Looking at the White Working Class Historically

by David Gilbert, September 18, 1984

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One of the supreme issues for our movement is summed-up in the contradictions of the term "white working class". On one hand there is the class designation that should imply, along with all other workers of the world, a fundamental role in the overthrow of capitalism. On the other hand, there is the identification of being part of a ("white") oppressor nation.

Historically, we must admit that the identity with the oppressor nation has been primary. There have been times of fierce struggle around economic issues but precious little in the way of a revolutionary challenge to the system itself. There have been moments of uniting with Black and other Third World workers in union struggles, but more often than not an opposition to full equality and a disrespect for the self-determination of other oppressed peoples. These negative trends have been particularly pronounced within the current era of history (since WW2). White labor has been either a legal opposition within or an active component of the U.S. imperial system.

There have been two basic responses to this reality by the white left. 1) The main position by far has been opportunism. This has entailed an unwillingness to recognize the leading role within the U.S. of national liberation struggles, a failure to make the fight against white supremacy a conscious and prime element of all organizing, and, related to the above, a general lack of revolutionary combativeness against the imperial state. More specifically, opportunism either justifies the generally racist history of the white working class and our left or romanticizes that history by presenting it as much more anti-racist than reality merits. 2) Our own tendency, at its best moments, has recognized the leading role of national liberation and the essential position of solidarity to building any revolutionary consciousness among whites. We have often, however, fallen into an elitist or perhaps defeatist view that dismisses the possibility of organizing significant numbers of white people particularly working class whites.

There is very little analysis, and even less practice, that is both real about the nature and consciousness of the white working class and yet holds out the prospect of organizing a large number on a revolutionary basis. This fissure will not be joined by some magical leap of abstract thought – either by evoking classical theories of class or by lapsing into cultural or biological determinism. We must use our tools of analysis (materialism) to understand concretely how this contradiction developed (historically). But an historical view can not be static. In seeing how certain forces developed, we must also look (dialectically) at under what conditions and through what means the contradiction can be transformed.

In this review, I want to look at three historical studies that contribute to the needed discussion: 1) Ted Allen's two essays in White Supremacy (a

collection printed by Sojourner Truth Organization); 2) W.E.B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction (New York: 1933) 3); J. Sakai, Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat (Chicago: 1983)

A) Ted Allen's White Supremacy In The U.S.; Slavery And The Origins Of Racism

Allen's two essays provide us with a very cogent and useful account of the development of the structure of white supremacy in the U.S. He shows both how this system was consciously constructed by the colonial ("Plantation Bourgeoisie") ruling class and what was the initial impact on the development of the white laborers. Contrary to the cynical view that racism is a basic to human nature and that there always have been (and therefore always will be) a fundamental racial antagonism, Allen show that systematic white supremacy developed in a particular historical period, for specific material reasons.

"Up to the 1680's little distinction was made in the status of Blacks and English and other Europeans held in involuntary servitude. Contrary to common belief the status of Blacks in the first seventy years of Virginia colony was not that of racial, lifelong, hereditary slavery, and the majority of the whites who came were not free". Black and white servants intermarried, escaped together, and rebelled together." (p.3)

A rapidly developing plantation system required an expanding labor supply. The solution was both to have more servants and to employ them for longer terms. A move from fixed-term servitude (e.g., 7 years) to perpetual slavery would be valuable to the ruling class of the new plantation economy. The question for analysis is not so much why there was a transition to chattel slavery but why it was not imposed on the white servants as well as on the Blacks. To analyze this development we need to understand that any method of exploiting labor requires a system of social control.

There were a series of servile rebellions that threatened the plantation system in the period preceding the transition to racially designated chattel slavery and white supremacy. Allen cites numerous examples. In 1661 Black and Irish servants joined in an insurrectionary plot in Bermuda. In 1663, in Virginia, there was an insurrection for the common freedom of Blacks, whites and Indian servants. In the next 20 years, there were no fewer than ten popular and servile revolts and plots in Virginia. Also many Black and white servants successfully escaped (to Indian territories) and established free societies.

Allen places particular emphasis on Bacon's rebellion which began in April 1676. This was a struggle within the ruling class over "Indian policy", but Bacon resorted to arming white and Black servants, promising them freedom. Allen says "the transcendent importance" of this revolt is that "the armed working class, Black and white, fought side by side for the abolition of slavery."

He mentions, but doesn't deal with the reality, that Bacon's cause was to exterminate the Indians. Allen's focus is on the formation of chattel slavery, but it is a problem that he doesn't analyze the other major foundation of white supremacy: the theft of Native lands through genocide.

The 20 year period of servile rebellions made the issue of social control urgent for the plantation bourgeoisie, at the same time as they economically needed to move to a system of perpetual slavery. The purpose of creating a basic White/Black division was in order to have one section of labor police and control the other. As Allen says, "The non-slavery of white labor was the indispensable condition for the slavery of black labor".

A series of laws were passed and practices imposed that forged a qualitative distinction between white and Black labor. In 1661 a Virginia law imposed twice the penalty time for escaped English bond-servants who ran away in the company of an African life-time bond-servant. Heavy penalties were imposed on white women servants who bore children fathered by Africans. One of the very first white slave privileges was the exemption of white servant women from work in the fields and the requirements through taxes to force Black children to go to work at twelve, while white servant children were excused until they were fourteen. In 1680, Negroes were forbidden to carry arms, defensive or offensive. At the same time, it was made legal to kill a Negro fugitive bond-servant who resisted recapture.

