

This pamphlet was produced as a part of the **Race Treason Discussion Group**, happening in Minneapolis every Wednesday at 7PM.

Discussions happen at **The Landing Strip**, which is located at 2614 30th Ave S.

This text will be the topic of discussion on **July 26th, 2023**

More information can be found at:  
[racetreason.noblogs.org](http://racetreason.noblogs.org)

# IN PRAISE OF TREASON

---

John Clegg

Treason to Whiteness is  
Loyalty to Humanity



*When I die, I don't want no part of heaven  
I would not do heaven's work well  
I pray the devil comes and takes me  
To stand in the fiery furnaces of hell  
—Springsteen, "Youngstown"*

Noel Ignatiev grew up in Philadelphia in the 1940s. He wrote in his memoir, *Acceptable Men*, that “from the time I was a youngster I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to revolution.” His parents had both been communists and he inherited the family business, traversing over his lifetime a variety of revolutionary groupings, from Stalinist to proto-anarchist. A man ahead of his time, he maintained a steady focus on the fight against racial oppression. In the mid 1960s, together with Theodore Allen, he popularized the phrase “white privilege,” a concept he saw as “a weapon in the class struggle.” The group he helped found in 1969 in Chicago, the Sojourner Truth Organization (STO), became a model for radical shop-floor organizing in the 1970s. And the journal he co-founded in the 1980s, *Race Traitor*, as well as his influential book *How the Irish Became White*, inspired both a scholarly interest in “whiteness” and a revival of abolitionism on the American left.

Ignatiev died in 2019, missing the George Floyd rebellion that swept across the country in the summer of 2020. Many of his friends and comrades also missed him dearly in those months, knowing how excited he would have been to take part in the largest protest wave in American history. In the “racial reckoning” that followed, Ignatiev’s work on the history of white supremacy gained a broader readership, and a new collection of his writings, *Treason To Whiteness Is Loyalty to Humanity*, has recently been published. On the cover, the *New York Times* describes Ignatiev as “a persistent voice against white privilege,” suggesting that, in the current racial reckoning, Noel’s time may finally have come. But Ignatiev was not merely a man ahead of his time, he was proudly *untimely*. And there were few things he had less patience for than the anti-racism defended by the *New York Times*.

In his last years Ignatiev expressed regret that his writings had contributed to a “diversity industry” that, despite throwing around terms like “social construction,” ultimately treats “race” as an unavoidable fact of life and reduces racial oppression to the problem of a prejudiced mindset. In this view the “psychic battle against privilege” must be never-ending. Thus, for Ignatiev, “Anti-racism’ is the ideology of a class of people who seek no alternative to the present system—or what is the same thing, who believe there is none—and those who act on it are like doctors who secretly love the disease they claim to be fighting.”

By contrast Ignatiev, a lifelong revolutionary, saw the practical abolition of racial divisions as a necessary step in the unification of the working class, the one that will enable it to finally destroy the present capitalist system and build in its place a society where the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. And in contrast to the pessimism that characterizes much contemporary discussion of racial oppression in America, he was quite optimistic about the prospects of such unification. But to understand how he drew that conclusion we need to see where he was coming from.

### Privilege As a Curse

When Ignatiev came of age in the 1960s American political life was centrally defined by the struggles of African Americans, first for civil rights in the South, then for broader social and economic freedoms in the country as a whole. These struggles encountered “massive resistance” by white Southern-

tains reactionary as well as revolutionary elements.” The task of communists is to *refract* the one from the other, and of course to “recognize and record” what the working class is doing, “looking for the breakthroughs.”

Sometimes it seems that today the right is doing more than the left to make “breakthroughs.” The same newspaper that blurbed Ignatiev’s book has called for right-wing “insurrectionists” to be tried for treason, a federal offense that still carries the death penalty. Ignatiev would not have found cause for optimism on January 6, 2021, when Confederate flags entered the Capitol building for the first time. But he would have pointed out that that the building itself was more of an embodiment of white supremacy than any of its invaders. It was, after all, built by slaves. I like to think that he would have quipped that it was a testament to the half-hearted “treason” of the occupiers that no-one thought to light a match. After all, the equally reactionary British occupiers had not neglected such measures in 1814. But they may have been inspired in this regard by the presence of liberated slaves among the troops.

