

## **Racism and Capitalism in the U.S.**

*(excerpted from "Toward a Communist Analysis of Black Oppression and Black Liberation," by Linda Burnham and Bob Wing)*

### **III. The Historical Development of Racism and U.S. Capitalism**

#### **A. Racism and the Accumulation of Capital**

In the preceding section of this essay we identified the particularity of Black oppression, concluding that it is a socio-historical relationship of white supremacy/Black oppression that polarizes society into antagonistic racial groups. The questions now posed are: What contradictions in the development of U.S. capitalism gave rise to racism? What has sustained racism in the U.S. from generation to generation?

Thus far we have explored the logic of the race relation—the dialectical interconnection between the Black and white racial groups. We have argued that these racial categories are nothing but the ideological reflections of racist social relations which appeared in history before they were expressed conceptually. It remains for us to explain how they came into being and how they have been reproduced in U.S. society. Thus the logical analysis which grows out of history also informs our study of history and is ultimately verified by its ability to illuminate key aspects of U.S. social development.

In this section we will address the historical relationship between racism and U.S. capitalism. Our view is that racism is a form of oppression brought into being and developed within the single, integral class structure of U.S. capitalism. Black oppression is not an oppressive relationship between separate national economies as the Black Nation thesis (as well as the internal colony thesis) asserts. Rather, the *raison d'être* of racism has been the incorporation of Black people into the U.S. class structure as a racially oppressed, coerced labor force. Racial oppression is a particular element of the capital vs. labor contradiction that developed in the concrete conditions of the U.S. It is a specifically capitalist form of oppression. Consequently, the object of analysis is the production and reproduction of racism within U.S. capitalism.

The key to grasping the particular historical role racism has played in the development of U.S. society is in its connection with the accumulation of capital. Capital accumulation is the motive force for the growth of capitalism as a system. This process includes the accumulation of money wealth, but this is not its essence. Just as "capital" refers to the social relationship between capital and labor, between the owners of the means of production and the sellers of labor power, accumulation of capital refers to accumulation of the capital relationship. Accumulation of capital is the process by which the exploitative production of surplus value comes into being and develops on an ever-widening scale.

Historically, capital accumulation appears in two forms: primitive and expanded. The "primitive accumulation of capital" is the process by which pre- or non-capitalist social relations are broken up and replaced by the capital social relationship. The "expanded accumulation of capital" refers to the process by which the capital relationship, inaugurated in primitive accumulation, systematically brings more and more arenas of social production and increasingly large masses of people under the sway of capital nationally and internationally. The study of this process in any given country is no less than the study of the modern history of that country as a whole.

Ultimately U.S. racism cannot be understood without a comprehensive study of the development of the capital relation in this country. Conversely U.S. history will remain incompletely grasped unless the central role of racism is properly understood. In what follows we make no pretense to having fully accomplished this. Rather we have focused on some of the key junctures in U.S. capitalist accumulation in order to highlight the continuous interpenetration of racism and capitalism throughout U.S. history. Through this examination we hope to demonstrate the qualitative impact that racism has had on the very shape and form of capitalism in this country. For in our view racism has not just added extra dollars to the coffers of the capitalists. It has been a dynamic force that has qualitatively affected the nature of capitalist development in the U.S. as well as the pace and power of its growth.<sup>1</sup> We will illustrate this point by analyzing the relationship of racism to U.S. capitalism in its three main stages of development. First we will discuss the primitive accumulation of capital, the origins of racism and slavery. Then we will analyze the role of racism in the formation of the U.S. proletariat in the nineteenth century. And finally we will investigate the relationship of racism to monopoly capital.

## **B. Origins of Racism**

### **1. Theoretical Framework**

As soon as we begin to address the question of when and how and why racism developed in the U.S., we immediately find ourselves embroiled in a debate. For what would at first appear to be a seemingly simple question that could be settled by fairly straightforward historical investigation turns out to have embodied in it the seeds of all future controversies over the nature of racism and the strategy to overcome it.

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<sup>1</sup> It is common within the communist movement to view Black oppression as essentially a problem of "super-exploitation." This view is flawed in a number of ways. First, when employed as an analysis of the particularity of racism it obscures the racial contradiction between the Black and white racial groups, reducing racism solely to a class contradiction between the bourgeoisie and Black workers. Second, when employed as the central connecting link between racism and U.S. capitalism it reduces the impact of racism to one of quantitatively increasing the exploitation of the working class by the capitalists. It thus fails to comprehend the qualitative importance of racism as a foundation of U.S. society, an independent dynamic shaping the very nature of the U.S. capitalist social formation. Third, the concept of super-exploitation as applied to Black oppression is inconsistent with Marxist political economy. Marxism understands exploitation—and super-exploitation—as a class relation between the capitalist class and the working class as a whole. Specifically, super-exploitation as used by Lenin refers to the fact that imperialist capital, due to its distortion and strangulation of the economic development of the colonies and neo-colonies, is able to force the working classes of those countries to accept a wage far below the historically developed value of labor power. By so doing, imperialist capital extracts superprofits from the underdeveloped countries. Super-exploitation does not refer to the relationship of a section of a single working class—e.g. Black workers in the U.S.—to the particular capitalists who employ them. If it is viewed as such—rather than as a class relation—all sorts of theoretical confusion abounds. For example, from this point of view, unemployed Black workers are not exploited at all since no value is squeezed from them by the capitalists: the role of the unemployed in capitalism only makes sense as part of a societywide class relation. Thus, while the notion of "superexploitation" has a useful rhetorical or metaphorical value to describe the special oppression and exploitation visited upon Black people by capital, it is incorrect to use it as a foundation of a scientific theoretical analysis.

Our theoretical starting point is that racism is a systematic separation and distinction of racial groups in a supremacy/oppression opposition based on color and other physical features. Therefore the effort to uncover the origins of racism entails an analysis of when such separation became a generalized social phenomenon and what the key causal factors were. Additionally, since our thesis is that the racial categories Black and white, which today seem so immutable and transcendent, should not be taken as a priori categories but must themselves be analyzed as to their historical origins—uncovering the beginnings of U.S. racism also requires an investigation into the process through which these categories came into being and acquired their full social meaning. This is particularly the case since, as we have seen, the categories themselves carry a racist logic.

Thus, an inquiry into the origins of U.S. racism requires an investigation of when and why the social practice of separating and assigning particular status according to race became generalized, as well as an investigation of when the categories Black and white assumed their social content and became reified. Our hypothesis is that the two closely coincided in time (the last quarter of the seventeenth century) and place (the British colonies in North America), and that in this coincidence we will find the origins of U.S. racism. 16

This approach to the question of the origins of racism is significantly different from most prevailing views on several counts.

