

Racism and the Class struggle

Workers' Solidarity Federation

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Contents

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|---|---|
| How can racism be defeated? | 3 |
| The roots of racism | 3 |
| Race and Empire | 5 |
| Racism today | 5 |
| Who benefits? | 6 |
| Why racist ideas are accepted | 7 |
| The Oppressed divided | 8 |
| Fighting racism | 8 |
| Our tasks | 9 |

Racial oppression remains a defining feature of the modern capitalist world. It is manifest most spectacularly in violent attacks on immigrants and minorities by fascist gangs. More important to the fate of these communities has been the systematic and increasing discrimination by capitalist states, manifest in attacks on the rights of immigrants, cuts in welfare services, and racist police and court systems.

How can racism be defeated?

An answer to this question requires an examination of the forces which gave rise to, and continue to reproduce, racism. It also requires a careful analysis of which social forces benefit from racial oppression.

By racism is meant either an attitude denying the equality of all human beings, or economic, political and social discrimination against racial groups.

The roots of racism

Capitalism developed as a world system based on the exploitation of workers, slaves and peasants — black, brown, yellow, and white. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the young capitalist system centred mainly on western Europe and the Americas. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Africa and Asia were brought increasingly into the ambit of capitalist power.

In the Americas, vast plantation systems were set up. Based on slavery, they were capitalist enterprises exporting agricultural goods.

It was in the system of slavery that the genesis of racism is to be found. In the words of Caribbean scholar, Eric Williams, “Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery”¹.

Initially, the slave plantations were not organised on racial lines.

Although the first slaves in the Spanish possessions in the Americas were generally native Americans, slavery was restricted (at least officially) to those who did not convert to Christianity.

The native Americans were succeeded by poor Europeans. Many of these workers were only enslaved for a limited period, as indentured servants serving contracts of up to ten or more years. Others were convicts sentenced for crimes such as stealing cloth, or prisoners of war from uprisings and the colonisation of areas such as Ireland and Scotland. However, there were also a substantial number of life-long European slaves, and even amongst the indentured a substantial number had been kidnapped and sold into bondage.²

Conditions on the “Middle Passage” (the trip across the Atlantic) for these indentured servants and slaves were, in Williams’ words, so bad that they should “banish any ideas that the horrors of the slave ship are to be in any way accounted for by the fact that the victims were Negroes”³.

¹ Eric Williams, 1944, *Capitalism and Slavery*. Andre Deutsch, p. 17. See also Peter Fryer, 1988, *Black People in the British Empire*. Pluto Press. chapter 11.

² Williams does not take sufficient account of the institution of life-long slavery among Whites.

³ Williams, p. 14.

More than half the English immigrants to the American colonies in the sixteenth century were indentured servants⁴, and until the 1690s there were still far more unfree Europeans on the plantations of the American South than Black slaves⁵.

Racist ideas were developed in the context of the slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this period, African people came to be the main source of slaves for the plantations.

The systems of social control established for American and European unfree labour was now applied to the Africans.

The main reason for this shift to African slaves was that such slaves were obtained cheaply enough, and in sufficient numbers, to meet the expanding needs of the plantation capitalists⁶. African ruling classes played a central role in the highly profitable slave trade: "The trade was ... an African trade until it reached the coast. Only very rarely were Europeans directly involved in procuring slaves, and that largely in Angola"⁷.

It in the seventeenth century that racist ideology began to be developed for the first time by such groups as "British sugar planters in the Caribbean, and their mouthpieces in Britain" who fastened onto differences in physical appearance to develop the myth that Black people were sub-human and deserved to be enslaved: "here is an ideology, a system of false ideas serving class interests"⁸.

Racism was used to justify the capture and perpetual enslavement of millions of people for the purposes of capitalism. The enslavement of native Americans had been justified as being on the grounds of their heathen beliefs; European servitude was justified as being the lot of inferiors; Black slavery was justified through racism.

Once developed, racist ideas came to be used more broadly as a justification for oppression. Jewish people, for example, came to be oppressed as a racial minority rather than as a religious group.

The beneficiaries of slavery were not Europeans in general, but the capitalist ruling classes of western Europe. African ruling classes also received substantial benefits. There were of course the vast numbers of Europeans indentured or enslaved. There were also the sailors on the "Middle Passage" whose conditions, according to Williams, were themselves scarcely distinguishable from slavery. Finally, there were vast numbers of "poor White" peasant farmers of the Americas (some of whom were former indentured servants) who were out-competed and driven to the margins by the giant slave plantations.⁹ The vast majority of Europeans never owned slaves: only 6 per cent of whites owned slaves in the American South in 1860.¹⁰ There were also African-American and native American slave-owners.