There will no doubt be new opportunities for treason (and new John Browns) in what looks to be a bloody expansion of American imperial power, as well as the militarized borders that divide the global working class against itself. On such issues right-wing “traitors” become loyal citizens. But for Ignatiev, the treason that mattered most was the refusal of regular-ass-people to play the roles imposed on them by bosses and police. Like James, he believed that the power to build a new world lies in the disobedience of ordinary workers. And while the level of disobedience has dimmed since the George Floyd rebellion, both the need and capacity for it are visible in the daily violence of working-class American life. Ignatiev liked to say that the quality he most appreciated in the American people, the one that gave him hope for the future, was their lawlessness.

This text was published by *The Brooklyn Rail* in March 2023. See the online text for citations which have been omitted from this pamphlet.

Ignatiev wrote that, “were C.L.R. James alive today, he would be called a class reductionist.” But, he argued, there are good and bad class reductionisms. The good version simply states that, “the working class is the only class whose self-emancipation depends on the emancipation of all.” Whereas identity politics is an understandable consequence of the bad version of class reductionism, which supposes that “the needs of sectors other than the working class are irrelevant to the working class.” Thus for Ignatiev identity politics are the by-product of a partial victory for the American working class, one that has “become detached from its class moorings, leaving only a semantic residue among diversity consultants and other debris left on the beach after the revolutionary tide receded.” This invites a more optimistic reading of contemporary anti-racism. Real progress has been achieved insofar as rigid segregation, characterized by a lack of competition along racial lines, is being replaced by what Ignatiev calls real conflict that creates the possibility of unity. On this interpretation modern identity politics can be seen less as a distraction from that all important conflict than as one of the forms in which it is played out.

In keeping with this interpretation, some of Ignatiev’s comrades saw the George Floyd rebellion as an eruption of “race treason.” In some ways it was. The burning of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis was a signal flare that Ignatiev would have recognized as proto-revolutionary. And in the subsequent riots several white people died at the hands of police and right-wing vigilantes. That’s genuine solidarity, comparable to that of Ignatiev’s hero Osawatimie Brown. Black lives mattered to him, as they did to Summer Taylor, Michael Reinhoehl, Joseph Rosenbaum, and Anthony Huber, not as token representatives of an idealized “race” but as friends and comrades. They recognized that an injury to one is an injury to all. Or as the old man said, “remember them that are in bonds as bound with them.”

But I think Ignatiev would have pointed out that the erosion of whiteness has not only made race treason easier today, it has also made it less treasonous. Murderous racist police briefly became intolerable to millions of white Americans, and that was undeniably a good thing. But the practical endorsement of the uprising by much of the bourgeois media, and its exploitation by the Democratic Party, would have given Ignatiev pause. He would also have been wary of the deathly embrace of abolitionism by the non-profit industrial complex. In a text on the 2014-15 wave of Black Lives Matter protests Ignatiev and Loren Goldner wrote, “every genuine mass movement con-

ers, who defended the tradition of white supremacy with police dogs, water cannons, and the lynching of civil rights activists. As the focus of the civil rights movement shifted northwards, following the 1964 Civil Rights Act, it became clear that many northern whites were prepared to violently defend their neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces from integration. Martin Luther King Jr. was stoned on a march for fair housing in Chicago in 1966, and many of the all-white neighborhoods he marched through voted for the openly racist presidential candidate George Wallace, in 1968.

Ignatiev moved to Chicago in 1966, having been expelled from a small and stultifying Marxist Leninist party, and he described breathing in the heady air of revolt, like a “fish that managed to crawl up onto dry land.” But the role of the white ally in the movement was changing. The civil rights movement took a more nationalist turn as it traveled North, and shortly after Stokely Carmichael’s 1966 “Black Power” speech, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) opted to become a black-only organization, asking affiliated white activists to go and “organize in white communities.” While most were keen to take up this challenge, the question, to which Ignatiev’s first writings were devoted, was: what did this mean?

