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More info can be found here: [racetreason.noblogs.org](http://racetreason.noblogs.org)

# BLACK WORKER, WHITE WORKER

NOEL IGNATIEV

These pages liberated from *Treason to Whiteness is Loyalty to Humanity*,  
a posthumous collection of writings from Noel Ignatiev, edited by Geert Dhondt,  
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## Black Worker, White Worker

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*Drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*, a central text in Ignatiev's political development, this classic study explores the contradictory consciousness of white workers and what it means for the development of revolutionary strategy. Ignatiev argues that white skin privilege is not in the interests of white workers and is a barrier to working-class solidarity. Ignatiev first delivered this text as a speech in Portland, Oregon in 1972, and it was first published in *Radical America* (July/August 1974).*

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In one department of a giant steel mill in northwest Indiana, a foreman assigned a white worker to the job of operating a crane. The black workers in the department felt that on the basis of seniority and job experience, one of them should have been given the job, which represented a promotion from the labor gang. They spent a few hours in the morning talking among themselves and agreed that they had a legitimate beef. Then they went and talked to the white workers in the department and got their support. After lunch the other crane operators mounted their cranes and proceeded to block in the crane of the newly promoted worker—one crane on each side of his—and run at the slowest possible speed, thus stopping work in the department. By the end of the day the foreman had gotten the message. He took the white worker off the crane and replaced him with a black worker, and the cranes began to move again.

A few weeks after the above incident, several of the white workers who had joined the black operators in the slowdown took part in meetings in Glen Park, a virtually all-white section of Gary, with the aim of seceding from the city in order to escape from the administration of the black mayor, Richard Hatcher. While the secessionists demanded, in their words, “the power to make the decisions which affect their lives,” it was clear that the effort was racially inspired.

At a large farm equipment manufacturing plant in Chicago, a black worker was being tried out for a repair job on an assembly line. The foreman had been harassing the man, trying to disqualify him during his three-day trial period. After two days of this, the majority of the workers on the line, black and white, walked off their jobs, demanding that the man be accepted for the job. The company backed down and work resumed.

Later on, some of the same white workers took part in racist demonstrations at a Chicago high school. The demonstrations were called against “overcrowding” in an attempt to keep out several hundred black students who had been transferred to the school as a result of redistricting.

## Civil War

The foregoing anecdotes indicate some of the complexities and contradictions operating within the lives and within the minds of the white workers in this country: on the one hand, displays of democratic cooperation and fraternal relations with black workers, and, on the other hand, examples of backwardness and selfishness, which are unbecoming to members of a social class which hopes to reconstruct society in its image. What is taking place is a “civil war” in the mind of the white worker. In the community, on the job, in every sphere of life, he is being faced with a choice between two ways of looking at the world, two ways of leading his life. One way represents solidarity with the black worker and the progressive forces of society. The other way represents alliance with the forces of exploitation and repression.

I'd like to speak a bit about this “civil war” and examine some of what it means for the development of revolutionary strategy.

In order to understand the contradictory, often bewildering

## Nothing Less Than a Total Change

The alternative would have been to encourage the group along its original lines, determined to fight consistently against white supremacy regardless of what came up or came down—to develop the group as the core of a fighting movement in the plant that carried out struggles on the shop floor around all issues of concern to its members, including the issue of racial discrimination.

It's probably true that such a group could not have been a majority movement at the beginning, or perhaps even for a considerable length of time. Most likely, as the group pushed firmly against racial discrimination it would alienate some white workers who could have been won to it otherwise. That's a choice that has to be made. The group in the plant made the wrong choice.

I think that a group such as I describe, made up perhaps in the beginning almost entirely of black workers, could have developed as a center of struggle in the plant and a center of opposition to the company and the rotten union. As time went on, it could have attracted to itself white workers who were so fed up with their situation that they were looking for radical solutions—and would even identify with a “black radical” outfit, so long as it seemed to offer a way out of the mess they were in. The very things which would make such a group repulsive to some workers would make it attractive to that increasing number of workers, black as well as white, who are coming to sense that nothing less than a total change is worth fighting for.

The course I advocate offers great difficulties—no doubt about it. It is likely that the repression directed against a radical group that relentlessly fought racial discrimination would be greater than against a more moderate group. It is possible that a group such as I describe could never have gained admittance into the UE. I freely concede all the difficulties. But then, who ever said that making a revolution was easy?