First, we take the standpoint of materialism and insist that racism is not simply or principally an ideological construct or psychological aberration. Thus, we do not examine the collective unconscious of Europeans to discover what particular psychology might have impelled them to oppress and enslave those with darker skin. In our view, Europeans had no particular predisposition towards oppression and racial hatred. Rather, the specific circumstances of developing capitalism led some European powers to be able to exploit and plunder the people and resources of the world. Out of these circumstances, the national oppression that was part and parcel of European colonialism became racialized and eventually specifically racist social relations came into being and became systematized.

We also do not engage in the kind of chicken and egg controversy that seems to bedevil most genesis theories. On the question of racism this has taken the form of arguing for one or the other of the following propositions: either that racism predates the enslavement of Africans and was its main cause, or that racism is the result of slavery in that the degraded status of Blacks promoted the conception of them as subhuman and racially inferior. 17 Both these lines of reasoning suffer from the same deficiency. Racism is seen as primarily an ideological problem of which the lower social status (in this case slavery) is either the cause or the effect. In other words, the object of study is the "thinking" of whites about Blacks rather than the social practice of racial oppression.

Second, our view is that the white and Black racial groupings came into being in history and thus the study of the birth of these groupings and the racial categories that identify them is an integral and critical part of the historical investigation of origins. The major methodological problem of most other "origins" arguments has been that they presume the eternal existence of racial categories and incorporate them into the analysis as though they were functional social categories throughout history. Our contention is that Europeans conceived of themselves as Christians or Jews, or as nations began to form, as Englishmen, Dutchmen, etc., or as part of various ethnic or geographic groups, and only descriptively if at all as whites. It is only through developed social practice of a particular nature that a "white consciousness" develops and with it the category "white people," or the white racial group. Likewise, it is through the same social practice that the "others"—who in reality have varying social positions—become subsumed under the category

Black and, in the context of a developing common experience, begin to create a common consciousness as Blacks.

Third, we understand racism to be a generalized and systematic relation within a particular society and therefore do not identify the advent of racism with the earliest color-coded expressions of antipathy or with individual and sporadic incidents of discriminatory behavior. We do not presume, for instance, that each negative historical reference to Blacks or Africans in literature, religious tracts, or law is an indication of the existence of racist social relations. Irrational expressions of antipathy on the part of Europeans towards many different groups abound and certainly predate U.S. race relations. But, prior to and in the early period of capitalist colonialism, these expressions are thoroughly intermixed with the religious, ethnic, and especially emerging national conflicts of the day. In studying the origins of racism we seek to understand its beginnings as a distinct and general relation—that is, one which impacts and influences society as a whole, polarizing it on the basis of race, and structuring society so that it recreates itself.

Finally, we view racism in the U.S. as distinct from racism elsewhere in the world. That is to say, though we understand that racist social relations prevail in many other countries, U.S. racism has its own particular dynamic. As we have noted, one indication of this is the unique way in which racial categories operate in the U.S. Therefore, the study of the origins of U.S. racism must be steeped in the particularity of the historical development of the U.S. It is only through grasping this history firmly that we will be able to uncover the genesis of racial oppression in its U.S. form.

## 2. Slavery and Primitive Accumulation

Capitalism in the U.S. was, in its very origins, a thoroughly racist system. The peculiarities of colonial development brought forth a system of racial slavery that placed an indelible stamp on the subsequent class and national formation of the U.S. Essentially, the social relation of racially differentiated class positions became the means through which the capitalist mode of production established itself in North America.

The key to understanding the central role of racism in the development of U.S. capitalism rests on a fundamental point of Marxist political economy. Pointing out that "the accumulation of capital presupposes surplus value" and that "surplus value presupposes capitalist production," Marx notes that the solution to this apparent vicious circle is "a primitive accumulation preceding capitalistic accumulation; an accumulation not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its starting point."<sup>18</sup> Primitive accumulation is not simply the early accumulation of money wealth, although such wealth is a necessary element of the process of primitive accumulation. As Marx stressed over and over again, "capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things."<sup>19</sup> Thus, primitive accumulation consists in the creation of that situation in which the owners of money wealth and capital in the means of production and means of subsistence encounter and subjugate to the rule of capital those who have been separated from both feudal obligations and from individual property in the means of production. Capital the thing brings together the incipient bourgeoisie and the newly "freed" wage laborer and in so doing begets itself as capital the relation.

The process through which this polarization/interrelationship takes place is, simultaneously, the process of the formation of the modern classes associated with capitalist production. The concrete historical phenomena that bring into being a class owning nothing but its labor power and a class which monopolizes the means of production is the material content of primitive accumulation. The production of the relation between the two is the production of the capital relation.

The general process of primitive accumulation is common to all countries in which the capitalist mode of production has come to prevail, but the precise way in which it takes place is historically specific, varying from country to country depending on historical conditions. In the U.S., the capitalist mode of production rose to its feet on the basis of land expropriated from the native peoples, money wealth from England,<sup>2\*</sup> and the labor of enslaved Africans. This combination of elements made it possible for the capital relation to gain a firm grounding in the Southern colonies as early as the end of the seventeenth century, enabling the U.S. national bourgeoisie to quickly mature as a class-for-itself led by the capitalist farmer/slaveowners of the plantation South.

The New World was not, of course, unpopulated. All along the Eastern seaboard of what became the colonial U.S. lived native peoples in various stages of development and with various forms of social organization. The land had been the communal possession of the native tribes and formed the material basis for their existence. Their dispossession became the first order of business for the colonists. Land grants from the English Crown served as the legal cover for the creation of private property in land where no such relation had previously existed. This constituted an essential component in the process of primitive accumulation.<sup>3</sup>

The settlement of the colonies was an undertaking that required the investment of a tremendous amount of wealth. The outfitting of ships seaworthy enough to make the journey from Europe and laden with enough supplies to see the colonists through the difficult months after landing was no small matter, especially in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Most investors did so in the hopes that the venturesome souls who left England behind would stumble across a get-rich-quick scheme like the robbery of South America's mineral wealth. They were not so lucky, though, and the first fifty years or so were essentially a bust, financially speaking. In fact, the Virginia Company folded, unable to fulfill the expectations of its investors for a steady stream of treasures returned to England. But once Virginia was able to produce tobacco as an export crop on a large scale, sometime around mid-century, the colonies became an increasingly profitable investment. From that period well into the nineteenth century English capital played a central role in the development of U.S. capitalism. As Marx notes, commenting on the employment of child labor as a source of primitive accumulation for English capital, "A great deal of capital, which appears today in the United States without any certificate of birth, was yesterday, in England, the

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<sup>2</sup> Much of this wealth was procured through the robbery and plunder of the rest of the world and through the commercial slave trade which characterized the early colonial system and constituted what Marx called the "chief momenta" of primitive accumulation in Europe.