Many, including Ignatiev, argued that it meant organizing white workers to build class power in the workplace, with socialist revolution as the ultimate goal. Some student activists chose to drop out of college and get jobs in factories (a practice that then had the unfortunate name of “colonizing”). Ignatiev was already working in factories by then, having made a similar choice in the late 1950s, but he disagreed with the organizing strategy of most of these militants when it came to race.

The conventional wisdom was that if organizers focussed on bread-and-butter issues racial divisions in the workplace would naturally dissolve, for Black and white workers would see that they have a common interest in opposing the bosses. This seemed all the more plausible because Black workers were often at the forefront of rank and file struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, not only against racial discrimination in the workplace, but also against issues that affected all workers, such as wages, safety, and automation.

Ignatiev knew from his own factory experience that white workers indeed typically sided with Black workers in such struggles. But he also knew that many of those same white workers would sometimes fight to exclude Black people from their neighborhoods and schools. Furthermore, if whites held a monopoly on skilled positions within a workplace (which they typ-

ically did) they would often resist attempts to open up these positions to Black people. He concluded that the only way to achieve genuine class unity was to fight white supremacy in the workplace head on.

Ignatiev made this case in his first and possibly most influential piece of writing, “White Blindspot.” In this text, which is not unmarked by the sectarian battles of the time, Ignatiev drew on the work of his friend and comrade Theodore Allen, who was himself building on the work of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois had argued that the marginalization of Black workers by the American labor movement enabled employers to pit white against Black workers, which may explain the historical weakness of labor in the US. Allen extended Du Bois’s argument to the period since the 1930s, paying close attention to the CIO’s withdrawal of its “Operation Dixie” campaign in the 1940s and the manner in which the bargain struck between labor and capital in the immediate postwar period reinforced racial divisions among workers. Neither policy was explicitly motivated by the racist ideologies that led early American unions to exclude Black people (the union movement was integrated in the 1930s and by the 1960s some American unions were playing key roles in the civil rights movement) but Ignatiev and Allen referred to these policies as “white supremacist” in the sense that they entrenched a racial hierarchy in which Black workers were either left out of unions (in the unorganized South) or confined to the worst jobs in unionized plants (in the North and West).

But, crucially for Ignatiev, it wasn’t only Black people who suffered from the de facto segregation of the American workplace. White supremacy gave white workers a monopoly on certain jobs, but those jobs remained unsafe, poorly paid, and subject to arbitrary decisions of bosses and foremen. Furthermore, the ability of white workers to improve their condition was undermined by a lack of solidarity that was directly attributable to the system of “white privilege,” since it made it easy for employers to pit white against Black. In short, not only were white workers still exploited (Ignatiev and Allen categorically rejected the view, common among Marxists, that white American workers shared in the “super-profits” of American imperialism) their exploitation was magnified by the privileges they seemed to enjoy.

In support of his argument that privileges actually harmed white workers, Ignatiev would point to the American South. It was in the South that white supremacy had been most firmly established, yet white workers in the South were generally poorer and less well organized than anywhere else in

Is this taking optimism too far? Ignatiev sometimes suggested that the erosion of white privilege would lead inevitably to widespread working-class revolt. While labor agitation has recently risen in the US, by historical and international standards it remains dismally low. This raises questions about Ignatiev’s original theory of white privilege.

In his book on the Sojourner Truth Organization, Michael Staudenmaier suggests that the arguments of Ignatiev’s more Leninist critics in STO have stood the test of time less well than Ignatiev’s Jamesian spontaneism. But he also points to the residual moralism in Ignatiev’s workplace writings from the 1970s, the lack of concrete suggestions as to how white workers might repudiate their privileges, as well as his romanticization of black struggles. He concludes that Ignatiev must share some of the blame for the political travesties of privilege politics.