As for the alternative, the course that was actually followed, we know all too well where that leads.

behavior of people, especially white people, in this country, we must take up two questions. The first question is: on what does capitalist rule depend?

There are groups, radical groups, which seem to operate on the premise that capitalist rule depends on the monopoly of guns and tanks held by the employing class and its ability to use them whenever it pleases against the exploited majority. This view explains why some groups put such great efforts into building alliances with all sorts of liberals to preserve constitutional forms of government. They hope, through these alliances, to limit the ability of the ruling class to use force against the people.

I do not share this view of the secret of capitalist rule. I do not agree that capitalist power rests, at present, primarily on guns and tanks. It rests on the support of the majority of people. This support is usually passive, sometimes active, but nevertheless effective.

## Competition among the Wage Earners

I contend that the key element in the popular acceptance of capitalist rule is the ideology and institution of white supremacy, which provides the illusion of common interests between the exploited white masses and the white ruling class.

Karl Marx wrote that wage slavery rests exclusively on competition among the wage earners. He meant that the existence of competition among the working class is responsible for the continued rule of the employing class and the inability of the working people to overthrow it and establish their rule.

Why do people compete? They compete in order to get ahead. The fact must be admitted that, from a certain point of view, it is possible to “get ahead” in this society. Years and years of unquestioning loyalty and devotion to the company will, in a certain percentage of cases, result in advancement for the employee—advancement to a position of lead man, foreman, soft job, high bonus job, etc. Working people have various uncomplimentary terms to describe this sort of behavior. Yet large numbers of them live their lives in this way, and for a certain portion of these, it “pays off.”

Because of the peculiar development of America and the nature of

capitalist policy in this country, there is a special element added to the general competition which exists among all workers. That special element is color, which throws the competition on a special basis, that raises color to a special place in the competition among workers.

All workers compete; that is a law of capitalism. But black and white workers compete with a special advantage on the side of the white. That is a result of the peculiar development of America and is not inherent in the objective social laws of the capitalist system.

In the same way that some individual workers gain advancement on the job by currying favor with the employer, white workers as a group have won a favored position for themselves by siding with the employing class against the non-white people. This favored status takes various forms, including the monopoly of skilled jobs and higher education, better housing at lower cost than that available to nonwhites, less police harassment, a cushion against the most severe effects of unemployment, better health conditions, and certain social advantages.

We're trying to explain why people act as they do and particularly why white workers act as they do. White working people aren't stupid. They don't act in a racist fashion simply out of blind prejudice. There are much more substantial causes—the system of white-skin privileges—which lead them to behave in a selfish, exclusionary manner.

A black steelworker told me that once, when he was working as a helper on the unloading docks, he decided to bid on an operator's job that was open. All the operators were white. He had worked with them before in his capacity as helper. They had been friends, had eaten together and chatted about all the things that workers talk about. When he bid on the operator's job, it became the task of the other operators to break him in. He was assigned to the job, sent to work with them on the equipment, and given thirty days to learn the job. It quickly became clear to him that the other workers had no intention of permitting him to get that job. They operated the equipment in such a way as to prevent him from learning how. Workers are very skilled at that sort of thing.

After two weeks, one of the white workers came to him and said, "Listen, I know what's going on here. You work with me on Monday and I'll break you in." The person who told me this story agreed—at least there was one decent white worker in the bunch. Friday afternoon came

Association of Machinists, which is one of the worst unions in the Chicago area, and bring in the United Electrical Workers union (UE), the old left-led union expelled in 1949 from the CIO and still under what is called progressive leadership.

Anyhow, they took a group of workers down to the UE hall and met with the organizers there. The staff people were delighted that they were interested in bringing in the UE, but they observed that there weren't enough white workers in the committee. If they ever hoped to win the plant for the UE, they would have to involve more white workers in the organizing effort.