What followed 1680 was a 25 year period of laws that systematically drew the color line as the limit on various economic, social, and political rights. By 1705, "the distinction between white servants and Black slavery were fixed: Black slaves were to be held in life long hereditary slavery and whites for five years, with many rights and protections afforded to them by law." (p.6)

We can infer from these series of laws that white laborers were not "innately racist" before the material and social distinctions were drawn. This is evidenced by the rulers' need to impose very harsh penalties against white servants who escaped with Blacks or who bore them children. As historian Philip Bruce observed of this period, many white servants "...had only recently arrived from England, and were therefore comparatively free from... race prejudice."

The white bond-servants now could achieve freedom after 5 years service: the white women and children, at least, were freed from the most arduous labor. The white bond servant, once freed, had the prospect of the right to vote and to own land (at the Indians' expense).

These privileges did not come from the kindness of the planters' hearts nor from some form of racial solidarity. (Scottish coal miners were held in slavery in the same period of time.) Quite simply, the poor whites were needed and used as a force to suppress the main labor force: the African chattel slaves.

The poor white men constituted the rank and file of the militias and later (beginning in 1727) the slave patrols. They were given added benefits, such as tax exemptions to do so. By 1705, after Blacks had been stripped of the legal right to self-defense, the white bond servant was given a musket upon completion of servitude. There was such a clear and conscious strategy that by 1698 there were even "deficiency laws" that required the plantation owners to maintain a certain ratio of white to African servants. The English Parliament, in 1717, passed a law making transportation to bond-servitude in the plantation colonies a legal punishment for crime. Another example of this conscious design is revealed in the Council of Trade and Plantation report to the king in 1721 saying that in South Carolina "Black slaves have lately attempted and were very nearly succeeding in a new revolution – and therefore, it may be necessary to propose some new law for encouraging the entertainment of more white servants in the future."

It would be important to have a concomitant analysis of the role of the theft of Indian land and of the impact of the slave trade itself. Allen's analysis of early plantation labor, however, provides an invaluable service.

When Black and white labor were in the same conditions of servitude, there was a good deal of solidarity. A system of white supremacy was consciously constructed in order to 1) extend and intensify exploitation (through chattel slavery) and 2) have shock troops (poor, but now privileged, whites) to suppress slave rebellions. Thus the 1680-1705 period is a critical benchmark essential to understanding all subsequent North American history. As Allen tells us, "It was the bourgeoisie's deliberately contrived policy of differentiation between white and Black labor through the system of white skin privileges for white labor that allowed the bourgeoisie to use the poor whites as an instrument of social control over the Black workers." (p.5)

Allen refers to, but doesn't fully develop, the impact of white supremacy on the white laborers. His general analysis is that by strengthening capitalist rule it reinforced exploitation of whites too: "...white supremacy (was) the keystone of capitalist rule which left white labor poor, exploited and increasingly powerless with respect to their rulers and exploiters." But since "the mass of poor whites was alienated from the black proletariat and enlisted as enforcers of bourgeois power." (p.40), it would be useful to have more analysis of the interplay of these two contradictory roles: exploited/enforcers. In any case, the overall effect was to break the white workers from their proletarian class struggle alongside Blacks and to bind them more tightly to their own ruling class.

B) W.E.B. DuBois Black Reconstruction 1860-1880

DuBois' work is a classic study, an absolutely essential reading to understanding U.S. history. The book deals not only with the Reconstruction period that followed the Civil War but also with the War itself and the period

of slavery preceding it. This review will only focus on the insights about the relationship of white labor to Black people and their struggles. There are, however, two essential theses that DuBois puts forward that should be pointed out here.

1. The slaves were not freed by Lincoln's or by the Union's benevolence. The slaves essentially freed themselves. First they fled the plantations in great numbers, depleting the South of labor for its wartime economy. Secondly, they volunteered to fight with the Union to defeat the slavocracies. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 came only when Lincoln realized that he needed to use Black troops in order to win the war. (It applied only to states at war with the Union). 200,000 Black troops made the decisive difference in the war.

2. Reconstruction was not this period of unbridled corruption and of heartless oppression of the noble (white) South that has since been depicted by the propaganda of history. Not only did Reconstruction see the active role of Black people in the government, but also, based on that, it was an era of democratic reform that brought such things as free public education, public works, and advances in women's rights to the South. At the same time, DuBois shows how Reconstruction was defeated by a systematic campaign of terror, with the complicity of the capitalist North.

DuBois' analysis of the pre-war south, starts with the basic structures (whose origins Allen described) in place and well developed. The system of slavery demanded a special police force and such a force was made possible and unusually effective by the presence of poor whites. By this time there were "more white people to police the slaves than there were slaves". (p.12)

Still, there were very important class differentiations within the white population. 7% of the total white Southern population owned 3/4 of the slaves. 70% owned no slaves at all. To DuBois, a basic issue is why the poor whites would agree to police the slaves. Since slavery competed with and thereby undercut the wages of white labor in the North, wouldn't it seem natural for poor whites in general to oppose slavery?

DuBois presents two main reasons: 1) Poor whites were provided with non-laboring jobs as overseers, slave-drivers, members of slave patrols. (DuBois doesn't indicate what percentage of whites held jobs like this). 2) There was the "vanity" of feeling associated with the master and the dislike of "negro" toil. The poor white never considered himself a laborer, rather he aspired to himself own slaves. These aspirations were not without some basis. (About 1/4 of the Southern white population were petty bourgeois, small slave-owners).