We could say something similar of *Race Traitor*. For all its brilliance, the journal floundered on an ill-defined central concept. “Treason to whiteness” functioned more as a provocation than an actual program. It was often presented as a matter of individual white rebellion, with Ignatiev proposing that whites adopt the position of “reverse oreos” (white on the outside, black on the inside), e.g. by challenging racist comments with the retort “what makes you think I’m white?” While it makes sense that Ignatiev defended Rachel Dolezal, especially given the way many of her critics naturalized race, this proposal now reads as cringeworthy at best.

To his credit Ignatiev came to recognize these weaknesses, and some would say he ended up bending the stick too far in the other direction. In his late writings he frequently complained about “identity politics,” “political correctness,” “trigger warnings,” and yes, even “wokeness.” There are similarities between these texts and the recent work of the Marxist scholar Adolph Reed. Reed shares Ignatiev’s view that the fundamental function of racism is to create false alliances across class lines, yet for Reed anti-racism itself has come to play a similar role today: it represents a politics of elite-brokerage that depends on the denial of class differences among Black people. But if it’s doubtful that racial hierarchy in the workplace was the only thing standing between the American working class and socialism in the 1960s, it’s even less plausible to suppose that anti-racism functions as that obstacle today.

In his last published article, on the birth of political correctness, Ig-

historical situation: the encounter between the collapse of Jim Crow agrarian peonage in the South with industrial enclaves of skilled white workers in the North, in the context of a comparatively weak labor movement. While we're already seeing new violent conflicts around migration and nativism, and the stigma of Blackness will not be easily shed, it's difficult to imagine unions today excluding Black workers, or employers using Black strikebreakers to prevent union drives. On the contrary, today's union-busting employers adopt the language of anti-racism, and those who have tried to divide workers along racial lines have found that it can easily have the opposite effect of uniting them.

In one of his last and most reflective articles (unfortunately not included in *Treason to Whiteness*), Ignatiev notes that no-one in the South today blinks an eye at Black and white skilled men working together on the roads, or the apparent camaraderie of Black and white women working behind the counter at Waffle House, a 24–7 breakfast chain. Such things would have been unthinkable in Ignatiev's youth. His point is not that these workplaces are models of racial harmony. On the contrary, he points out that Waffle House in particular has become known for instances of violence, much of it intra-racial and involving staff, customers, and police. Rather, Ignatiev suggests that this violence may be a kind of proving ground for the hard-to-win trust that is the essence of class formation:

In Studs Lonigan, James T. Farrell describes the horrifying violence engaged in by young Irish men against their presumed “fellows.” A relative of one of our editors spent much of his childhood watching his uncles and older cousins recovering from bone shattering, blood-thirsty fights with each other. Historically it was the lack of competition between black and white that prevented the formation of a common consciousness; competition, or more generally living and working together, gave rise to conflicts that created the possibility of unity. Maybe, just maybe, the violence amid the camaraderie at Waffle House restaurants signals the painful emergence of a class-for-itself, people whose ancestors come from all over the world, who have nothing to lose but their chains, and know it. One looks for the positive in the negative.

the country. The “poor whites” under slavery had the privilege of freedom, but little to show for it. They had little or no political power, and lacked access to the land, education, or skilled work that enabled whites elsewhere to lift themselves out of subsistence poverty. After the abolition of slavery the Southern textile industry excluded Black workers for over half a century, yet wages in Southern textile mills were significantly lower than in the North, and workers' power was virtually non-existent. Ignatiev extended this regional comparison internationally, suggesting that white workers have it worse in the US and South Africa than Europe for the same reason that Southern whites experience the worst working conditions in the US: “the greater and more firmly established” the system of white privilege, “the greater the misery” of white workers.

All the ostensible victories of American labor could be seen from this point of view as actually defeats, insofar as they retained or reinforced racial divisions within the working class. In accepting racial hierarchies in the workplace, the American labor movement had failed to live by the maxim “an injury to one is an injury to all.” But this was not merely a moral failure, it was also a practical one. In so far as whites maintained a quasi-monopoly on certain jobs they were prevented from fighting as a class, and this meant they lost far more than they gained, both in the short and long run. In an oft-quoted version of this argument Ignatiev writes:

White supremacy is the real secret of the rule of the bourgeoisie and the hidden cause behind the failure of the labor movement in this country. ... To suggest that the acceptance of white-skin privilege is in the interests of white workers is equivalent to suggesting that swallowing the worm with the hook in it is in the interests of the fish.