That was certainly a logical effort. And so, what did the group do? They went back into the plant and began campaigning for the UE, using the newsletter as their chief vehicle. But now there was a change. The main aim became to reach the white workers, and so the line of the newsletter now became: all workers unite, the boss makes no distinction between black and white, do not let race feeling divide us, bringing in the UE will benefit us all, our interests are all the same, etc. As for the exposures of racial discrimination and the campaign to abolish it in the plant, which had occupied so much of the group's attention prior to the decision to bring in the UE, that was laid aside in the interests of appealing to the broadest number of workers who could be won to the immediate goal, getting a better union.

What is there to say about a story like this? What is there to do besides shake your head? Doesn't this represent, in capsule form, the whole history of labor movement in this country—the radicalization of the workers followed by the capitulation, on the part of the leadership, to the backward prejudices of the white workers? How many times does this experience have to be repeated? Apparently an infinite number until we learn the lesson.

By the way, the upshot of the organizing campaign was that the group didn't succeed in fooling any white workers; they still considered it a black power group and kept it at arm's length. But it did succeed in cooling the enthusiasm of the black workers who were its initial base.

Was there an alternative course that could have been followed in the particular situation? I think there was.

two groups in the country that do, but nobody pays any attention to them. The point today is to define the relation between the black movement and the general class struggle. And that is where the differences come out.

Everybody in the movement is opposed to racism, everybody chants the litany that racism is the greatest barrier to class unity. Every group puts out propaganda against racism and sincerely strives to win the workers to the struggle against it.

But what about those cases where the struggle of black workers and black people against racial discrimination appears to conflict with the desire to unify the largest possible number of workers behind what are called “general class demands”? For example, as sometimes happens, when the aggressiveness of black workers in pursuing their fight for equality tends to alienate white workers who might be willing to join with them in common efforts to achieve some reform of immediate and direct benefit to both groups? Then the trouble begins. And we must admit that some left-wing groups, especially those dominated by whites, are all too willing to set aside the special demands of the black struggle.

### A Bad Choice

A recent example of this might serve to clarify the difference between the two approaches. At a large electrical appliance manufacturing plant in Chicago, one of the radical groups, the Revolutionary Union, sent a few people in. The radicals began putting out a plant newsletter which raised the issues of speedup, safety, low wages—all the various grievances of the workers—and also carried on a fairly aggressive campaign against racial discrimination, against the exclusion of black workers from the better departments, etc.

The group managed to build up considerable support, most of it among black workers, which wasn't surprising since black workers made up almost half the work force and were most victimized by the oppressive conditions the group was agitating against.

After some time had passed, the strategists in the group who, it is safe to surmise, were the white radicals who had initiated it along with one or two newly radicalized workers from the plant, decided that, as a tactic, they ought to try and throw out the present union, the International

around, and the white worker approached him. With some embarrassment, he admitted that he had to back down from his offer. “It's bad enough when all the guys call me a n—lover, but when my own wife quits talking to me, well I just can't go through with it.”

The man who told me that story never succeeded in getting that job.

What made those white workers act in the way they did? They were willing to be “friends” at the workplace, but only on the condition that the black worker stay in “his place.” They didn't want him to “presume” to a position of social equality if and when they met on “the outside.” And they didn't want him to presume to share in the better jobs at the workplace. Those white workers understood that keeping themselves in “their place” in the company scheme of things depended upon helping to keep the black worker in “his place.”

They had observed that whenever the black people force the ruling class, in whole or in part, to make concessions to racial equality, the ruling class strikes back to make it an equality on a worse level of conditions than those enjoyed by the whites before the concessions. The white workers are thus conditioned to believe that every step toward racial equality necessarily means a worsening of their own conditions. Their bonus is cut. Production rates go up. Their insurance is harder to get and more expensive. Their garbage is collected less often. Their children's schools deteriorate.

This is how the white-skin privilege system works. If a small number of white workers do manage to see through the smoke screen and join in the fight together with the black workers, the ruling class responds with bribes, cajolery, threats, violence, and pressure multiplied a thousand-fold to drive the thinking whites back into the “club” of white supremacists. And the purpose of all this is to prevent the white workers from learning the black example, to prevent them from learning that if blacks can force concessions from the boss through struggle, how much more could be accomplished if the white workers would get into the struggle against the boss instead of against the black workers.