"The result was that the system was held stable and intact by the poor white... Gradually the whole white South became an armed and commissioned camp to keep Negroes in slavery and to kill the black rebel." (p.12)

There was another factor that had heavy impact on both poor whites in the South and the Northern working class. In early America, land was free (based on genocide of the Indians) and thus acquiring property was a possibility for nearly every thrifty worker. This access to property not only created a new petty bourgeoisie emerging out of the white working class, it also created an ideology of individual advancement rather than collective class struggle as the answer to exploitation.

The Northern working class tended to oppose the spread of slavery but not oppose slavery itself. If slavery came to the North it would compete with and undercut free labor. If the plantation system spread to the West, it would monopolize the land that white workers aspired to settle as small farmers. But there was very little pro-abolition sentiment in the white labor movement. Northern white labor saw the threat of competition for jobs from the fugitive slaves and the potentially millions behind them if abolition prevailed in the South. There was considerable racism toward freed Blacks in the North.

The most downtrodden sector of white workers – the immigrants – might seem to have had the least stake in white supremacy. But the racism had its strongest expression among these sections because at the bottom layer of white labor, they felt most intensely the competition from Blacks for jobs, and blamed Blacks for their low wages. During the Civil War, the Irish and other immigrant workers were the base for the "anti-draft" riots in the Northern cities. These were really straight out murderous race riots against the local Black population.

For DuBois, the position of the Northern working class, appears somewhat irrational. Freed slaves did represent, its true, potential competition for jobs. However, DuBois argues, "What they (white workers) failed to comprehend was that the black man enslaved was an even more formidable and fatal competition than the black man free." (p. 20)

This analysis seems inadequate. As materialists we have to wonder why such a formidable consensus of a class and its organizations would hold a position over a long period of time that was opposed to their interests. In addition to the issue of competition, we must ask if the super-exploitation of black labor was used to provide some additional benefits for white labor – in a way, did the formation of the U.S. empire anticipate some of the basic oppressor/oppressed worker relations described by Lenin with the development of imperialism? Certainly the issue in relationship to the Native Americans is clear: genocide provided the land which allowed many white workers to "rise" out of their class (which also strengthened the bargaining power of remaining laborers). This reality firmly implanted one of the main pillars of white supremacy. There were undoubtedly also some direct benefits from the super-exploitation of slave labor for the white working class that DuBois does not analyze. Data presented in Settlers indicates that white American workers earned much higher wages than their British counterparts.

DuBois sees the material basis of white labor antagonism to Blacks as based in competition for jobs and its impact on wage levels. On the other hand he sees the existence of a slave strata as even worse competition. But how did this second aspect play itself out? Perhaps as direct competition only for the white working class in the South. But here there was the counterforce of slavery being the direct basis for a large section of whites to become petty bourgeois, while others got jobs overseeing and controlling Black labor. It isn't clear how slavery in the South would directly compete with Northern labor – and on the contrary some benefits might be passed on as a result of the super exploitation of Black labor. Certainly first the wealth generated by King Cotton and then the availability of the cheap raw materials were cornerstones of the Northern industrialization that provided and expanded jobs.

Further, this issue can not be treated in isolation from the other main pillar of white supremacy – the availability of land based on genocide of the Native Americans. It is doubtful that the capitalist class would have opened up the West for settlement without a guarantee of still having an adequate supply of cheap labor for industrialization. Earlier in England, to prepare the way for manufacture, there had been the brutal enclosure movements which forced peasants off the land in order to create a large supply of cheap labor. In North America, the movement was in the opposite direction: people were actually settling the land, becoming peasants, while manufacture was developing. It is unlikely this would have been allowed without 1) slavery to guarantee cheap labor for the main cash crops and raw materials, and 2) an influx of immigrant labor into the Northern cities.

In any case, the predominant position among Northern labor opposed the spread of slavery but did not favor abolition; these positions were punctuated by occasional race riots with a white working class base. In addition to the aspiration to rise to the petty bourgeoisie, a labor aristocracy began to develop in the prewar period, usually based in longer established white settlers as opposed to the immigrant workers. After 1850 unions of skilled labor began to separate from common labor. These skilled unions established closed shops that excluded Blacks and farmers.

After the Civil War the defeat of the slavocracy, the presence of the Union Army, the reality of thousands of armed Black troops, all should have created radically new conditions and possibilities for Black/poor white alliance in the South. DuBois, in his very positive view of Reconstruction, goes so far as to describe it as "a dictatorship of labor" (p. 187) in the South. Reconstruction with the important Black role in Southern politics, did mean a lot of democratic reforms while it lasted. There are some significant indications of poor whites allying. For example, early on in Reconstruction, Mississippi and South Carolina had popular conventions with significant poor white involvement. The Jim Crow laws, later passed in Mississippi, found it necessary to place severe

strictures against whites associating with Blacks. But there isn't much evidence of a solid alliance from any large sector of poor whites.

The basis for an alliance seems clear. The basic problem of Reconstruction was economic; the kernel of the economy was land. Both freed slaves and poor whites had an interest in acquiring land. It would seem logical to have an alliance to expropriate the old plantation owners.