Of course, Ignatiev recognized that individual white workers often had an interest in defending their privileges. There were real benefits from being the right color to get a promotion, or having family ties to the foreman. But what made rational sense for individual white workers was irrational from a collective point of view.

Since white privilege undermined class solidarity and class power, to accept it was tantamount to collaborating with the bosses or acting as a scab. This analogy is rhetorically and analytically more powerful than that of the fish and the hook, which suggests that the problem is merely one of false con-

sciousness. Ignatiev writes that in his workplace, “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.” It was only through learning to repudiate such self-serving behavior, that unions could form in these plants. The analogy also allowed Ignatiev to be hopeful about the prospect for white workers repudiating their privileges, since they had already done something similar in the past:

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.

Of course, learning to repudiate these privileges would be a process full of setbacks and violent conflicts, just as it had been in the past. But as Ignatiev pointed out, “whoever said it would be easy to make a revolution?”

#### Black Intellectual, White Worker

In light of what he called, “the political travesties of privilege theory,” Ignatiev often wondered whether he made a mistake in popularizing the phrase “white privilege.” He can certainly be faulted for his choice of words. It would be no exaggeration to say that he spent the rest of his life clarifying what he *didn’t* mean by this phrase. That process began within months of publishing “White Blindspot,” when a group split off from Ignatiev’s SDS faction that would come to be known as the Weather Underground.

This group argued that white workers have a real collective interest in defending their “white privilege,” since they not only enjoyed better wages and conditions than Black workers, but also shared in the profits of US imperialism. They concluded that white workers would never be able to align with Black workers and that radical groups should limit themselves to supporting oppressed minorities in the US and “oppressed nations” abroad. And with that, as Adorno might have said, the hell that we live in was filled with oxygen.

Ignatiev was as fierce in his critique of this view in 1969 as he was in his later denunciations of similarly sanguine conceptions of “privilege” among

find common cause with working-class African Americans. He noted that attitudes towards race had changed dramatically over his lifetime—e.g. the number of Americans who said they approved of marriages between Black and white people went from four percent in 1958, to ninety-four percent today. But he also identified structural changes that made it easier for whites to act as “race traitors.”

In the early 2000s, Ignatiev began to speak of an “erosion of white privilege” in America. His point was not that racism, including anti-black racism, had gone away. It’s just that whiteness was no longer what it used to be. In founding *Race Traitor*, Ignatiev adopted a standard definition of white supremacy as a “system of color caste in which the lowliest of ‘whites’ enjoyed a status superior to that of the most exalted of ‘blacks.’” But by that definition white supremacy was already a thing of the past. Shortly after the Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination by employers and unions, opening the way for Black people to enter highly paid professions, deindustrialization eliminated many of the highly-paid skilled jobs that white workers had once excluded Black people from. Black men suffered more than white men from deindustrialization, but by the 2010s white life expectancy was falling even as Black life expectancy continued to rise. Today there are 1.8 million African American millionaires, many of whom hold supervisory positions over whites. As Ignatiev came to recognize, there are now many African Americans who hold a higher status than the “lowliest” of whites.

To observe this change, for Ignatiev, was not to be a pollyanna or to claim victory prematurely. The privileges of ordinary whites had been eroded without substantially improving the conditions of most Black people. Moreover, the erosion of white privilege had not been won in the way Ignatiev had hoped, through its active repudiation by white workers themselves. Nor was it simply a victory of Black struggle. Rather, it was in large part the result of the dull compulsion of economic relations. As such there was nothing to prevent the emergence of new oppressive divisions among workers to replace the old form of white supremacy. Indeed, Ignatiev predicted new and violent forms of segregation among workers insofar as growing sections of the American working class, both Black and white, were relegated to a “permanent surplus population.”