A common approach to the problem posed above is that of the white radical who goes into a shop which has a typical pattern of discrimination against black workers. Instead of directly taking up that issue and attempting to build a struggle for equality, he looks for some issue, like speedup, which affects all workers to one degree or another. He aims to develop a struggle around this issue, to involve all the workers in the struggle. He hopes that in the course of the struggle the white workers,

through contact with blacks, will lose their attitudes of racial superiority. This is the approach to the problem of unifying the working class, which prevails within the radical movement today.

I don't think it works. History shows it doesn't work. The result of this sort of false unity always leaves the black worker on the bottom. It always seems to be the demand for racial equality, the last one on the list, that is sacrificed in order to reach a settlement and celebrate the "great victory" of the struggle.

Present-day unions are, to a considerable extent, the end product of this sort of approach. It is black and white together on the picket line, and after the strike is over the white workers return to the skilled trades, the machining departments, and the cleaner assembly areas, and the black workers return to the labor gang and the open hearth. Every "victory" of this kind feeds the poison of racism and pushes further off the real unity of the working class, which must be established if significant progress is to be made.

There is no way to overcome the national and racial divisions within the working class except by directly confronting them. The problem of white supremacy must be fought out openly within the working class.

### Hug the Chains of an Actual Wretchedness

Over eighty years ago, Tom Watson, the Georgia agrarian protest leader, wrote the following words, full of profound meaning:

You might beseech a Southern white tenant to listen to you upon questions of finance, taxation and transportation; you might demonstrate with mathematical precision that herein lay his way out of poverty into comfort; you might have him "almost persuaded" to the truth, but if the merchant who furnished his farm supplies (at tremendous usury) or the town politician (who never spoke to him except at election times) came along and cried "Negro rule," the entire fabric of reason and common sense which you had patiently constructed would fall, and the poor tenant would joyously hug the chains of an actual wretchedness rather than do any experimenting on a question of mere sentiment . . . the argument against the independent movement in the South may be boiled down into one word—nigger.<sup>1</sup>

discussion and decision-making through the direct participation of thousands of people, the black movement has created a new concept of citizenship and community. Continuing through the sit-ins, freedom rides, mass marches, and urban rebellions, the black movement has given new meaning to politics and helped the American people in general to rediscover their tradition of self-organization and revolt.

Many examples of this phenomenon could be cited from the only community in this country whose members greet each other as brother and sister. But the point is made: in spite of all the obstacles placed in its way, the black movement, expressed in the patterns of life arising from struggle, represents a powerful magnetic pole to vast numbers of workers looking for a way out of the mess which is modern life.

Recall, if you will, the anecdote with which I opened this talk: the case of the white workers acting in solidarity with the black crane operators. Consider the position of the white workers in that case. They are under conflicting pressures. On the one hand, they see a group of workers preparing to strike a blow at the company and, like all workers everywhere, they want to deal themselves in, to hit back at the enemy which is oppressing them. On the other hand, to join with the black workers in such a situation means turning against habit, against tradition, against their own status as racially privileged workers.

They are faced with a choice, between their identity and interests as whites and their identity and interests as workers. What was it that made that particular group of workers in that situation decide, in the words of one activist, to be "more worker than white"?

Their actions can only be explained by the fact that, whether or not they express it in words, the black movement represented for them an alternative way of life, a way that was better and more attractive than the usual passive, subordinated life they were accustomed to. Anyone who has ever taken part in collective struggle knows that, regardless of how they may have acted afterward, the experience left a lasting impression on them.

What about the tasks of revolutionaries, and in particular white revolutionaries, in regard to this vital task of unifying the working class around its class interests?

Things have changed in the last twenty years. It is no longer possible for any group which claims to be revolutionary to openly oppose the black movement. Not if it hopes to have any following. There are one or



## A Powerful Magnet

Today the black movement represents an alternative to the dominant mode of life in our country, in the same way the CIO represented an alternative to the old way of life in the factory. The relations which black people, especially black workers, have established among themselves, and the culture which has arisen out of their struggle, represent a model for a new society. The black movement exercises a powerful attraction on all those who come into contact with it.

Consider the matter of the position of women and relations between the sexes. Black women, as a result of their struggle for freedom as black people, have achieved a great sense of their independence, not merely from one man but from men in general. This has forced black men to accept a degree of independence for women that is rare in the rest of the population. Anyone who has observed the changes undergone by white, Latin, or Asian women once they go to work and come into contact with black women can see the extent to which the old way of women's unquestioned subservience to man has been undermined. The men may resent this process, but it is irreversible.

