

Many of us who have been a part of the struggle by labor for human dignity tend to equate this struggle by labor for its rights and for recognition with revolutionary struggle. What we so easily forget or ignore is that, more often than not, what starts out as a struggle for equal justice, equal representation, or equal rights can, *precisely because it gains momentum*, become just another factor in the development of the system. Militant struggles, as we should know by now, do not of themselves lead to the transformation of the system. Instead, they can lead to the incorporation into the system of those who carried on the militant struggles, thus giving the system more validity in the eyes of more people and helping those in power to keep the power which enabled them to be oppressors in the beginning.

All of us know or should know that the labor movement of the thirties and forties—which gave hope to so many—has today become just another interest group inside U.S. capitalism. We also know that every time a strike takes place today—no matter how much it is hailed as a struggle by labor fighting for human justice—it is no more than a group of workers fighting for their share of the capitalist pie, their share of the capitalist spoils, their "piece of the action." All these strikes for more wages or more benefits today in the advanced industrialized countries end up by justifying the capitalist system in its exploitation of people in other countries.

Today there are some people who are looking to blacks to play the role of revolutionizing U.S. society which they once expected the working class (by which they really meant white workers) to play. All they are doing is trying to avoid the examination of the premises which led them in the first place to expect workers to revolutionize capitalist society by militant struggles alone. If we approach the question of black workers or blacks as dogmatically and pragmatically as we formerly approached the question of the potential of the working class for revolution, all we will be creating for ourselves and for everybody else is demoralization and disillusionment.

When we reflect on black workers, we cannot just reminisce about and romanticize them any more than we can just reminisce about and romanticize white workers. Rather, we must put their struggles into a historical context.

## BEYOND MILITANCY

BY JAMES BOGGS

The following is from a panel discussion on "Blacks in Auto," sponsored by the Detroit Labor History Project, University of Detroit, January 10, 1974. James Boggs is a frequent contributor to MR.—The Editors

Good evening. It is good that we can gather here to discuss the social and political phenomenon of black workers as they relate to the United States. It is good if we are ready to discuss this question in terms of where blacks are *today* and not just in terms of where they came from yesterday.

All too often at these gatherings, we recall the struggles and sacrifices of the past as if, somehow, some way, if we talk about them enough, some one will take up the gauntlet and lead us to the Promised Land. All too often we try to find new social forces who will, we hope, lead us to "the revolution" because they are militant in their reactions to their oppression by capitalist society. We do this because many of us are still trying to find a simple solution to the very complex questions which have arisen out of the unique development of the United States.

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The Unique U.S. Past

First and foremost, we must analyze the unique contradiction in which black labor has found itself from the very beginning of this nation's history. All countries have their own unique contradictions. The unique contradictions of the United States stem from the historical fact that from the very beginning the total labor force of this country had to be imported. Nobody who became a worker in this country was indigenous to this country but all came, either voluntarily or in chains, because the native Americans would not work for the early settlers and were eventually put into concentration camps.

The white workers came voluntarily, but at the same time that they were seeking new opportunities in this country they were running away from social struggles against the contradictions of the European nations which they left behind. The blacks came in chains; they were torn away from their families and their culture and robbed of the opportunity to develop Africa and themselves through social struggles against their tribal chiefs and witch-doctors. The whites came from different European countries but they came to a land whose culture was not too different from that which they had known. The blacks, having been forcibly uprooted from Africa and enslaved by Europeans, were faced with a totally different culture. In this process blacks have been forced to live like scavengers. That is, they have had to take the leavings in everything or whatever whites no longer considered worth having.

Detroit in the Thirties

It is within this framework, this historical context, that I came into the labor movement in the late thirties. I came in the early days of the CIO, which was itself a by-product of the social crisis brought on by the Great Depression. In most of the plants where the CIO was organizing, there were very few black workers. Blacks in Detroit worked mostly in the service areas—shoeshine, porters, bellhops, car washers, parking-lot attendants, maids, janitors, elevator operators, and dressing-room attendants. They got jobs in the last two categories only if they were very light-complexioned, very "high yellow." In fact, at that time and up to the sixties, Detroit still had churches which

were restricted to light-skinned blacks. If dark-skinned blacks dared to attend these churches, ways and means were found to discourage them; if they persisted, then the light-skinned blacks would leave that church and found another one.

At that time the only blacks in the auto plants were in foundry, paint, sanding, grinding—all very unhealthy jobs; or they were janitors, the most menial job. In fact, I was one of the first blacks to become a material handler in the Chrysler plant. Those few blacks who were in the Chrysler, Briggs, or GM plants, however, played a role in bringing other blacks into the labor movement. They took part in the slowdowns; they stayed in the plants like white workers, even when the white workers still called them "boy" and "uncle" and did not think of them as in any sense equal.