But as Marx once said, history can progress by its bad side, and Ignatiev welcomed the erosion of white privilege, which he considered in some respects irreversible. Those privileges were, after all, the product of a specific



would bring about the changes he sought. The point wasn't to change worker's minds, but to recognize that they would change their own minds when the opportunity to build working-class power through interracial struggle presented itself.

### *The Declining Significance of Whiteness*

How has history treated Ignatiev's faith in the capacity of white workers to repudiate white privilege? Many will point to Trump and the growing popularity of far-right nationalism and conclude: not well. As Robert Brenner and Dylan Riley have recently argued, the stagnation of modern capitalism has generated "a vicious, narrowly divided politics of zero-sum redistribution, largely axed on conflicts of material interest within the working class." As we can expect such intra-class competition to intensify in the coming years, Brenner and Riley conclude that it is a "rational strategy" for white workers to organize on the basis of their whiteness. There is, they suggest, a reason that optimism is out of fashion these days.

If we accept this prognosis our options seem to be either the pessimism of the Weather Underground (the white worker is a lost cause) or a return to the Leninism of Ignatiev's early years (white workers must be led away from the precipice by enlightened anti-racist socialists). In refusing both strategies Ignatiev was sometimes accused of having an overly heroic conception of spontaneous working class self-organization. His critics suggested that if in the past workers have been able to transcend self-interested behavior, then it was in large part due to the institutions they were able to build, such as the strike fund and unemployment insurance. In answer to this kind of criticism Ignatiev would insist that people were motivated by more than mere self-interest, and that morality and even heroism have been essential components of every revolutionary movement. But maybe the true heroes are those who build institutions that don't require everyone to be a hero?

But Ignatiev himself refused to take such a pessimistic view of the contemporary situation. He was unfazed by Trump, and took the rise of the far right to be an index of the bankruptcy of mainstream American politics. He was wary of the tendency of left-wing anti-fascism to make common cause with the liberal bourgeoisie, and argued that the "the law-and-order stance of the so-called anti-racists can only reinforce white supremacist influence." And he remained optimistic about the capacity of working-class whites to

anti-racists. He wrote that Weatherman's "muddled" view of privilege, in "denying the identity of interests of white and Black workers is anti-working class. In being anti-working class, it is, of necessity, anti-black." But of course it wasn't enough to simply point out the pessimism in the Weathermen's conclusions about white workers. After all, those conclusions were supported by the evidence that Ignatiev himself had presented of the historic betrayals of African Americans by white workers. So how did Ignatiev remain optimistic about the capacity of white workers to repudiate their privileges?

Ignatiev's early writings on this question reflect the proselytizing spirit of an orthodox Marxist Leninist. He seemed to have thought that it was the task of organizers like himself to demonstrate by argument and by example that white workers could put their collective interest in overcoming racial divisions ahead of their individual interests in preserving them. His own efforts in this respect at the various factories in which he worked were not altogether unsuccessful. Since many of the most militant struggles in these workplaces were led by Black workers, it didn't take much persuading to convince whites to support bold challenges to the power of the bosses. But there is a notable change in Ignatiev's writings between the late 1960s and the early 1970s: he went from viewing "white chauvinism" among workers as an "ideological barrier" that had to be overcome by exhortation and appeals to reason, to viewing American workers as capable of spontaneously overcoming racial divisions in the course of their struggles.

That change seems to be explained by Ignatiev's encounter with the Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James, who helped him shed the vanguardism of his youthful Stalinism and embrace what James called the "self-activity" of the working class. James had been a leader of the Pan Africanist movement in London in the 1930s and had organized Southern sharecroppers and Detroit autoworkers in the 1940s. Ignatiev met him shortly after his release from the house arrest imposed by his former friend Eric Williams, then Prime Minister of Trinidad, who had objected to James's criticisms of his policies. By then James had moved politically from Trotskyism to something close to council communism, inspired by the Hungarian workers councils of 1956. He concluded that the supposed representatives of the workers, like unions and leftwing parties, in fact obstructed their spontaneously revolutionary self-activity, which he saw as rooted in their desire and capacity to control their own work. He thus insisted on Marx's dictum that "the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the workers themselves."