The rise in general working-class militancy, observed by everyone in the last few years, is directly traceable to the influence of black workers, who are generally recognized by all, including white workers, as the most militant and combative group of workers when it comes to taking on the company. The black workers are drawing on the experience they have gained in their struggle for national freedom and are beginning to transmit the lessons of that struggle to the white workers with whom they come in contact.

The same thing is true also for the insurgent movement within the military, where the GI resistance, led by black GIs, reached such proportions that it forced major changes in official government policy.

This is true also for the insurgent movement within the prisons, where the resistance and courage of black prisoners has pulled whites into the struggle for decent conditions and human dignity.

For decades, politics, to white workers, has been a dirty word. It has meant nothing more than the right to choose every four years which gang of thieves is going to loot the public treasury for the next four. Beginning in 1955 with the Montgomery bus boycott, when an entire city organized its own system of transportation as well as of public

These words are as true today as when they were first written. They apply with equal force to workers as well as to farmers, and the truth of them is not limited to the South. Ted Allen has put it that white supremacy is the keystone of ruling class power, and the white-skin privilege is the mortar that holds it in place.

There are two points in what I have been saying so far that are distinctive and that I wish to emphasize.

The first point is that, for revolutionary strategists, the key problem is not the racism of the employing class, but the racism of the white worker. (After all, the boss's racism is natural to him because it serves his class interests.) It is the support by white workers for the employers' racial policies, which represents the chief obstacle to all social progress in this country, including revolution.

The second point is that this support has its basis in real conditions of life. It is not simply a matter of ignorance and prejudice, to be overcome by exhortation and appeals to reason.

The second question I wish to take up is: where does socialism come from?

## To Impose Order on Chaos

In their daily activities, working people express the drive to reorganize society so that they become the masters of production instead of the servants of production—the essential meaning of socialism. I would like to cite a few examples of this striving of workers.

One of the characteristics of steel production is that it must be continuous: to stop the furnaces is a costly and time-consuming operation. (I heard a story that once in Colorado around 1912 the Industrial Workers of the World pulled a strike at a steel mill and, instead of banking the furnaces, simply walked off the job. According to the story, that furnace stands today, over sixty years later, with a solid block of iron inside of it, unusable.)

Steel is a continuous operation and has to be maintained that way. What the steel companies do is operate a system of three shifts, and a system of relief on the job: a worker can't leave the job until his relief shows up. The workers take advantage of this in various ways. There is one mill I know of in which the workers have organized a rotation

system among themselves, in which they take turns calling off, allowing the person they are scheduled to relieve eight hours overtime in their place. There are a couple of dozen people involved in this, they have it organized in turns, and it would probably take a professional mathematician several weeks of studying attendance records to figure out their system. It allows each worker to get an extra day off every few weeks, and then receive, in his turn, an enlarged paycheck—without working a single hour more than normal. You see, the company posts its schedule of work, and then the workers proceed to violate it and impose their own.

Of course they don't have everything their own way. When the absenteeism gets too severe, the company cracks down and threatens reprisals, and the workers are forced to slack off for a while. Then, when the heat is off, they go back to their own schedule.

Another example. One of the characteristics of the capitalist scheme of production is the division between maintenance and production workers. This is universal under capitalism. There is one category of workers who perform the same operation minute after minute for their entire lives, and another category of workers who go around fixing machines when they break down. In the United States this division has been adapted to serve the system of white-skin privileges. White workers are generally given preference for the jobs in maintenance, which are usually easier, cleaner, more interesting, and higher paying than production jobs.

The workers respond to this division in ways that at first sight seem bewildering. When they get angry at the company, production workers will not perform the simplest and most routine maintenance task. They will stop an entire operation waiting for a maintenance worker to change a fuse.

A black worker in maintenance, one of the few, told this story. He was called to repair a piece of equipment that had failed. Unable to locate the trouble, he called his foreman to help. The foreman was also unable to find the trouble, and so he called a higher-up. They stood around for a while scratching their heads and then decided to go back to the office and study the schematic drawings of the equipment to see if they would reveal the trouble. After the foremen had left, the black maintenance worker asked the production worker, who was also black, what was wrong with the machine. He replied that he had thrown the

still find appropriate, is that white-skin privileges are poison bait, a worm with a hook in it. To be willing to leap from the water to exert the most determined and violent efforts to throw off the hook and the worm is the only way to avoid landing on the dinner table.