<sup>3</sup> The dislodging of native peoples from their land and the appropriation of this land first by English colonists and later by "pioneer" settlers and the U.S. state was a process that was to occur over and over right up to today. This land grab freed up what was undoubtedly one of the most critical conditions for the rapid growth of U.S. capital—a huge and fertile land mass together with incalculable natural resources. At the same time, this process did not, in the main, serve to integrate native peoples into the developing class structure of the U.S. With some important exceptions, the principal dynamics have been either the wholesale extermination of native peoples or their isolation on barren reservations. Although native peoples were, in some cases, enslaved by colonists, for a number of reasons this never became a general social dynamic. Having remained outside the class and national formation of the U.S., though clearly thoroughly oppressed by the development of U.S. capitalism, in our view the oppression of native peoples is best understood and analyzed within the framework of colonialism and national oppression rather than racial oppression.

capitalized blood of children."<sup>20</sup> These investments were, therefore, another essential component of the primitive accumulation which fueled U.S. capitalism.

But in order for what was capital in England to become again capital in the U.S. and not degenerate into simple money wealth or unutilized means of production, it had to enter into or create the conditions identified above. It had to bring together the nascent bourgeoisie and the "free" laborer. And therein lay the rub. For in the colonial U.S., as was to be the case in several other British colonies, capital was willing but labor was not. It had other options and, more often than not, chose to refuse capital's tender offer.

The export-producing colonies were faced with a chronic labor shortage. Tobacco production depended upon the labor of indentured servants. But each year another batch of servants worked off their indentures and had to be released. The fact that land was plentiful meant that these newly freed servants could become independent small farmers. It was impossible to monopolize all the land and instruments of production in the hands of the big planters. Thus indentured servitude was an unstable system. Instead of reproducing the capital relation and a class of dispossessed it tended to keep disintegrating and producing a class of self-sufficient farmers and petty commodity producers. When labor had an option, it chose not to work in the service of capital. In the U.S. as in Canada and Australia, the problem of how to expropriate the laborer from the soil and keep him working for the capitalist while the conditions for petty production were at hand was one that troubled would-be capitalists no end. But in colonial U.S. there was one difference: the climate and soil of the Southern colonies were appropriate for the large scale production of an export crop that potentially had a large international market. If the labor problem could be solved, capitalist agriculture could take off.

The problem could not be satisfactorily resolved by making the European indentured servants into slaves since, at least in some sense, servitude took the form of a voluntary contract. Were the planters to have violated such contracts through the permanent enslavement of indentured servants they would have shut off the flow of those willing to immigrate, and brought a protest from England. On the other hand, the slave trade had already transformed captured Africans into a form of property. The buying of slave labor consisted in the transfer of the right to that "property" from the slave trader to the planter. In no sense was it a contractual agreement between the planter and the laborer as with indentured servitude.

It is in this context that slave labor was introduced and took root in the U.S. The international slave trade (principally supplying the West Indies and South America) was a well established commercial venture by the time Virginia was settled. In the early years of the colony the number of Africans imported remained small. Toward the end of the century, though, African slave labor began to replace indentured servants from Europe in the by then flourishing tobacco fields. From the point of view of the planter, slaves were simply a better investment. Though the initial cost of a slave was higher than buying the indenture of a servant, if a slave and all his or her progeny could be held in bondage for life it became well worth the larger initial outlay, for this ensured a permanent, stable labor force for the expansion of capital, something which the system of indentured servitude could not provide.

Thus the enslavement of Africans became the first form through which capital as a relation gained a firm foothold in the U.S. Black slave labor constituted the permanently dispossessed pole of the capital/labor relation. While the majority of the white population was involved in petty production as small farmers or artisans, the Southern planters (and their English investors and creditors) began to amass huge profits through the cultivation of tobacco, rice, and later cotton on the basis of slave labor. After the close of the seventeenth century, the Southern colonies grew more rapidly

than those in the North, mostly due to the importation of slaves. By 1770, 40% of the population of the five Southern colonies consisted of enslaved laborers. Whereas in 1616 Virginia had shipped 25,000 pounds of tobacco to England, by 1688 this was up to 28 million pounds and by 1771, 105 million pounds.<sup>21</sup> In the New England colonies, commercial capital developed as merchants served as middlemen and suppliers to the planters of the Southern colonies and the West Indies. The enormous profits accruing to the Northern merchants from the slave trade provided the basis for their particular form of primitive accumulation of capital. But capital as a relation of exploitation in production did not develop to any significant degree in the North until the period of early industrialization beginning in the nineteenth century. Here the same problem existed as had existed in the South: labor could not be permanently commanded to work for the profit of capital when it could obtain the conditions to work for itself. The only arena in which surplus value was being wrung from labor and in which capitalist private property became a generalized social relation prior to industrialization was in the plantation system of the South.

And here we have unraveled the common origin and essential connection of capitalism and racism in the U.S. Racial slavery was a central foundation for and served to hasten the primitive accumulation of U.S. capital. Capitalism in the U.S. has been, from its origins, a racist system.

### 3. The Development of Racism and Racial Categories

The development of the capitalist plantation system based on the enslavement of Africans is the historically specific circumstance which produced racism and racial categories in the U.S. Ultimately the plantation system based on racial slavery thrived, becoming a centerpiece of the primitive accumulation of capital in North America. But the development and intersection of the plantation system, slavery, and the system of white supremacy was neither preordained nor a simple transference of the "advanced experience" of Latin America or the Caribbean. Rather these developments were the result of a particular confluence: the systematization of the English colonial system which guaranteed a world market for tobacco, thus giving a qualitative boost to the development of the plantation system, and the rise of incipient national planter capitalists in the South intent upon expanding that system to the greatest possible degree. That process did not mature until the end of the seventeenth century. Until it did, neither slavery nor racism were fully developed social practices and the categorical distinctions between servant and slave as well as that of Black vs. white were either non-existent or undeveloped.

Of course, the Africans who arrived in Jamestown in 1619 were certainly captives who had been hunted and transported as part of a developing international slave trade that already supplied the Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese colonial possessions with a labor supply. As such it was a given that they would be laborers of some sort. There was no other reason for their importation and they certainly did not come voluntarily to seek their fortunes in the New World. But the specific status of Africans in the English colonies was far from a fully settled question. What would be the social and legal status of these people? How would it be similar to or distinct from that of the indentured servants brought from Europe?