Ignatiev describes his first encounter with James in a short essay included in *Treason to Whiteness*. He was initially struck by James's lack of condescension to his audience, a rare quality among leftist intellectuals trying to preach socialism to the masses. James could cite Shakespeare by heart and this resonated with Ignatiev, who grew up in a poor household rich in culture and writes that, "Shakespeare's characters were more real to me than people I passed daily in the street." James was also eager to learn from Ignatiev's workplace experience and spoke of his regret at never having had the opportunity (as he put it) to work in large-scale industry.

James no doubt had a romantic conception of the working class, and of the American working class in particular. He was enamored both by its industrious creativity and its history of violent resistance. This was important to Ignatiev, who describes his encounter with James as allowing him to relate to his own American identity with "neither facile apologetics nor masochistic self-hatred." But it was not the romanticism (common among leftists at the time) that changed Ignatiev's view of the white working class. It was rather James's understanding of the workplace as a site of collective self-transformation, in which "the new society" (by which he meant communism) is already present in embryo.

One way to understand James is to recognize that the problem workers faced, in trying to build class power, was that they needed to trust one another. But such trust couldn't be imported by union officials or well-meaning anti-racist activists. It could only be the hard-won result of daily interactions between workers in conflict-ridden workplaces. Yet it was precisely in gradually building a sense of solidarity that workers came to recognize their collective capacity to remake society. Thus whereas Ignatiev had seen his task (and the task of the revolutionary organizations he was part of) to demonstrate to white workers their true collective interests, James argued that the collective action problem the workers faced could only be solved iteratively, by workers demonstrating to each other that they could stay the course.

James had two reasons to be optimistic about the capacity of white and Black workers to find a solution to this problem. First, he saw that most white workers were not deeply or consciously committed to white supremacy. He agreed with Allen and Ignatiev that racial hierarchies only served the bosses, such that a commitment to whiteness was simply a sign of the low level of working-class organization. Second, he knew that white workers had a track record (albeit blemished and broken) of supporting Black workers under the

motto "an injury to one is an injury to all." He had witnessed this himself in the formation of the CIO, and from his studies of American history he knew about the Knights of Labor, the Populist movement, and the IWW. Most importantly for Ignatiev, he reminded us that thousands of white workers had intoned this principle as they marched to war for the Union singing, "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free."

Largely as a result of his encounter with James, Ignatiev became a rare example of a red diaper baby who could let out much of the bathwater of Old Left dogmas while remaining open to what was genuinely radical in the insurgencies of the 1960s. At that first meeting in Chicago, Ignatiev asked James what role he envisaged, if any, for revolutionary organizations. James's response was that, rather than try to lead the workers, such organizations should seek to "recognize and record" the new society as it emerges within the shell of the old. This would remain Ignatiev's motto, both in his writing and his organizing, for the remainder of his life.

As an example of what it meant to "recognize and record," Ignatiev could turn to earlier works by James's associates in the US, such as Grace Lee Boggs's and Phil Singer's *The American Worker* (1947) and Martin Glaberman's *Punching Out* (1952). These gave detailed firsthand accounts of factory life, showing how workers continually sought control over the production process, independently of union leadership and without necessarily adopting a "radical" political consciousness. Throughout the 1970s, Ignatiev would write shopfloor theory along similar lines, taking race relations as his central theme. Some of these are included in *Treason to Whiteness*, such as "Organizing Workers: Lessons for Radicals," and the justly influential "Black Worker, White Worker." Others are included in *Acceptable Men*, his memoir of working for US Steel that he insisted on calling his "novel" and which included more playful stories of life in the plant.

The central theme of these writings is the oscillation between conflicts internal to the working class, typically along racial lines, and conflicts between workers and management, in which racial divisions would present themselves as obstacles to the further extension of the struggle. Ignatiev saw there was nothing easy about overcoming these obstacles. As James said, the new world "carries within itself much of the sores and diseases of the old." However, the key point is that no-one else could solve this problem on behalf of workers. Ignatiev continued to object to the racism of his fellow white workers in US Steel, but he had no illusions that his individual actions