Let me offer a historical parallel. Back in the 1930s when people were organizing the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), one of the problems they had to face was that many workers in the plants had worked out a means of survival which consisted of gaining advancement for themselves in return for favors for the boss. Old timers still talk about how, back in the days before the union, if you wanted a promotion or even wanted to keep your job in the event of a layoff, you had to mow the boss's lawn or wash his car or give him a bottle of whiskey at Christmas. In order to bring a union into those plants, that sort of activity had to be defeated. It was undeniably true that those who washed the foreman's car were the last workers laid off. On what basis was it possible to appeal to the workers to renounce this sort of behavior which they felt was necessary to their survival? The basis of the appeal was that it was precisely that sort of behavior which bound them and subordinated them to the company, and that the interests of solidarity of the entire work force demanded the repudiation of such individual arrangements.

The appeal fell on deaf ears until it began to seem that there was a real possibility of making some basic changes in those plants. Until the CIO was present as a real force, until the momentum built up, until people began to feel that there was another way to live besides mowing the boss's lawn, they were not willing to repudiate the old way.

Today, as a result of the CIO, in vast areas of American industry, any worker who was suspected of doing the sorts of favors for the foreman that were once taken for granted would be ostracized and treated with cold contempt by his fellow workers. (Some people may argue that the previous statement is an exaggeration and that the spirit of togetherness and combativity has deteriorated over the years. To the extent that they are right, it should be noted that this deterioration is in large part due to the habit of subservience encouraged by the general acceptance by white workers of racial privileges.)

The time will come when the masses of white workers in our country will regard with disdain those among them who seek or defend racial privileges, in the same way they now have only contempt for someone who would wash the foreman's car in return for preferential treatment.

using the black movement to weaken the construction unions and drive down the cost of labor. That argument is not without validity; it is difficult to believe that the Ford Foundation and the Chicago Northwestern Railway are unselfishly interested in the cause of black workers.

Some radical groups, from a lofty position of supposed objectivity, took it upon themselves to advise the black coalition that instead of directing their struggle against the admittedly unfair assignment of jobs, they should recognize the fact that there was a shortage of jobs in construction and should join with the unions to expand the number of jobs, which would benefit black as well as white and avoid the danger of “dividing the working class” as the present struggle was allegedly doing. This, of course, was merely a radical-sounding version of the argument given by the construction unions and contractors themselves, who would welcome any support from any quarter which offered to expand the industry.

The response of the black masses to this argument was to press forward the struggle to open those jobs up or shut them down. Their actions showed their confidence that it was they who were using the Ford Foundation and not the other way around and that as for the problems of the construction industry, these could not be of concern to them until they became part of it.

Some listeners may sense the justice in what I have been arguing and at the same time question its practicability. Wherein lies the basis for establishing solidarity among the working class? Is it possible to expect white workers to repudiate privileges which are real in the interests of something so abstract as justice?

### Poison Bait

The answer is that the system of white-skin privileges, while it is undeniably real, is not in the interests of white workers as part of a class which aims at transforming society to its roots. The acceptance of a favored status by white workers binds them to wage slavery, makes them subordinate to the capitalist class. The repudiation, that is, the active rejection, through struggle, of this favored status is the precondition for the participation by white workers in the struggle of workers as a distinct social class. A metaphor which has been used in the past, and which I

wrong switch by mistake and blown some obscure control device. He pointed it out, after swearing the maintenance worker to secrecy, and it was fixed in three minutes. His attitude was—no one had asked him what was wrong, and if they treated him like a dope he would act like a dope.

This is one side of the workers’ response to the arbitrary maintenance–production split. On the other hand, they make efforts to overcome the barriers in their way, to master the entire process of production in order to express their full human capacities. Production workers do everything they can to learn about their equipment. On some occasions they go to great lengths to make repairs themselves without calling the maintenance department.

Maintenance workers also show this striving to break down artificial barriers. Many times they voluntarily grab a shovel or perform other tasks which are outside of their job requirements. But if the foreman orders them to do it, they will curse him and refuse.