Given that Africans were captives of the slave trade and lacked indentures, their status was probably never identical to that of servants from Europe. One telling example of this is the fact that female servants of European ancestry did not, in general, work in the fields while female African servants did. There are many indications, though, that the concept of certain people being subject to inheritable, lifetime enslavement was not fully developed until the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

In fact, during the mid-seventeenth century servants of European ancestry and those of African ancestry labored together in the tobacco fields under fairly similar conditions. There is considerable evidence to show that these servants shared quarters, socialized together and, quite frequently, ran away from their masters together. The gulf between servant and large planter was far greater than any between the servants themselves, providing the basis for them to make common class cause against those who exploited their labor. This was particularly so during the 1660s and 1670s when a glut in the tobacco market and a radical drop in prices together with attempts to monopolize the best and most protected lands on the part of the big planters severely circumscribed the prospects for freed servants. In some cases Africans and Europeans jointly rose up in rebellions against the large planters.

The point here is that for several decades after the first Africans were brought to the colonies in chains neither the slave vs. servant nor the white vs. Black distinctions had yet become fully consolidated. The division of humanity into antagonistic racial groups, one slave and the other free, had not yet achieved the status of a systematic social relation. Rather, throughout most of the seventeenth century, a profusion of categories was used to designate people whom we would today, with our thoroughly racialized consciousness, simply identify as Black and white. The dominant categories were Black (actually "Negro," borrowed from the Spanish) vs. Christian and Negro vs. English. That is, religious and national distinctions, not racial distinctions, predominated. (The category "white" did not even formally appear until 1691.)

The initial opposition of Negro vs. Christian reflected the incomplete transition from a feudal/religious context to a bourgeois/secular one. It also testifies to the absence of an impenetrable barrier between people of African descent and people of European descent: that is, the Negro vs. Christian distinction was quite permeable since a Negro could convert to Christianity. In fact, given the proselytizing character of Christianity, one only needed to get baptized to be considered a Christian, and many Negroes, especially those who had been ("seasoned" in the Spanish West Indies, availed themselves of this opportunity. The point is that during this early period this religious categorization reflected actual social practice and was not merely a cover-up for racism. Conversion was a decisive factor in determining whether Negro servants would be indentured or freed, or if indentured, for how long. The record also shows that converted Negroes had the right to testify in court, own property, etc. On the other hand, non-Christian Negroes faced discrimination and oppression of various sorts—for example, longer indentures, or even indentures for life. Of course, as racial slavery developed and consolidated into the principal form of the labor process, conversion to Christianity had less and less bearing on one's status, but until the end of the seventeenth century the Negro vs. Christian categorization continued to hold real social, even legal, force. Consequently, the law books and court records of the time are full of references such as "all Negroes imported into the colony who are not Christian...." In other words, the permeability of the Negro vs. Christian distinction was not in contradiction to social reality in this period.

The Negro vs. English opposition overlapped with the Negro vs. Christian distinction, but tended to supersede it by mid-century. The new categorization reflected the political consolidation of the colonies as outposts of British capital and represented the further advance of the plantation system and the movement towards a system of slavery. Nationality was clearly less permeable than a religion which could be penetrated simply by conversion. But even national assimilation was possible and indeed was accomplished to the apparent satisfaction of the courts in a number of instances in which cultural assimilation was deemed crucial in determining the status of "Negroes." This distinction, then, was also not impenetrable. Moreover, it was not inclusive since the colonies included not only English and African, but also Scotch, Irish, German, Dutch, etc. Thus, the Negro vs. English distinction could not establish an impenetrable qualitative distinction



between Europeans and Africans, and indeed was not intended to do so since such a distinction was unnecessary in the mid-seventeenth century.

Of course, we are not arguing that the categories are always the exact reflection of social practice at a given moment. In general, developing social practice tends to render the old categories obsolete, thus necessitating an alteration in their ideological and legal expressions. But whatever the time lag, the fact is that at some point the Negro vs. Christian and Negro vs. English oppositions were the reflections of actual social practice.

In 1660 the Navigation Acts established a division of labor within the English empire that provided a qualitative spur to the plantation system in the colonies. In the last quarter of the century the plantation system came into its own and along with it, slavery and racism. The planters' need for a permanent, unfree, and unfreeable labor force—unfreeable through baptism, "acculturation," or by virtue of part-European parentage—became overwhelming and gave rise to racism and racial categories to ensure its reproduction.

As late as 1680 Negro indentured servants still could be freed, could sue in court, serve as witnesses, enjoy freedom of movement, exercise at least some measure of self-protection, and own property. But the handwriting was on the wall, and a law of 1682 finally closed all loopholes through which Blacks could evade the web of slavery.

". . . all servants except Turkes and Moores, whilst in amity with his majesty which . . . shall be brought or imported into this country, either by sea or land, whether Negroes, Moores, Mulattoes or Indians, who and whose parentage and native country are not Christian at the time of their first purchase of such servant by some Christian, although afterwards, and before such their importation and bringing into this country, they shall be converted to the Christian faith. . . are hereby adjudged, deemed and taken, and shall be adjudged, deemed and taken to be slaves to all intents and purposes, any law, usage or custome to the contrary notwithstanding."<sup>22</sup>

The incredibly circuitous language of this law, which laboriously closed all the former loopholes and explicitly retracted all former laws and customs, is itself testimony that racial categories were by no means the norm in the seventeenth century. Otherwise, why not just say "all Negroes shall be subject to enslavement"?

By 1705 Southern history's first slave code was enacted, a code so all-sided that it differed little from those that prevailed up to the Civil War. Included was a very important provision meant to plug what might be called the "miscegenation loophole"; that is, it defined the status of children of "mixed race." ". . . the child, grandchild, or great grandchild of a negro shall be deemed, accounted, held and taken mulattoe"<sup>23</sup> and hence subject to the slave condition. This law graphically illustrated the total subjugation of natural, biological diversity to socially determined racial categories. A person who had one Black ancestor was to be considered mulatto, thus enslaveable, even if the majority of his/her forebears were white. Of course, in practice no one spent time searching through genealogical charts. Instead, anyone with a perceptible trace of African ancestry was a mulatto and enslaveable, a powerful incentive for establishing that acute American eye for "race" which is now deeply embedded in U.S. culture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a number of years, terms such as mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon which strive to reflect genealogy in a more accurate way than simply "Black" or "Negro" were in use. These may have reflected some slight status distinctions among Blacks, but in time they proved to have little social validity and by the nineteenth century they fell into disuse.