In this period, when there were some 18 to 20 million unemployed in the country and over a million on welfare, WPA, and in CG camps in Michigan, the formation of the union was viewed in some quarters as a threat to blacks, especially at the Ford Motor Company. Ford had followed a policy of hiring by ethnic groups, approximately 10 percent from each ethnic group, and as a result black workers had achieved a higher status at Ford than anywhere else. Inside the foundry Ford had allowed blacks to become skilled workers: pipe fitters, moulders, and, in a few cases, machinists and foremen. Ford also influenced the black ministers in Detroit, who would often preach sermons about the benevolence of Ford, in its hiring of blacks. In a period when GM, Chrysler, and Hudson hired only a few blacks, and when the only way you could get anything to eat was by working, Ford looked like a savior to black folks, even though at Ford blacks were doing most of the dirtiest and crudest work—just as blacks have been doing in this country from the very beginning. During slavery, while whites were able to go West and start their own farms, blacks were kept on the plantations down South, to clear the land and to grow the cotton, which could then be sold to England in order to buy the machines which the underdeveloped United States needed for its industrialization. Thus black labor on the plantations laid the infrastructure for the capital accumulation which the Northeastern states needed for their mechanization.

At Chrysler and GM, as well as at Ford, blacks did the dirtiest work in the service areas, while white workers, even if they had just come from Europe and didn't know any English, or had just migrated from the South, got the jobs on the production line and in skilled crafts. This continued until the Second World War when the threat of a march on Washington made it necessary for the United States to use blacks in defense plants. First a few black men and then a few black women came into the plant. This was followed by a mass influx of black workers, men and women.

#### The War Years: Social Struggle in the Plant

Beginning with this mass influx of black workers—which took place in the Detroit area in 1942 and 1943—black workers began to create a new social milieu and an arena of struggle inside the plant. For the first time whites were confronted directly with many of the contradictions which they had been evading because of their position of privilege and isolation from blacks. White men and white women were forced to confront questions which they had never dreamed of—and which at the time seemed monumental. Would they or would they not sit on the same toilet stool as blacks? Would they or would they not eat in the same restaurant or cafeteria? Would they work side by side with blacks? Many times the line would grind to a halt because a white worker would answer these questions in the negative, believing confidently that the whole future of civilization depended on his refusing to sit on the same toilet stool as a black man.

Leading to even more vicious controversy was the question of whether black men had a right to talk to white women—even when the conversation might be related only to the job. If a white man saw a black man talking to a white woman, he would saunter over to check on the conversation and to see whether he could intimidate the black man enough so that he would split.

The shop at that time was made up of several categories of workers. The white workers—of Irish, Scotch, German, English or Southern-white descent—spoke English. Then there were the "bohunks" or "buffaloes," as they were called, mean-

ing the East Europeans, who were still speaking broken English and who were looked down upon by the white workers in the first category. The Italians at that time had not yet "made it" into the American power structure. It was not until several years after the Second World War that Italians began to be elected mayors of big cities—which is usually the sign in this country that an ethnic group has "arrived." In those years Italians were still being called "wops" and "dagoes" and "guineas" which, in the sliding scale of derogatory names that in this country has always revealed the relative positions of various ethnic groups, was much less derogatory than the name applied to blacks, who were still just "niggers."

The tensions and conflicts arising from the influx of blacks into the plants were many. But for several reasons these tensions rarely broke into serious physical hostility inside the plant. First, most blacks and whites still had some pretty vivid recollections of the depression and how difficult it had been to get work. Second, there was the crisis of the war. And finally, there was the union which kept before both blacks and whites the idea of solidarity of the workers against the boss and the need to keep the production lines moving for the boys at the front.

The war years were years of social struggle (1) between blacks and whites who were learning how to accept each other as workmates, (2) by black workers who were fighting for upgrading to job classifications heretofore reserved only for whites, and (3) by the union which was struggling to solidify its position as the representative of the workers in the plant. The black workers were constantly putting the union stewards and committeemen on the spot on racial issues, forcing the union leadership to take a positive stand on the issue of racial equality, even when it was trying to evade the issue. Often the union leaders were able to pacify the white workers only by holding the threat of the war over their heads.

During the war years there was very little economic struggle because the wages of workers had been frozen by the government. Ford, as you know, was the last of the big auto corporations to be organized. At Ford the basis was laid for the union bureaucracy because, after first resisting the union, Ford gave in and established the union committeemen's room right in the shop.

### Economics Takes Command

When the war ended in 1945, black workers were able, for the first time in history, to remain in the shop because they had acquired seniority by staying in one plant, while white workers jumped about from plant to plant. With the end of the war the union quickly shifted the focus of its activities to economic issues. It quickly established dues checkoff, which guaranteed the union its funds, the cost of living clauses which provided for automatic wage adjustments, pension funds, SUB funds, the five-year contract, etc. Management conceded these in exchange for the right to control production and the work schedule.

In the early 1950s the McCarthy era put an end to radicalism in the plant, and the era of Reutherism began. Reuther symbolized the complete integration of the labor movement into the values of the capitalist system. The union became just another economic entity seeking to gain for the workers their share of the capitalist spoils or capitalist pie.