⁴ Williams, p. 10.

⁵ Leo Huberman, 1947, *We, the People: the drama of America*. Monthly Review Press. p. 161.

⁶ Williams, pp. 18–9, 23–29.

⁷ Bill Freund, 1984, *The Making of Contemporary Africa: the development of African society since 1800*. Indiana University Press. p. 51.

⁸ Fryer, p. 64.

⁹ Williams, pp. 23–6; Huberman, p. 167–8.

¹⁰ Huberman, p. 167.

Race and Empire

Racism was thus born of the slavery of early capitalism. However, having been once created, subsequent developments in capitalism would sustain and rear this creature of the ruling class.

The extension of capitalist power over Africa and Asia took place largely from the seventeenth century onwards in the form of imperialism¹¹. Initially, imperial conquest was often undertaken directly by large corporations such as the British East India Company (in India) and the Dutch East India Company (in South Africa, among other places). Later capitalist governments took a direct hand, notably in the conquest of most of Africa from the 1880s.

Imperialism in this period was driven by the search for profits: initially, profits from control of trade; later by big corporations' need for cheap sources of labour and raw materials, and by the need to find new markets to sell manufactured goods.

Racist ideas were again pressed into service to justify the process of imperial conquest and rule. Imperial control was justified on the supposed grounds that Africans and Asians (and for that matter other colonised peoples such as the Irish) were unable to govern or develop themselves, and needed to be ruled by external forces — namely the ruling classes of western Europe and Japan¹². Equal rights were not seen as even being possible in this world view.

Empire did not benefit workers in the colonies, nor in the imperialist countries. The profits of empire accrued to the capitalist class¹³. Meanwhile, the methods and forces of colonial repression were deployed against workers in the imperialist countries (most notably, the use of colonial troops to crush the Spanish Revolution), whilst lives and material resources were wasted on imperial adventures. Today, multi-national companies cut jobs and wages by shifting to repressive Third World client regimes.

Racism today

Clearly, capitalism gave birth to racism. Racism as an idea helped justify empire and slavery. Racism as a form of discrimination or oppression facilitated high levels of exploitation, and has thus been an important factor in the development of capitalism.

Today, both slavery and the formal empires have been overthrown — this has largely been the result of struggles by millions of workers, peasants and slaves against oppression. Slave revolts are part of the history of class struggle against capitalism. Peasant and worker resistance to colonialism are equally so, although it must be noted that most anti-colonial struggles were prevented from reaching their necessary conclusion- socialist revolution- by the determination of local elites to reach a deal with capitalism and imperialism.

However, although these struggles removed the formally racist structures of slavery and empire they have not buried racism.

Racism — as an idea and as a practice — continues to serve two key functions under capitalism.

First, it allows the capitalists to secure sources of cheap, unorganised, and highly exploitable labour. Key examples are immigrants and minorities. Subject to racist discrimination, they form a segment of the working class that has been described as “super-exploited”, providing high levels

¹¹ See Freund for a discussion of the African experience.

¹² Fryer, pp. 61–81; Freund.

¹³ And not to workers as Fryer claims, pp. 54–5. These arguments are criticised in greater detail in the WSF Position Paper on “Anti- Imperialism”.

of profit for capitalists. In times of capitalist crisis (such as today) these segments are most readily deprived of political and social rights, the first to fall in the overall assault on the working class that takes place.

Secondly, racism allows the capitalist ruling class to divide and rule the exploited classes.

Across the planet, billions of workers and peasants suffer the lashes of capitalism. Racism is used to foster divisions within the working class to help keep the ruling class in power.

Praxedis Guerrero, a great Mexican anarchist, described the process as follows¹⁴:

“Racial prejudice and nationality, clearly managed by the capitalist and tyrants, prevent peoples living side by side in a fraternal manner...

A river, a mountain, a line of small monuments suffice to maintain foreigners and make enemies of two peoples, both living in mistrust and envy of one another because of the acts of past generations. Each nationality pretends to be above the other in some kind of way, and the dominating classes, the keepers of education and the wealth of nations, feed the proletariat with the belief of stupid superiority and pride to make impossible the union of all nations who are separately fighting to free themselves from CapitalÉ.

If all the workers of the different ... nations had direct participation in all questions of social importance which affect one or more proletarian groups these questions would be happily and promptly solved by the workers themselves.”

It happens between majority populations and super-exploited minorities, but also between the working classes of different countries. Workers are told to blame and hate other workers-distinguished by culture, language, skin colour, or some other arbitrary feature- for their misery. A classic example is the scape-goating of immigrants and refugees for “taking away jobs and housing”.