DuBois gives several reasons why this alliance didn't come to fruition: 1) Poor whites were determined to keep Blacks from access to the better land from which slavery had driven the white peasants (i.e., if people took over ownership of land they had worked, the ex-slaves would get the choice plantation land.) 2) Poor whites were afraid that the planters would control the Black vote and thus be able to politically defeat the poor white's class aspirations. 3) Petty bourgeois whites still wanted to have cheap Black labor to exploit. 4) White labor was determined to keep Blacks from work that competed with them; poor whites were desperately afraid of losing their jobs. 5) White labor, while given low wages, were compensated with social status, such as access to public parks, schools, etc.; the police were drawn from their ranks; the courts treated them leniently. In short, white labor saw a threat to their racial prerogatives in every advance of the Blacks.

These reasons were all very real. However, it is not clear on the face of it, why they should override the potential for joint expropriation of the plantation owners. We also must look at a factor that DuBois mentions but does not develop sufficiently, the power backing up Reconstruction was the Union Army. Despite the importance of Black troops, there is no indication that the Union Army as a structured institution was ever anything over than an instrument of Northern capital. Northern capital wanted to break the national political power of the old plantation owners (hence the Black vote) but they certainly didn't want to support the liquidation of private property, even in the South. In fact, by 1868 the Union Army had forcibly retaken almost all the plantation land seized and worked by communities of freed slaves. (See Vincent Harding, There Is A River) Thus died the promise of "40 acres and a mule".

Thus, DuBois' characterization of Reconstruction as a "dictatorship of labor" backed by the Union Army seems overdrawn. He is much more on the mark when he says "It was inconceivable, therefore, that the masters of Northern industry through their growing control of American government, were going to allow the laborers of the South any more real control of wealth and industry than was necessary to curb the political power of the planters..." (p.345)

It seems to me that with the presence and dominance of Union troops, the joint expropriation of the old plantations did not appear as a very tangible possibility. It is in that context, that the poor whites' overwhelming choice was to try to reconsolidate their old white privileges. (This would also be the natural

spontaneous choice given the history and culture.) The power context also reflects on the question of alignments on a national scale.

Looking nationwide, DuBois reasons, "there should have been [emphasis added]... a union between champions of universal suffrage and the rights of freedmen, together with the leaders of labor, the small landholders of the West, and logically the poor whites of the South" against the Northern industrial oligarchy and the former Southern oligarchy. (p.239) This union never took place. DuBois cites two main reasons:

1. The old anti-Black labor rivalry.

2. The old dream of becoming small farmers in the West becoming a dream of labor-exploiting farmers and land speculation.

Here again DuBois' explanation, while helpful, does not seem to be sufficiently materialist; the implication seems to be white workers going against their more basic material interest. We need to also specify some of the concrete benefits that accrued to white labor at the expense of Black (and Indian) subjugation. Also to reiterate, these choices took place in the context of a vigorous and rising U.S. capitalism. The prospect of white supremacist rewards that capitalists could offer must have seemed very real and immediate while the prospect of overthrowing private property (which would necessitate alliance with Blacks) must have seemed difficult and distant.

By the 1870's, the labor movement in the North saw the growth of craft and race unions. "Skilled labor proceeded to share in the exploitation of the reservoir of low-paid common labor" (p.597). The position of common labor was greatly weakened since their strikes and violence could not succeed with skilled labor and engineers to keep the machinery going.

In the South, the poor whites became the shock troops for the mass terror that destroyed the gains of Black Reconstruction. DuBois explains that the overthrow of Reconstruction was a property – not a race – war. Still, the poor whites involved were not simply tools of property. They perceived their own interests in attacking the Black advances. In fact, some of the early examples of Klan-style violence that DuBois provides show such bands attacking the old-planters as well as the freed slaves.

DuBois documents, state by state, the war of terror that defeated Reconstruction. Here, I will indicate it with one example: In Texas, during the height of the war, there were an average of 60 homicides per month. Black Reconstruction was also defeated with the complicity of Northern capital which was sealed with the withdrawal of Union troops in 1877. The defeat of Reconstruction meant that the color line had been used to establish a new dictatorship of property in the South. For Black labor, this meant a move back toward slavery in the form

of sharecropping, Jim Crow laws, and violent repression. For white labor, their active support of the "color caste" (white supremacy) immeasurably strengthened the power of capital, which ruled over them.

C) J. Sakai's Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat

While Allen and DuBois focus on specific periods, Sakai sketches the whole time from the first European settlement to the current time. Also, Sakai examines the relationship of the white proletariat to Native Americans, Mexicanos, and Asians, as well as to the Black nation.

This, of course, is quite a scope to cover in one book. Sakai starts from an explicit political perspective: what is called the "United States" ... "is really a Euroamerican settler empire, built on colonially oppressed nations and peoples..." In this light, a lot is revealed about U.S. history that is not only quite different from what we learned in school but that also debunks interpretations generally put out by the white left.

Even for those of us who think we understand the white supremacist core of U.S. history, reading Settlers is still quite an education. To take one stark example, when the Europeans first arrived there were an estimated 10 million Natives in North America. By 1900, there were only 300,000. Sakai also critiques the white supremacist nature of movements mythologized by the left such as Bacon's Rebellion, Jacksonian Democracy, and the struggle for the 8 hour work day. Sakai shows that integral to most advances of "democratic" reform for white workers was an active consolidation of privileges at the expense of colonized Third World peoples.