As for the category "white," it first appeared, appropriately enough, in a law designed to prevent intermarriage and which displayed a degree of chauvinism lacking previously:

And for prevention of that abominable mixture and spurious issue which hereafter may increase in this dominion, as well by negroes, mulattoes, and Indians intermarrying with English, or other white women, as by their unlawfull accompanying with one another, Be it enacted . . . that for the time to come, whatsoever English or other white man or woman being free shall intermarry with a negroe, mulatto, or Indian man or woman bond or free shall within three months after such marriage be banished and removed from this dominion forever. ....

More than racial madness was at stake here. Clearly the slave system could absorb a certain degree of "miscegenation," especially if the children of such alliances had no legal status. But widespread, legal miscegenation would have posed enormous contradictions to the rigidly developing racial categories by which the slave vs. free distinction was maintained.

In summation, the racial categories of Black and white are the categorical reflection of the social practice of racism. The insidious racist logic inherent in the white vs. Black distinction came about as the result of a process of conscious definition and refinement necessitated by the labor requirements of the capitalist plantation system. In order to establish these as operative social categories, the ethnic distinctions developed in Africa were obliterated and subsumed in the category Black. And the national and religious distinctions and rivalries between Protestant and Catholic, Irish and English, etc., were subordinated to the category white. And in an inspiration that does credit to the pecuniary instincts of the developing planter-capitalists, though not to their regard for their own children, the offspring of any "intermixing" were also considered Black in order to entrap the maximum number of people in slavery to capital.

This categorical distinction was a reflection of a qualitative material distinction in which Blacks came to be slaves and whites free. The category "servant" was superseded by Negro slavery on the one hand and white freedom on the other. The hardening of racial categories was a reflection of the fact that one portion of the laboring masses was made to "specialize" in slave labor and the other was exempted from slavery and allowed to rise to the status of free independent farmers and petty artisans, if not planters and merchants.

Thus, primitive accumulation in the U.S. got underway on the basis of both a polarization between capitalist planter and slave and the qualitative racial distinction among the laborers. The full consolidation of the categories Black and white signaled that racism and slavery had achieved the status of generalized social relations. Thus racism and slavery were inextricably connected as racial slavery. The racial categories produced by that union reflected, summarized, and served to reinforce that relationship, inextricably tying both slavery and racism to the earliest formation of capital through the process of primitive accumulation. At the same time, the race relation developed a life and logic of its own based on the systematic separation in law and social status of the historically designated Black and white racial groups. This racial system transcended the direct planter/slave relation and became a foundation for the organization of all aspects of the society.

#### 4. The White Racial Group and the U.S. State

Every system of class oppression is ultimately dependent on a repressive apparatus. That apparatus—the state—is fundamentally the instrument of the oppressor group, the military, legal, and ideological means by which the oppressive social system is reinforced and reproduced. The state, as Engels notes, came into being with classes and private property as the indispensable accompaniment for a system of exploitation and oppression.

Thus the U.S. bourgeois state inevitably emerged and grew as the repressive apparatus of a particular class, the bourgeoisie. But given the centrality of racism to the capitalist mode of production in the U.S., the bourgeois state also developed as the repressive apparatus of the white racial group. In other words, the state enforced and reproduced both the relations of capital and the relations of white supremacy/Black oppression.

It is no accident therefore that the U.S. has traditionally been regarded and, in some quarters, continues to be regarded as a white man's country. This viewpoint is not entirely the subjective delusion of racists. The tendency to make an identity between "American" and "white" has a powerful base in the economic and political history of this country. More particularly, the U.S. state apparatus has served as an effective and ever available lever to reinforce racist social relations.

U.S. historians have troubled themselves endlessly over the seeming contradiction that characterized the forging of the state. On the one hand, the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution are recognized as the most advanced political documents of their time, granting broadly defined rights to a wide sector of the population. On the other hand, the U.S. state, in its origins, sanctioned slavery—the total denial of any rights whatsoever to another sector of the population.<sup>5</sup> Often enough, slavery is viewed as a strange and anomalous formation on an otherwise perfect body politic. Even many Marxist historians have shifted about uneasily in the face of this riddle, oscillating between a glorification of "America's democratic traditions" and a righteous moral condemnation of slavery.

But this apparent dilemma evaporates as soon as we grasp that the political efforts of the "founding fathers" were devoted not to the establishment of democracy, nor even to the establishment of capitalism in the abstract, but to the establishment of a political system designed to serve the purposes of a historically definite capitalist system. Of course, the capitalist mode of production, founded as it is on free enterprise and the rights of private property from intrusion by the state, tends to broaden the democratic base of society in general. But it always does so in the context of definite historical conditions. The bourgeoisie, being a most political class, never forgets therefore that democracy is always subordinate to its actual and concrete class interests.

In some ways, the U.S. revolution established a broader range of democratic rights for the masses of the population than did any of the other bourgeois democratic revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There were two reasons for this. One was the absence of any

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<sup>5</sup>At the time of the Revolution Blacks were 20% of the population of the 13 colonies.

significant feudal remnants in the U.S. as a result of which there was no grouping of feudal landlords who had to be conciliated in the bourgeoisie's rise to power. The other is that due to the pivotal role of racial slavery in the developing U.S. capitalist system, the majority of the white racial group were to one degree or another property-holders and thus a broader range of liberties could be extended to the entire group. Essentially the U.S. state, through its chief political document, the Constitution, was able to guarantee wide democratic rights to one portion of the population because they were completely denied another.

In this sense, the Constitution—including both its celebrated Bill of Rights and its racist exclusion of Blacks from all of the rights granted whites—is an accurate reflection of social reality.

The revolutionary coalition that accomplished the political break from England was made up of sectors of the bourgeoisie—mainly slave-owning and commercial—together with the mass of small property owners. It is certainly no accident that several of our most noteworthy and influential "founding fathers," including the authors of the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution, the leader of the revolutionary army, and four of the first five Presidents of the new republic (governing for 32 of the new nation's first 36 years), were either members or representatives of the plantation bourgeoisie. In many ways, these planters constituted the moat "conscious" sector of the bourgeoisie.