In this way, workers’ anger is deflected onto other workers (with whom they have almost everything in common) rather than being directed against capitalists (with whom workers have nothing in common). An appearance of common interest is created between workers and bosses of a given race or nation.

Who benefits?

Racism does not benefit any workers. Even workers who are not themselves directly oppressed by racism lose out from racism because it divides the working class. White American workers, for example, in no way benefit from the existence of an impoverished and oppressed minority of African American workers who can be used to undercut wages, and working and living conditions.

In addition, racist attitudes make it very difficult to unite workers against the capitalists to challenge the overall distribution of wealth and power in society. Racism has been used again and again to break workers’ struggles.

¹⁴ Programa de la Liga Pan-Americana del Trabajo in Artículos de Combate, p. 124–5, cited in D. Poole, “The Anarchists and the Mexican Revolution, part 2: Praxedis G. Guerrero 1882–1910”, Anarchist Review. No. 4. Cienfuegos Press.

The more the working class is divided, the worse its overall condition will be. This point, which was repeatedly made by the classical anarchist movement¹⁵, has been confirmed in a study by an American sociologist who set out to test the proposition that white workers gain from racism¹⁶.

Comparing the situation of White and Black workers in all fifty US states, he found, firstly, that the less wage discrimination there was against Black workers, the better were the wages that White workers received. Secondly, he found that the existence of a substantial nationally oppressed group of poor workers reduced the wages of White workers (but did not affect the earnings of middle and upper-class Whites very much). Finally, he found that the more intense racial discrimination was, the more poverty there was for lower class Whites.

Such facts fly in the face of political strategies which claim that majority population workers receive material benefits from racism. The logic of this argument is that these privileges must be “renounced” before working class unity is possible. Such an argument assumes that capitalists would adopt a strategy that systematically benefits the majority of workers, a most unlikely (and as we saw above, unsustainable) notion. In addition, this argument implies that the immediate political task is a redistribution of wealth among workers as opposed to a class struggle against capitalism. That is to say, it calls on the majority of workers to fight on principle for worse conditions.

Finally, this approach mixes up two very different things: oppression and privilege. While it is obviously true that some workers do not directly experience racial oppression, it does not follow that they benefit from it. The two terms are distinct: while it is oppressive to be subject to low wages, it is not a privilege to have a living wage.

Why racist ideas are accepted

None of the arguments made so far in this article deny the possibility that minorities of the working class may receive temporary benefits from racial oppression in specific circumstances. A case in point would be the small white working class in South Africa between the 1920s and the 1980s, which received real benefits from apartheid. But, as a general rule, racial oppression is fundamentally against the interests of the majority of workers of all colours.

To recognise the primary role of capitalist ruling classes (aided by their states) in promoting and benefiting from racial oppression is not to deny that many working class people often support racism. Racism is often very widespread. However, such support for racism is an example of working class people acting against their own interests, rather than evidence that workers benefit from racism.

However, if racism provides no benefits for workers, how can we explain such support for the essentially irrational ideas of racism?

The answer is that there are very real material forces in capitalist society which operate to foster support for these ideas.

The first factor is capitalist control over ideas. Capitalists do not simply rule by force, they also rule by promoting a capitalist world-view. Here we must consider, as Praxedis argued above,

¹⁵ For example, Ricardo Flores Magon and others, *To the Workers of the United States*, November 1914, reproduced as Appendix A, in Colin Maclachlan, 1991, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution: the political trials of Ricardo Flores Magon in the United States*. University of California Press. p. 123.

¹⁶ Al Szymanski, 1976, “Racial Discrimination and White Gain”, in *American Sociological Review*, 41.

how “the dominating classes, the keepers of education and the wealth of nations” É “feed the proletariat with the belief of stupid superiority and pride”: the role of the schools, the media, literature and so forth. The impact of this propaganda cannot be underestimated.

The second factor is the material conditions of the working class itself. Under capitalism, the working class suffers poverty, alienation and misery. In the same way that workers may take solace from religion, they may also seek the imaginary compensation of supposed racial superiority, “the belief of stupid superiority and pride” (in Praxedis’ words).

In addition, working class people are locked in bitter competition for a limited amount of jobs, housing and other resources. In this situation, they may blame other groups in the working class for their plight. Where the other groups are culturally or physically distinct in appearance, this resentment and competition may be expressed in racist terms. Hence the view, for example, that ‘they’ are ‘taking our jobs’.

The Oppressed divided

From the above, it is clear that racism is a product of capitalism, and fundamentally against the interests of the working class and peasantry.