In covering such a range, there are some points of interpretations that could be questioned. Overall it is a very revealing and useful look at U.S. history. For this review, I just want to look at one period, the 1930's. Then we also will examine the overall political conclusions that Sakai draws.

The Depression of the 1930's was a time of intensified class struggle, the building of the CIO, the famed sit-down strikes such as Flint, the height of the Communist Party USA. The CIO of this period has often been praised by leftists as exemplary in including Black workers in its organizing drive.

Sakai sees the essence of the period as the integration of the various European immigrant minorities into the privileges of the settler nation (white Amerika). In return, as U.S. imperialism launched its drive for world hegemony, it could depend upon the armies of solidly united settlers (including the whole white working class) serving imperialism at home and on the battlefield. The New Deal ended industrial serfdom and gave the European "ethnic" national minorities integration as Amerikans by sharply raising their privileges – but only in the settler way: in government regulated unions loyal to U.S. imperialism.

Where the CIO organized Black workers it was utilitarian rather than principled. By the 1930's Black labor had come to play a strategic role in 5 industries (usually performing the dirtiest and most hazardous jobs at lower pay): automotive, steel, meat packing, coal, railroads. Thus, in a number of industrial centers, the CIO unions could not be secure without controlling Afrikan (Black) labor. "The CIO's policy, then, became to promote integration under settler leadership where Afrikan labor was numerous and strong (such as the foundries, the meat packing plants, etc.) and to maintain segregation and Jim Crow in situations where Afrikan labor was numerically lesser and weak. Integration and segregation were but two aspects of the same settler hegemony." (p.86)

At the same time, it was CIO practice to reserve the skilled crafts and more desirable production jobs for white (male) workers. For example, the first UAW/GM contract that resulted from the great Flint sit-down strike contained a "noninterchangibility" clause which in essence made it illegal for Black workers to move up from being janitors or foundry workers. Such policy came on the heels of Depression trends that had forced Blacks out of the better jobs. Between 1930-1936 some 50% of all Afrikan skilled workers were pushed out of their jobs.

Roosevelt's support of the CIO came from a strategy to control and channel the class struggle. A significant factor in the success of the 1930's union organizing drives was the government's refusal to use armed repression. No U.S. armed forces were used against Euro-Amerikan workers from 1933-1941. This policy was in marked contrast to, for example, the attack on the Nationalist party in Puerto Rico. In 1937, one month after President Roosevelt refused to use force against the Flint sit-down strike, U.S. police opened fire on a peaceful nationalist parade in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Nineteen Puerto Rican citizens were killed and over 100 wounded. While leftists committed to organizing of the 30's might want to bring in different examples and argue Sakai's interpretations, I think that overall subsequent history of the CIO has been clear: it has both reinforced white monopolies on preferred jobs and has been a loyal component of U.S. imperial policy abroad.

What conclusions about the white working class can we draw from this history? Sakai takes a definite and challenging position. Settlers is addressed, internally, for discussion among Third World revolutionaries. Still, it is important for us to grapple with its politics and to apply those lessons to our own situation and responsibilities.

Sakai's general view of the history is that the masses of whites have advanced themselves primarily by oppressing Third World people – not by any means of class struggle. Also that for most of U.S. history the proletariat has been a colonial proletariat, made up only of oppressed Afrikan, Indian, Latino and Asian workers. On top of this basic history, U.S.

imperial hegemony after WW2 raised privileges to another level. “Those expansionist years of 1945-1965... saw the final promotion of the white proletariat. This was an en masse promotion so profound that it eliminated not only consciousness, but the class itself.” (p.147)

Thus, for Sakai, there is an oppressor nation but it doesn’t have a worker class, at least not in any politically meaningful sense of the term. To buttress this position Sakai, 1) discusses the supra-class cultural and ideological unification in the white community; 2) points to the much higher standard of living for white-Americans; and 3) presents census statistics to indicate that whites are predominantly (over 60%) bourgeois, middle class and labor aristocracy. Here, Sakai enumerates class based solely on white male jobs in order to correct for situations where the woman’s lower status job is a second income for the family involved. This method, however, fails to take account of the growing number of families where the woman’s wages are the primary income. The methodological question also relates to the potential for women’s oppression to be a source for a progressive current within the white working class.

In a way, Sakai puts forward a direct negation of the opportunist “Marxist” position that makes class designation everything and liquidates the distinction between oppressed and oppressor nation.

Sakai’s survey of U.S. history understates the examples of fierce class struggle within the oppressor nation which imply at least some basis for dissatisfaction and disloyalty by working whites. Still, these examples – defined primarily around economic demands and usually resolved by consolidation of privileges relative to Third World workers – can not be parlayed into a history of “revolutionary class struggle”.

Class consciousness can not be defined solely by economic demands. At its heart, it is a movement toward the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. “Proletariat internationalism” – solidarity with all other peoples oppressed and exploited by imperialism – is a necessary and essential feature of revolutionary class consciousness. In our condition, this requires up front support for and alliance with the oppressed nations, particularly those within the U.S. (Black, Mexicano, Native). Thus white supremacy and class consciousness can not peacefully co-exist with each other. One chokes off the other. An honest view of the 350 year history clearly shows that the alignment with white supremacy has predominated over the revolutionary class consciousness.