But they were a peculiar bourgeoisie in that their unchallenged position in the ruling class was based not on the exploitation of a "free" proletariat but on an enslaved labor force that was entirely Black. The Northern commercial interests, too, depended on the continuation of the slave trade and racial slavery. At the same time, neither of these sectors of the bourgeoisie were yet in direct all-sided antagonistic contradiction to petit-bourgeois capital. In fact, not only did the Constitution represent the interests of both big and small capital, the newly forged state acted to encourage the simultaneous development of both. Of course, the interests of large and petit capital did not always coincide, leading, at times, to overt forms of class struggle—for instance, Shay's Rebellion (1786) of small, debt-ridden farmers in Massachusetts. However, the real clash did not come until towards the end of the nineteenth century. By and large, "Jeffersonian democracy" could uphold the rights of small farmers and still represent the interests of capitalist agriculture because the expropriation of the small farmers was not yet a requirement for the development of agriculture on a capitalist basis. Essentially, the small farmers, who made up the majority of the population, were protected from expropriation by the fact that, on the one hand, there was a enormous land mass onto which both the plantation bourgeoisie and the small farmers North and South could expand and, on the other hand, because the labor base of large scale agriculture, located in the South was assured through slavery.

In this sense, the revolutionary coalition was a white united front of big and small property standing on the back of Black slave labor to oppose colonial domination. In this united front, big capital could magnanimously tolerate an advance in the democratic rights of the masses so long as those rights were not extended to Blacks. Slavery depended on the categorical identity of "Blackness" and "subject to enslavement" or, put another way, "subject to legally coerced exploitation by Capital" under conditions in which the availability of labor was dependent on such coercion. Slavery also depended on its opposite—"whiteness" and exemption from

enslavement" As long as this arrangement was not tampered with and no one seriously proposed considering the Black laboring masses to be part of "We, the People" and therefore entitled to rights, the capitalist private property interests of the planters were guaranteed. The white united front remained intact, formalized in the U.S. Constitution, Slavery was reinforced, the system of white supremacy became further reified and a racialized republic was established.

From its first expression in racial slavery to the racialized urban working class ghettos of the twentieth century, racism in the U.S., has consisted in the special oppression of a section of the laboring masses on the basis of socially developed racial categories. However, with the transformation of U.S. capitalism from the competitive to the monopoly stage, the form of racism also changed.

The principal dynamic shaping the intersection of racism and U.S. capitalism in the present era is monopoly capital's need for a thoroughly stratified working class in a period in which the working class has become the overwhelming majority of the population. The condition for this dynamic was the victory of monopoly capital over virtually every sphere of social production and the subsequent urbanization of the country as a whole. This signaled the demise of the plantation system and the transformation of Black people from a primarily agricultural and Southern people into a primarily urban people distributed throughout the country. Therefore, after a brief discussion of the demise of the plantations, this section will concentrate on the stratification of the working class along racial lines, the principal expression of racism in the twentieth century.

### 1. Capital Taps Its Latent Reserve Army

One of the peculiarities of U.S. capitalism is that well into the twentieth century it continued to suffer a labor shortage. Unlike the European countries where the penetration of capital into the countryside freed up masses of former peasants and threw them into the waiting arms of capital as wage laborers, U.S. capital since its inception was faced with the great problem of locating a labor force. It was precisely this labor problem that lay at the heart of the origin and subsequent reproduction of racism in the U.S. and which relieved Europe of millions of displaced peasants in the nineteenth century.

This massive flow of European immigration in the nineteenth century satisfied capital's labor demands and rendered unnecessary the tapping of the Black labor reserve in the South. World War I, however, put an end to that immigration and monopoly capital was forced to look southward to fill its increasing demand for labor. A massive labor recruitment effort, promising everything from riches to freedom from racism, was mounted to entice Black people northward. As a result, beginning with WWI, millions of Blacks abandoned the horrors of Southern sharecropping, the KKK, and Jim Crow and migrated to the Northern cities, often leaving their family and friends behind. Slowed temporarily by the depression of the 1930s, this massive displacement of humanity once again picked up steam during WWII, this time opening the West as well as the Northeast and Midwest to Black labor. By the 1950s, the plantation system was broken up. Bereft of cheap Black labor, Southern agriculture finally mechanized in order to drastically reduce its reliance on a labor-intensive work process. Black people were integrated

into the urban proletariat throughout the country. Thus, a whole epoch of racism and Black life in the Southern plantation system came to a close.

While this process marked a step forward for Black people, their integration into the broader spectrum of U.S. economic, political, and social life was shaped from beginning to end by the prevailing system of white supremacy. Far from eliminating the oppressive system of racism, this integration reinforced it. Indeed precisely because most Blacks are no longer confined to a distinct condition of labor in one industry in one region of the country, Black oppression under conditions of monopoly capitalism more glaringly reveals the all-sided structural nature of racial oppression in the U.S. and its centrality to U. S. capitalist production. To examine this more closely, we turn to the fate of Black people within the urban proletariat.

## 2. Stratification of the Working Class

Under monopoly capital, the working class becomes the great majority of the population in the imperialist countries. Petit bourgeois crafts and farming are qualitatively undermined by giant industrial corporations and agribusiness. Shopkeepers give way before the assault of monopoly marketing chains. And one profession after another is reduced to proletarian conditions—teaching, office work, lower levels of engineering and other technicians, etc. The petit bourgeoisie survives, but Marx and Engels' prediction that capitalist society would be increasingly polarized between proletariat and bourgeoisie has been validated by history.

Nowhere is this more true than in the United States. However, alongside the relative and absolute growth of the U.S. working class there has proceeded a thoroughgoing internal stratification of that class. This stratification has many sources, economic as well as political. Indeed, no working class is a homogeneous whole. The very nature of the capitalist mode of production introduces divisions within the working class—skilled vs. unskilled, employed vs. unemployed, industrial, agricultural, commercial, financial sector, etc.<sup>6\*</sup> The massive development of the forces of production under monopoly exaggerates all these tendencies and adds new ones, the condition of labor in the monopoly vs. the competitive sectors, public vs. private, etc. Moreover, capital consciously promotes this stratification in order to seize greater control of the labor process, to split the working class politically and ideologically, and generally to maintain its political and economic rule in the face of a working class that is far larger and potentially far stronger than the capitalists themselves.

In addition to the stratification which grows out of the labor process itself, capital seizes upon (and even introduces) antagonisms among the working masses—such as differences flowing

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<sup>6</sup> Stratification along the lines of gender marks the development of the working class from its very beginnings. This stratification varies in the different periods of capitalist development and exists both within the labor process and external to it. But the male-female contradiction is a social relation in its own right which cannot be reduced to a question of stratification in the working class even though, as with racism, there is a crucial intersection. Sexism as a social relation must be examined in its own right, an undertaking which is beyond the scope of this study.

from religion or nationality—in order to further divide the class. In the U.S., the particularity of stratification in the working class in the monopoly capitalist period is its intersection with the powerful system of historically developed racism.