Are capitalists from oppressed groups reliable allies in the struggle against racism? The short answer is, no, they are not.

The effects of racism are fundamentally mediated by class position. Taking the case of the United States: although national averages of White and Black incomes show a vast gulf between the two, when class is taken into account the material inequalities between White and Black workers are shown to be quite limited; taken from another angle, the gap between the conditions of both sets of workers, on one side, and those of the upper class, on the other, are yawning¹⁷.

Michael Jackson may still face racism, but his wealth and power as a capitalist shields him from the worst effects of racism. Private schools, lawyers, high incomes — all these factors cannot be ignored.

Perhaps more importantly, the class interests of such elites tie them into supporting the capitalist system itself. Black police chiefs, mayors, and army officers are as much defenders of capitalism as their White counterparts. Such strata will readily compromise with the powers-that-be if it will give them a chance to be ‘in the racket and in the running’.

Fighting racism

It is capitalism that continually generates the conditions for racist oppression and ideology. It follows that the struggle against racism can only be consistently carried out by the working class and peasantry: the only forces capable of overthrowing the capitalist system. The overthrow of capitalism will in and of itself fundamentally undermine the social sources of racism. The overthrow of capitalism however, requires the unification of the working class and peasantry internationally, across all lines of colour and nationality.

In addition, the crushing of capitalism, and the establishment of libertarian socialism will allow the vast resources currently chained to the needs of profiteering by a rich few to be placed under

¹⁷ N. Chomsky, 1994, *Keeping the Rabble in Line*. AK Press. pp. 105–6.

the control of the working and poor people of the whole globe. Under libertarian communism it will be possible to use these resources to create social and economic equality for all, thus finally enabling the disfigurements of racial oppression to be scoured from the face of the earth.

However, this article is in no way arguing that the fight against racism must be deferred until after the revolution. Instead, it is arguing that on the one hand, only a united working class can defeat racism and capitalism; on the other, a united working class can only be built on the basis of opposing all forms of oppression and prejudice, thereby winning the support of all sectors of the broad working class.

Firstly, it is clear that racism can only be fought on a class basis. It is in the interest of all workers to support the struggle against racism. Racism is a working class issue because it affects the conditions of all workers, because most people affected by racism are working class, and because, as indicated above, it is the working class members of racially oppressed groups who are the most severely affected by racism.

Working class unity is also in the interests of racially oppressed segments of the working class, as alliances with the broader working class not only strengthen their own position, but also help lay the basis for the assault on capitalism. Without denying in the least the heroism, and, in some cases, radicalising role played by minority movements, it is quite obvious that a minority of, say, 10 per cent of the population lacks the ability to overthrow the existing conditions on its own¹⁸. Such unity is particularly vital in the workplace, where it is almost impossible for unions of minority workers to function.

Secondly, working class unity can, however, clearly only be built on the basis of a resolute opposition to all forms of racism. If other sections of the working class do not oppose racism, they create a situation in which nationalists can tie racially oppressed segments to Black and other minority capitalists in the futile games of 'Buy Black' campaigns and voting blocs. Class-based and anarchist alternatives must present a viable alternative if they are to win support.

Our tasks

Anti-racist work should occupy a high priority in the activities of all class struggle anarchists. This is important not simply because we always oppose all oppression, and because anarchists have long been opponents of racism. It is also because such work is an essential to the vital task of unifying and conscientising the working class — a unity without which neither racism nor capitalism can be consigned to the history books.

At a general level, we can approach these tasks by active work in anti-racist struggles and campaigns, including work alongside non-anarchist forces (without, of course, surrendering our political independence), and by continual propaganda against racism in our publications, workplaces, unions and communities.

The workplace and the union are particularly important sites for activity: it is here that capitalism creates the greatest pressure for workers' unity across all barriers, and it is here that the workers' movement stands or falls on the basis of its ability to address the needs of its whole constituency.

¹⁸ See on this point, "Race, Class and Organisation: the view from the Workers Solidarity Federation (South Africa)", 1997, Black Flag, no. 212.

We can approach these tasks by raising, on the one hand, demands that apply equally to all workers (better wages, full union rights, opposition to social partnership etc.), and by raising, on the other, demands which specifically address the needs of racially oppressed segments of the working class (equal schooling, equal housing, no to colour bars in industry etc.). Thus, we should fight for “Better Housing for All! No to Segregation!”, to take one example. The target of such demands would, of course, be the bosses, although in no case whatsoever should the tiniest concession be made to racial prejudices on the part of any workers.

There is no contradiction between the class struggle and the struggle against racism. Neither can succeed without the other.

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