Furthermore, the culture of a more or less unified, supra-class, white supremacist outlook is also a very important factor. That culture is a reflection of a common history as part of an oppressor nation; it also becomes a material force in perpetuating that outlook and those choices.

Common culture is a format to organize even those whites with the least material stake in white supremacy.

All the above considerations, however, do not provide a complete class analysis. There are other aspects of people's relationship to the mode of production which are important. A central distinction is between those who own or control the means of production (e.g., corporations, banks, real estate) and families who live by wages or salaries, i.e., by working for someone else. Those who live by the sale of labor power have little control or access to the basic power that determines the purpose of production and the direction of society as a whole. In the best of times, most white workers may feel comfortable; in periods of crisis, the stress might be felt and resolved on qualitatively different lines within the oppressor nation (e.g., which class bears the costs of an imperialist war or feels the brunt of economic decline). Even among whites, those who aren't in control have a basic interest in a transformation of society. It may not be expressed in "standard of living" (goods that can be purchased) as much as in the quality of life (e.g., war, environment, health, and the impact of racism, sexism, decadence). Crises can bring these contradictions more to the surface, expressing the necessity to reorganize society.

In my view there definitely is a white working class. It is closely tied to imperialism; the labor aristocracy is the dominant sector, the class as a whole has been corrupted by white supremacy; but, the class within the oppressor nation that lives by the sale of their labor power has not disappeared. This is not just an academic distinction; under certain historical conditions it can have important meaning.

A dialectical analysis goes beyond description to look at both the process of development and the potential for transformation. This is the great value of the Ted Allen essays. They show how white supremacy was a conscious construction by the ruling class under specific historical conditions. This implies that, under different historical conditions, there also can be a conscious deconstruction by oppressed nations, women, and the working class. Our analysis has to look for potential historical changes and movement activity that could promote revolutionary consciousness within the white working class.

In approaching such an analysis, we must guard against the mechanical notion that economic decline will in itself lessen racism. The lessons from DuBois' description of the "anti-draft" riots of the 1860's (as well as our experience over the last 20 years) shows the opposite to be true. Under economic pressure, the spontaneous tendency is to fight harder for white supremacy. While the absolute value of privilege might decrease, the relative value is usually increasing as Third World people abroad and within the U.S. bear the worst hardships of the crisis. The white workers

closest to the level of Third World workers can be the most virulent and violent in fighting for white supremacy.

Rarely have major sectors of the white working class been won over to revolutionary consciousness based on a reform interest. Imperialism in ascendancy has been able to offer them more bread and butter than the abstraction of international solidarity. But a more fundamental interest could emerge in a situation where imperialism in crisis can't deliver and where the possibility of replacing imperialism with a more humane system becomes tangible.

D) Some Lessons From The Sixties

In the 60's and 70's, it appeared as though the rapid advance of national liberation was remaking the world in the direction of socialism. In the past 12 years, the painful setbacks, have shown just how difficult it is to create a viable alternative to underdevelopment in the Third World. Today we are in an historical juncture of crisis in social practice and theory. Nonetheless, given prevailing conditions, the contradictions and social struggles are likely to continue to be most intense in the Third World. Now, however, we have no clear guidelines as to when, how, or even if these struggles can lead to socialism in the world.

While it is discouraging to no longer have a defined outline for the triumph of world revolution, the human stake in the outcome of the social crises and struggles does not allow us the luxury of demoralization. We have to make our most intelligent and concerted effort to maximize the potential for humanitarian and liberatory change.

Solidarity with the Third World struggles has to become our top priority for both humanitarian and strategic reasons – the more we can do to get imperialism off their backs, the better the chances for their potential for leadership toward world transformation to bloom. But solidarity cannot be ethereal, it can not be developed and sustained with any scope without some sort of social base within the oppressor nation. Class may very well not be a primary form for such a social base, but we still need to establish more realistic and useful terms for the role class can play in the next period of social upheaval and motion. The historical lessons we examined make it clear that it would be unreal to talk about the white working class "as a whole", or even the majority of it, as a revolutionary force. But, on the other hand, the predominance of white supremacy is not genetically determined nor is it carved in stone historically. We need to look for what conditions and movement activity can promote anti-imperialist organizing within the white working class – both to build solidarity forces and to point the direction toward a genuine long-term emancipation of working people from a system based on exploitation, dehumanization, and war.

The movement of the 1960's showed the potential for positive response from whites to the rise of national liberation struggles, along with a desire for a more humane and cooperative society. It is true that this response came first from elite students, the children of the petty bourgeoisie and professionals. These sectors felt more secure in their privilege and felt less immediately threatened by advances for Black people than did the poorer sectors of whites. Also, students and intellectuals are frequently the group that early on, albeit subjectively, responds to emerging contradictions in a given society. The movement was a real reflection of the objective advance of national liberation and the need to transform U.S. society. As the war in Vietnam dragged on, increasing numbers of working class youth became involved in the movement.

This fledgling success and glimmer of potential of the 60's also provided some historical lessons that we have not done nearly enough to analyze and codify. The movement involved more than the traditional unrest of students. Broader cultural identification played a major role in generating a larger youth movement. First and foremost it was the impact of Black culture, with its more humane values of social consciousness, emotional expressiveness, and sense of community – primarily through the genesis of rock 'n roll. The cultural rebellion also importantly involved an opening of sexual expression that challenged the prevailing straitjacket of repression. Paradoxically, to the grim realities we've come to understand, at that time drugs (particularly marijuana and LSD) were seen as liberation from repressive control and promoting anti-authoritarianism.