### Integration Via Rebellion

The eruption of the black movement in the fifties and sixties, coinciding with the decline of the union into an adjunct of the system, created new tensions inside the shop between black and white workers. White workers were interested only in economic issues, but black workers, stimulated by the struggles of blacks outside the shop, began to raise questions inside the shop about the racist character of this entire society, including both the company and the union. When young black militants were hired into the shop after the big rebellions of 1967-1968 these tensions increased.

However, most of these black militants had very romantic illusions about the power of black workers to make "the revolution" by taking over the unions and the plants, and it wasn't long before most of them were fired. Meanwhile, as a result of the rebellions and black militancy, the company upgraded more and more blacks to the positions of foremen, labor relations, supervisors, etc.

As a result, blacks today are integrated into both the union bureaucracy and low-level management just like white workers. In the process blacks have become just as individualistic and

materialistic as white workers, adopting the values of the capitalist system just like white workers. So when black and white workers unite to fight today, they are not fighting to transform the society but only to get more of the capitalist spoils for themselves.

### The New Challenge

What I have said tonight cannot cover in any depth the struggle of black workers in auto. To believe that I could do this in these few minutes would be an insult to your intelligence. What I have tried to convey to you is that we should not have any illusion that black or white workers represent a socialist force just because both are interested in the same economic issues. In reality, as each group has become more incorporated into the system, its members have become more individualistic, more consumer-oriented. White or black, white and black, all they want is more wages, more wages, more benefits, more goods.

What we have witnessed over the last 40 years has been the phase of militant economic struggles by the working class and the assimilation of blacks into these economic struggles inside the plant, just as they have been assimilated into bourgeois politics outside the plant. All each group is interested in is "more"—more wages, more benefits, more goods. How lacking they both are in any sense of class solidarity with the oppressed was demonstrated by their behavior during the Vietnam War, when it was impossible to get any group of workers, black or white, to oppose the war. The groups formed by radical organizations and claiming to represent workers in the plant were paper organizations made up of a few radicals.

Up to this time U.S. capitalism has been able to give the workers their "more" because of the relatively free hand it has had in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. But the defeat which it had to accept in Indochina has brought that era to an end. The present crisis in energy, in food, in raw materials of all kinds, demonstrates that the chickens have come home to roost.

The time has come to challenge all workers and all blacks with the question of what responsibility they are ready to assume

in reorganizing this society. At this stage both are only complaining about the oil industry, as if all they need to do is blame the system without accepting any responsibility themselves to change the system.

The question that faces all those who are interested in the past struggles of workers in this country—white or black—is not whether the two will at some point be militant together but, what they be militant for?

## Help Save Famine Victims

One of the worst disasters in living memory has afflicted Ethiopia and six other West African nations. Long years of drought and negligence on the part of government in responding to the problem have destroyed most livestock and crops, bringing starvation, death, and disease.

In Ethiopia alone more than five million people are directly affected. In most affected areas entire communities have perished and cattle has been decimated by 80%-90%. Even if they manage to survive, a generation of children may have their physical and intellectual development crippled by malnutrition and disease.

You can help! Send contributions to:

**"Committee to Help Famine Victims  
in Ethiopia"**  
Bank acct. # 073-014-559  
Chemical Bank  
2681 Broadway  
New York, N.Y. 10025

For more information write to the committee:

P.O. Box 274  
New York, N.Y. 10025

## National Demonstration in Support of the Independence of Puerto Rico Madison Square Garden October 27

### for a Bi-Centennial Without Colonies!

The action at Madison Square Garden must include thousands of Black people expressing a solidarity which has tremendous potential both for ourselves and our Puerto Rican brothers and sisters.

Ban Chavis  
National Alliance Against Racist & Political Repression

North Americans are struggling for their own independence when they struggle for Puerto Rican independence... it is the same copper companies, the same pantagon that we are both fighting...  
David Dellinger  
Liberation Magazine

The most important thing that Puerto Ricans can do to support the American Indian movement is to gain their own independence from United States domination.  
Clyde Bellecourt  
American Indian Movement

**THE MOMENT OF UNITY IS HERE.** It is up to us, people living in the U.S., to make the government stop its illegal and immoral activity in Puerto Rico, to pull out its troops and stop its repressive intervention—to get out of the Puerto Rican people's lives.  
 I/my organization wish (es) to sponsor the demonstration at Madison Square Garden. Please use my name on your sponsor list.  
 I/we wish to be a sustainer of the Committee. Here is my check for \$100, which entitles me to a special seat on the garden floor during the activity.  
 I/we wish to purchase a block of tickets. Send Information.  
 Here is a contribution for "Kick-off" money.  
 I/we would like to contribute some time. Get in touch.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
Puerto Rican Solidarity Day Committee PO 319 Cooper Station NYC 10003



**madison square garden**

Pennsylvania Plaza, 7th Ave. 01st to 23rd Sts.