These efforts by both production and maintenance workers to break down the barriers erected between them represent the striving of working people to master the equipment which makes the things they need, to gain control over the work process so that labor itself becomes a source of satisfaction to them.

There are many other examples that indicate the efforts of workers to impose their order on the chaos of capitalist production. If we want to know what socialism in the United States will look like, we should carefully study the activities of the working people today, because the ingredients of the socialist society appear right now in embryonic, subordinated ways.

### The Ultimate Exploited

Now I must tie together the two lines of argument I have been pursuing so far and pose the question—where does the black struggle fit into all this? Please note: by black struggle I mean the autonomous black movement. I do not mean any particular organization, although a number of organizations are part of it. I am referring to the tendency on the part of large numbers of black people, especially workers, to find ways of acting together independent of white control and white approval and to decide

their course of action based simply on what they feel is good for black people, not what serves some so-called larger movement.

The elements of such an autonomous black movement exist. They are repressed and subordinated, just as the autonomous efforts of workers generally are repressed. The conscious and determined efforts of the white ruling class to flood the black community with drugs are one indication of the serious threat the black movement poses to official society.

In spite of all the efforts of the ruling class to suppress it, the black movement exists. How does it fit into the general movement of all the oppressed to revolutionize society? I wish to make three points.

First of all, the black workers are the ultimate exploited in this country. They have no possibility of rising as a group to oppress anyone else. In spite of what many whites think about such subjects as welfare, black people receive no favors as a group from the capitalist class.

In the second place, the daily activities of the black people, especially the black workers, are the best existing model for the aspirations of the workers generally as a distinct class of people. Other groups in society, when they act collectively on their own, usually represent partial and occasionally even reactionary interests. The activities of the black workers are the most advanced outpost of the new society we seek to establish.

### The Challenge to White Workers

In the third place, the autonomous movement of black people poses a constant challenge to white workers to (in the words of C. L. R. James) "take the steps which will enable the working people to fulfill their historic destiny of building a society free of the domination of one class or one race over another."

The black movement poses a challenge, not merely to white workers in general, but to those white intellectuals, workers or not, who regard themselves as in some sense radical or revolutionary. This is a challenge which, in the past, they have generally not lived up to. This challenge is not something limited to history either; it continually comes up, in new ways as well as old ones. Let me offer a few examples.

The system of seniority was originally fought for by the unions as a defense against individual favoritism and arbitrary discipline by the

boss. Through a fairly involved process, seniority has been adapted to serve the needs of white supremacy. The boss decided whom to hire first, and the seniority system placed the union label on the practice of relegating blacks to the status of "last hired, first fired." As black workers press forward with their demands for full equality in all spheres of life, they increasingly come into conflict with the seniority system and other devices which uphold white supremacy, such as certain types of tests, and so forth. The white workers often react defensively. In many cases they insist that their resistance is not due to any prejudice against black people but is merely an objection to bypassing what has become the regular procedure for advancement. On more than one occasion, black workers have forced the employer to open a new job area to them, only to run up against the rigid opposition of white workers.

White revolutionaries must understand, and help the masses of white workers to understand, that the interests of the entire working class can only be served by standing firmly with the black workers in such cases.

Or consider the dispute over jobs in the construction trades, which reached a peak several years ago in a number of cities and is still going on in some places. In Chicago it took the form of, on one side, a community coalition led by Reverend C. T. Vivian, a number of elements around Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Operation PUSH and various diverse forces from among the black community and youth, along with, apparently, some financial backing from the Ford Foundation and the Chicago Northwestern Railway.\* The aim of the struggle was to gain entrance for blacks into the construction trades. The means used was to surround various ongoing construction sites with mass picketing in order to stop work on them until black workers were admitted in proportion to their numbers in the city. On the other side was a united front of the construction unions and contractors. Of course, their defense was that they do not practice racial discrimination; black workers simply had not applied for or passed the tests for admittance.

What is the position of radicals to be in a case like this? There have been arguments that the Ford Foundation and other such forces are

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\* The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was founded by Martin Luther King Jr. and other major civil rights figures following the victory of the Montgomery bus boycott. Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity) was founded as an affiliate of the SCLC and advocated black self-help, civil rights, and social justice.