins as a settler society, the U.S. in particular has been deeply affected by racism, extreme individualism, unconcern for the environment, and macho sexism. All these lead to a lack of class identification — unlike, to a large degree, the workers of Western Europe — and to a willingness to identify with its rulers.

The key question is whether this has been good or bad for the white workers. The political tendency which produced BTR has held that this white unity has been good for the white workers — at least within the limits of capitalism (obviously it has been bad in that it has prevented us from reaching the delights of socialism). This position is implied in BTR by only mentioning the so-called privileges of the white workers. Of course, each privilege in itself is a benefit. But the gains must be balanced by the losses. A racially-divided working class has been unable to force larger gains from the ruling class, gains which are taken for granted in Western Europe. The U.S. working class has been unable to win nationalized health care, public child care, month-long vacations, guaranteed pensions, real rights to form unions, job security, and other benefits taken for granted in Europe and, to some extent, in Canada. The U.S. has the lowest rate of unionization of any industrialized capitalist democracy -now less than 9 % in private industry. All this is directly connected to racial division within the working class.

Empirically, the worst-off white workers in the U.S. are in the South, the most racist part of the country. U.S. white workers are worse off than Canadian workers. North American workers are worse off than Western European workers. So to focus only on the relative privileges of the white workers is to miss the most important effect of white supremacy.

Our analysis of the effects of white supremacy affects our strategy to overcome it. The fight against racism would be very difficult if the main effect of racism is to make life easier for the white workers. How are we to persuade the white workers to

give up those privileges? The only possible appeal is a moral one, appealing to their sense of guilt (if any) and to the values of democracy and religion. This is a tough row to hoe. The implications are authoritarian – that the white workers may have to be forced to give up their privileges. Otherwise, how will they be gotten to give up the benefits they provide for their families? Those who invented this theory (Noel Ignatiev and the Sojourner Truth Organization) were Maoists at the time (that is, a variety of Stalinist). They had no problem in advocating a revolutionary dictatorship over the white majority of North America. However, this strategy does not fit in with anarchism.

An anti-racist appeal is easier (if still hard) if it is in the self-interest of the white workers. Morality always goes further when it is merged with self-interest. A libertarian-democratic society is possible today because there is a working class in whose interest it is to overthrow all forms of oppression and to create a free, humanistic, and cooperative world.

The possibility of a more holistic approach is suggested in the BTR's section on feminism. Logically, feminism does not fit in with a sole focus on overthrowing racism. But, for reasons which can be guessed at, the document calls for "feminist political work...that connect[s] struggles against sexism with struggles against white supremacy". Why not union work which connects struggles against sexism with struggles against white supremacy and against capitalism? Why not struggles against white supremacy which connect with struggles against sexism? A holistic class struggle approach would attempt to integrate all struggles against oppression with the overall struggle against racist-patriarchal capitalism and its state.