A key effect of this stratification is to give rise to a privileged "aristocracy of labor" within the working class. The labor aristocracy attempts to speak in the name of the class as a whole while promoting and reinforcing its own privileged position within the class. In so doing, however, it establishes a sharp polarization between itself and a growing mass of proletarians who, by virtue of unemployment, underemployment and generally the most oppressive and unstable conditions of social life, stand at the bottom of the internal class hierarchy. Of all the characteristic features of these two antagonistic poles in the working class, none is more stark or more significant than that one is overwhelmingly white while the other contains Within it the highest concentration of Black and other minority workers.

### 3. The Industrial Reserve Army of Labor and Racism

Capital, to function, needs access to labor which has no choice but to do the bidding of capital, a circumstance which is produced by removing from a certain section of the population its access to any other means of survival but sale of its labor power to capital.<sup>7</sup> However, even this is not sufficient. Capital must have at its disposal a substantially larger number of laborers than those it can actually employ at any given moment As Marx pointed out:

"A surplus laboring population is...the lever of capitalistic accumulation, nay, a condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost... It creates for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital a mass of human material always ready for exploitation

"...The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore, also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army.... This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation. (emphasis in original)"

In the U.S., this reserve army of labor was relatively invisible and transient until the twentieth century due to the constant waves of European immigration, westward expansion, and fast changing social structure. Now, however, it has emerged with a vengeance—but with the typical U.S. particularity. This "absolute general law of capitalist accumulation" is seen as a natural affliction of Black people rather than an inherent law of capitalism. Racism has made it appear natural that Black people would be chosen to play this role in highly disproportionate numbers due to their "inferiority"—and it matters little whether this "inferiority" is attributed to genetics or the unfortunate consequences of a sociological condition.

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<sup>7</sup>We have already seen how, under the conditions of an aggravated labor shortage, capital "solved" this problem in the U.S. with the establishment of racial slavery. In general, however, capital solved this problem by separating the laboring masses from the means of production—either from the land or from the tools by which they might otherwise manage.

That Black and other minority peoples suffer unemployment at well over two times the rate of whites is a well known fact. But even this quantifiable reflection of racism does not capture the full force of racism on the working class and its industrial reserve. For the industrial reserve is itself not an undifferentiated mass of unemployed. It too has a structure that has been racially polarized in the U.S.

Marx identified three forms of the industrial reserve which were differentiated by their role in capitalist production as well as their conditions of reproduction. First, there is the "floating" sector, which may be said to consist of those who fall into unemployment "normally," that is through the general functioning of the capitalist business cycle, the perennial shifting of production produced by the vagaries of the marketplace and technological development. Then there is the "latent" reserve of those who can be recruited into the active force from occupations within which they are either superfluous or expendable—historically this has mainly referred to the agricultural population but today "housewives" might be added to this category. Finally there is the "stagnant" reserve composed of that sector of the labor force which is habitually unemployed and underemployed and whose conditions of life are significantly lower than the rest of the working class. This analysis of the reserve army is indispensable for understanding the role of Blacks in capitalist production as well as their conditions of life in U. S. society as a whole.

We have already discussed the millions of Blacks who served as a "latent" reserve army of labor for monopoly capital, "called up" during WWI and constantly drafted into the urban proletariat since then. Here we will focus on the "floating" and the "stagnant" reserves.

When government economists detail the extent of unemployment in the country, their figures are based, for the most part, on a count of the floating section of the industrial reserve.\* Those in this category characteristically move in and out of employment fairly rapidly and rarely exhaust their unemployment benefits. They are active in the search for new jobs and are joined by those first entering the job market whose prospects for employment are quite good so that they might shop around a bit for a suitable job. A large section of the active part of the U.S. working class is in this category at one time or another. For most workers in this category, unemployment is a temporary condition and is felt unevenly, with workers in certain industries (steel and auto especially) having won extended unemployment benefits which serve to cushion the worst aspects of unemployment. An examination of the "floating" sector of the industrial reserve immediately highlights two facts: first, those white workers who are unemployed are mostly to be found in this category; second, Blacks make up a disproportionate percentage of the floating reserve, relative to their numbers in society.

When we examine the "stagnant" reserve, however, we come to the heart of racism in the structure of U. S. capitalism. For in this category Blacks and other racial minorities not only comprise a disproportionate percentage; it is quite likely that they make up an absolute majority. Here is where the "permanently" unemployed reside, together with those who have "withdrawn" from or perhaps never entered the labor market in despair at ever finding decent employment. Here is where the permanently underemployed dwell, those who move from job to job, or who in an effort to make ends meet hold two or even three jobs at once but nonetheless scramble for survival in precarious and marginal enterprises. Here is where the most depressed sector of the



working class is to be found, those who can never make ends meet, locked into jobs under the worst conditions of employment, and housed in the worst slums. In short, this is the penurious "underclass" living in a permanent state of economic depression.

A 1970 Census Employment Survey (CES) based on 68 volumes of raw statistics undertaken by the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty in the United States Senate gives a glimpse of the conditions of life in this sector and its possible size. In 1970 nationwide unemployment amounted to 4.9% of the labor force. However, the average unemployment in the CES central city survey was 9.6%, almost twice the national average—in New York it was 8.1%. When discouraged workers were added to this count, the New York figure jumped to 11%. A careful calculation of the involuntary part-time employed further raised the figure to 13.3%—nearly double the official unemployment figures for the New York sample areas and triple the nationwide rate of unemployment. When to this was added those who had full time jobs but could not make ends meet (calculated for New York at \$7000 before taxes for a family of four, the nature of which can be judged from the fact that it allowed only \$100 for rent) the results were astounding: "In the seven New York City sample areas, the subemployment rate rises to between 39.9% and 66.6% of the labor force. Indeed, the average for all sampled areas in the country comes to 61.2%." 29

Clearly the law of the absolute emiseration of the working class under capitalism— so heatedly debated by those whose vision is conspicuously confined to white workers—has been disguised in the U.S. by the fact that it is color-coded.

#### 4. The Black Ghetto

Racism has always involved a physical separation of the racial groups as well as a political, economic, and social separation. Under monopoly capitalism, this segregation has been reproduced in the form of the Black ghetto. Earlier in this century, the ghetto was a section of the urban area in which the bulk of Black people were forced to concentrate. Today, however, a number of cities are themselves predominantly Black with pockets of walled-off white "protected" areas, as the dialectic of urbanization and suburbanization has been thoroughly racialized.<sup>8</sup>

These ghettos are the concentrated expression of racial oppression in the U. S. They are the principal communities of the stagnant unemployed - and the rest of the racially oppressed section of the laboring masses. On top of this, however, conscious racial policies affect the density of population, the quality and quantity of available social services, the flow of drugs, the quality of housing, and police harassment. Still more, the predatory instincts of petty capital, inherent in its marginal conditions of reproduction, are unleashed in the ghetto in the form of exorbitant prices

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<sup>8</sup> Alarmed at the potential for political revolt simmering in these ghettos, the bourgeoisie has embarked on a program to re-whiten the cities through "gentrification" and to disperse some of the Blacks through "spatial deconcentration." This latter is a fancy name for an all-out attack on the living conditions of the Black community.

for low quality merchandise, high rents for shabby housing, small time organized crime, rip-off pawn brokers and bailbondsmen, etc.