Civil rights and anti-war activity among whites started mainly on the campuses, and the student movement was a spearhead for political consciousness throughout the 60's. Most white working class youth were initially indifferent if not downright hostile to these initial stirrings. But over the years there were increasing cultural links that laid the basis for a broader movement. For example, white working class youths who dropped out of the daily work grind and were often into drugs, gravitated to communities near campuses. Anti-draft counselling offices brought many into more direct, political contact with the movement. The burgeoning of community colleges meant that more working class youth were themselves students. By the late 1960's the growing disenchantment and anger about the war in Vietnam provided a unifying focus and sense of identity for all the disaffected. When soldiers in Vietnam started to turn against the war, that added a new dimension to the movement, as well as significantly deepening its class composition.

The main base for the anti-imperialist movement of the 60's was a social movement of youth, heavily impacted and in many ways generated by Black culture. As the movement developed, it involved increasing numbers

of working class youth, who played a major role in the movement's growth and heightened militancy. This extension showed, 1) the ability of culture to be a bridge to deepening the class base of a social movement; 2) the increasing ways the draft, in the context of a bloody and losing war, made the interests of some working class people intersect with those of national liberation; 3) the contagious effect of victorious revolutions and liberatory vision.

The New Left did have an intelligent strategy for extending the movement and deepening it's class base, but abandoned it at the very moment it was achieving stunning success. The Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM) strategy called for the extension of what had started as a primarily elite student base to a broader, particularly working class, youth base by doing more work around the draft, with G.I.s, in community colleges, and among youth in working class neighborhoods. The movement, still heavily male supremist, had little sense of the role of women and often lapsed into very negative sexist posturing. However even here the freedom energy and rhetoric of the movement provided a new opening for women's liberation. Women active in the Civil Rights Movement and in SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) provided a major impetus for the new wave of feminism that emerged in 1967. Unfortunately the reaction of men within the movement was so sexist that it led to what has become an ongoing and destructive stasis that pits anti-imperialism and women's liberation against each other. But RYM did offer a vision extending the movement to involve broader working class sectors without losing the political focus on anti-war, anti-racism and militancy.

Large numbers of working class youth did get involved in the movement. At the high point, millions took to the streets in the wake of the 1971 invasion of Cambodia and the killing of students at Kent State. This movement was of course not magically free of racism, as painfully illustrated by the failure to make issues of the killings at Jackson State and of Chicano anti-war activists in Los Angeles. But it was a movement that could, with political leadership, have strong anti-imperialist potential.

SDS, which correctly formulated the RYM strategy in December, 1968, was already splintered apart by May 1971. The dissolution of SDS shortly before the triumph of its strategy was not simply a question of stupidity or even just a matter of the pervasive power of opportunism. The student movement had reached a crisis in 1969 because its very successes had moved it from simply "shocking the moral consciousness of America" to realizing it was in fundamental opposition to the most powerful and ruthless ruling class ever. The murderous attacks on the Black movements we supported (dozens of Black activists were killed and a couple of thousand incarcerated from 1968 through 1971) drove the point home graphically at the same time that the dictates of solidarity urgently pressed

us to qualitatively raise our level of struggle. The movement went into a crisis in 1968 because it came face to face with the terrifying reality of imperialism's power.

RYM was a creative and realistic strategy to extend the base and power of the movement, although it needed to be joined by an equally strong politics on women's liberation. But for all of its value as a transitional strategy, RYM was of course in itself nowhere near an adequate basis for overthrowing bourgeois power. So, looking for immediate answers in the crisis, the left floundered on the perennial dilemma in white supremist society. The majority looked for a magic solution to the problem of power by mythicizing the white working class (the majority in the U.S.) as "revolutionary" – in reality this position meant a retreat into white supremacy and away from confronting imperialism. The minority tried to maintain purity around racism and the war by seeing ourselves as exceptional whites, separated from any social base - in reality this position meant abandoning responsibility for building a movement that could sustain militant struggle against imperialism.

While a youth movement in itself can't be sufficient, the promising success of RYM within its realm does suggest some lessons:

1. the role culture can play in building cross-class movements;

2. the value of looking for potential points of intersection of interests of whites with the advance of national liberation – e.g., a) costs of imperialist wars, G.I.'s, draft, taxes, social priorities, b) situations of common oppression where there is third world leadership (welfare, prisons, some labor struggles), and c) situations where a vision of a revolutionary alternative can be most readily perceived (youth, women);

3. the likelihood that social movements can play more of a role in involving white working people in a progressive struggle than traditional, direct forms of class organizing. The social movements though – youth, Lesbian-Gay-AIDS, anti-war and anti-nuclear, ecology, and potentially around housing, health, and education – have typically had a "middle class" leadership and a primarily middle class base. ("Middle class" meaning people from college educated backgrounds – mainly professionals and petty bourgeois.)

While the Women's movement is usually labeled as a social movement because it is not one of the traditional struggles for state power, it should be more appropriately grouped with national liberation and class as responding to one of the 3 most fundamental structures of oppression. No movement can be revolutionary and successful without paying full attention to national liberation, class content, and the liberation of women.

After the collapse of the anti-war and youth movements in the 70's the women's movement provided the most sustained and extensive impetus for social change within white America. Like the social movements, the leadership and main active base was middle class. With the ebbing of the radical women's liberation tendency that identified with national liberation, the apparent leadership of contemporary feminism has a more pronounced middle class character – at the same time that many more working class women, while eschewing the name "feminism", have actively adopted and adapted the goals and struggles of the movement.

We would argue that the women's movement and the social movements, to be revolutionary, must relate to racism, national liberation, and Third World leadership. But we should add that, as with the youth movement, each should be looking for ways to extend its base into the working class on an anti-racist and pro-women's liberation basis.

The Lesbian-Gay-AIDS movement has been of particular urgency, militancy and importance in this period. The struggle around AIDS has pushed the radical sector toward the need to ally with Third World and poor white communities impacted by intravenous drugs and poor health care. The AIDS movement has also provided leadership in breaking through the sterile conservative (cut back services to the poor) versus liberal (defend state bureaucracy) definition of political debate. ACT-UP and others have provided an excellent example of mobilization and empowerment from below for self-help while at the same time demanding a redistribution of social resources to meet these social needs.

Peace, ecology, the homeless, health care, education all speak to important pieces that express the inhumanity and ineffectiveness of the whole system. Of course these movements have been, almost by definition, reformist. But that doesn't mean that they have to be under all circumstances: e.g., 1) a deeper crisis in imperialism where it has less cushion from which to offer reforms, 2) a situation where revolutionary alternatives are strong enough to be tangible, 3) a political leadership that pushes these movements to ally with national liberation, promote women's liberation, and deepen their class base, while at the same time drawing out the connections among the different social movements into a more coherent and overall critique of the whole system. Under such circumstances and leadership, the social movements could not only involve far more white working class people in anti-systemic struggles, but would also serve to redefine and revitalize class issues and class struggle itself.

Lessons from the 60's certainly don't offer a blueprint for the 90's, which are a very different decade. Clearly we are not now in a period of progressive social upheaval. Economic dislocation, at least initially, provides fertile ground for white supremacist organizing. National

liberation struggles are not at this point achieving a clear path to socialism.

What is certain is that there will be changes, and, at points, crises. We can't afford to repeat the old errors of once again floundering on the dilemma of either "joining" the working class' white supremacy or of abandoning our responsibility to organize a broader movement. While there is no blueprint, the basis for a real starting point is an analysis of actual historical experience.

In sum, revolutionaries must be realistic about the history of white supremacy, the impact of material wealth and dominance, and the mushrooming of job and status differentials among workers, both nationally and internationally. There is nothing approximating the Marxist revolutionary proletariat within white America. At the same time, the distinction between those who control the means of production and those who live by the sale of labor power has not been completely obliterated.

A system of white supremacy that was historically constructed can be historically deconstructed. A key factor for whites is the tangibility of a revolutionary alternative as opposed to the more immediate relative privileges that imperialism has had to offer. In this regard we have no map of what the future will bring. The experience of the 60's does offer some possible lessons for when the system is under stress. 1) Anti-imperialist politics are more important than initial class composition. 2) Culture, especially with ties to Third World people, can be an important force for building progressive cross-class movements. 3) In seeking to extend such movements, revolutionaries should look for intersection points of white working class interests with the advance of national liberation, such as the draft. 4) Women's liberation must play a central role in all movements we build. 5) The various social movements, if we can fight for an alliance with the national liberation and the presence of women's politics and leadership, can be important arenas for extending base to include working class people, mutually redefine class and social issues, and make the connections to an overall anti-systemic perspective.

David Gilbert is a North American political prisoner and longtime anti-imperialist. On October 20, 1981, he and other comrades were captured at Nyack, NY during an attempted expropriation by a unit of the Black Liberation Army and other white revolutionaries (known as the Revolutionary Armed Task Force - RATF). During the expropriation attempt, 3 officers were killed. Charged and convicted of felony murder, David is serving a 75 year (minimum) to life sentence. While in prison, David has been actively involved in the struggle against AIDS, and has remained a staunch opponent of oppression still dedicated to human liberation.

How you can support David Gilbert

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Incomplete List of Writings by David Gilbert

Abu Ghraib and the Logic on Conquest - a brief reaction to the war on Iraq, the abuse at Abu Ghraib, tying it all together with imperialist aggression on the people of Haiti, Palestine and Venezuela. Written July 16th 2004.

After Election, Need for Independent Anti-war Movement - brief commentary on 2004 U.S. elections.

AIDS Conspiracy? Track the Real Genocide

Born on Sunday - a tribute to fallen freedom fighter Kuwasi Balagoon, published in Hauling Up The Morning

Capitalism and Crisis, Creating a Jailhouse Nation, a review of Christian Parenti's book Lockdown Nation , published in Monthly Review March 2001. Available on the internet athttp://www.monthlyreview.org/301gilb.htm

Decentering Whiteness and Understanding Nationalism - a letter to Onward! newspaper Volume 3 #1.

New World Dis-Order - a review of the book Night-Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neo-Colonial Terrain.

No Surrender and the Losses of 10/20/81 - written in late 2004, on the deaths and fallout of the Brinks action David is imprisoned for.

9-11-01: The Terrorism that Terrorism has Wrought

SDS/WUO - alook at Students For A Democratic Society (SDS) and the Weather Underground Organization (WUO)

The Vortex - published in Hauling Up The Morning

Many of these works can be found at the Kersplebedeb website:

http://www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/profiles/gilbert.html

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