The ghetto serves to isolate Black people politically by concentrating them into one section of the city, subject to manipulation, terrorization, gerrymandering, etc. The ghetto also provides conditions for the uninterrupted, seemingly natural, reproduction of cheap Black labor concentrated in the stagnant section of the industrial reserve.

In other words, the ghetto helps to normalize and reproduce a level of subsistence for Black people well below that of the rest of the working class and, by walling off this sector of the working class from the white world outside the ghetto, locks Blacks into their specially oppressed status. Likewise, the ghetto reproduces the political, social, and cultural relations of racism, thus reinforcing in an all-sided way the material foundations and ideological expressions of the white vs. Black polarization.

Finally we should note that precisely because the ghetto, created in accordance with the needs of racial oppression and monopoly capitalism, is also the principal site of the production of Black self-organization and culture, it is therefore a key arena of class struggle and political organizing.

In summation, the Black racial group as a qualitatively distinct section of the laboring masses has neither waned nor begun to disappear into the general conditions of the working class under monopoly capital. The "declining significance of race," so loudly proclaimed in certain academic and even left circles, is a racist myth. Black and other racial minority peoples remain that section of the working class condemned to perpetual depression level conditions, those assigned the task of absorbing as normal the shocks of capitalist accumulation in order to smooth the ride for others, those upon whom all the contaminations of bourgeois society are dumped in order to make working class life in the U.S. more tolerable for those whose lives "really count." Central to the very functioning and structure of U.S. monopoly capitalism, Blacks are held hostage in a ghetto life which systematically reproduces racism while rendering it relatively invisible.

## 5. The Aristocracy of Labor

At the opposite end of the working class hierarchy is the aristocracy of labor. This category, named by Engels and discussed by Marx and Lenin, is of the utmost political significance for the U.S. working class movement and the struggle against racism.

While stratification of the working class is inevitable under capitalism, this stratification is qualitatively aggravated under imperialism. Specifically, the imperialist exploitation of a highly disproportionate amount of the world's labor and resources results in a relatively high standard of living for the working class in the imperialist countries. Moreover, this massive imperialist accumulation makes possible the development of an "upper stratum" of the working class which is able to win (or which is granted) a relatively high standard of living, relatively stable and secure employment, and protected social conditions. This is the material basis for pro-imperialist opportunism within the working class, an opportunism which makes its highest priority the maintenance of the privileged position of this upper stratum over and above the interests of the less protected sectors within the country and the working classes of other nations, especially in

the oppressed nations. The forces who promote this opportunism, rooted in the upper stratum of the working class, Lenin called the "aristocracy of labor" and its leaders he dubbed (after Daniel DeLeon) the "labor lieutenants of monopoly capital."<sup>9</sup>

Thus in 1920 Lenin noted that "the craft union, narrow-minded, selfish, case-hardened, covetous, and petty-bourgeois 'labor aristocracy', imperialist-minded and imperialist-corrupted, has developed into a much stronger section [in the advanced capitalist countries of the West] than in [Russia]." <sup>30</sup> This is all the more true in the world's dominant imperialist country since WWII, the U. S., where it has penetrated not only the skilled crafts and the recently proletarianized professions, but also certain sections of the industrial proletariat and civil service workers, especially during times of capitalist stability. Challenged in the 1930s and 1940s by the left wing of industrial unions, the aristocracy of labor has held unrivaled hegemony in the trade union movement since the 1950s.

The aristocracy of labor in the U.S., however, is not only a social-imperialist, national chauvinist, "patriotic" trend based on U.S. world hegemony. It is also based on racism and is therefore almost exclusively white in composition. As we noted, racism enabled white people to occupy the skilled trades in the nineteenth century by means of Jim Crow, legalized racial discrimination, and lily-white trade unionism. Similar means, together with the full force of most of the leadership of the trade union movement {with a few notable exceptions} are utilized today to protect and further the white interest in the working class. Some of the policies pursued by this racist aristocracy of labor are a lukewarm attitude toward civil rights, absolute opposition to forceful affirmative action, defense of racist seniority systems, good-old-boy recruitment networks and hiring practices, Sack of trade union democracy, failure to organize the unorganized and the South and Southwest as a whole, and fighting for demands that principally benefit the upper strata and not the class as a whole (such as percentage rather than across-the-board raises, no-strike agreements, prioritizing pension funds over wage hikes and improvements in working conditions, etc.).

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<sup>9</sup> The U.S. communist movement has for the most part been thoroughly confused about the nature, size, and influence of the labor aristocracy. Some forces, noting the undeniable fact that the U.S. working class stands in a relatively privileged position vis-a-vis the proletariat in most of the rest of the world (especially in the oppressed nations) have concluded that the class as a whole, or at least its entire white section, is hopelessly compromised and incapable of revolutionary consciousness. The opposite reaction has been to minimize the size and influence of the labor aristocracy in the working class, suggesting that this "disease" is peculiar only to the upper echelons of the trade union bureaucracy. Both views reflect a mechanical materialist outlook. For while the size and influence of the labor aristocracy clearly expands and shrinks with a variety of economic, political and social factors operating in the working class, the question is principally one of politics and not sociology. The existence and influence of a social-imperialist trend in the working class movement presupposes but does not automatically flow from a sizeable upper stratum within the class. Certainly imperialist superprofits provide the material basis for such opportunism to exist. In the more developed imperialist countries, therefore, the social base of opportunism in the working class is that much more developed

In essence, the labor aristocracy provides the leadership and the social base within the working class movement not only for pro-imperialist politics, but also for racist white interest politics as well. Although far from constituting a majority of the class, the labor aristocracy has so far succeeded in forging a broad white united front within the working class that is linked to the white bourgeoisie against racial minorities. It also exercises effective hegemony over organized trade union politics in general. Consequently, to cover up this reality or to downplay the size, strength, and power of this labor aristocracy and its grip on working class politics today is to conciliate racism and social-imperialism in the working class.

## 6. The White United Front and the White Racial Group

A cornerstone of monopoly capital's political power, like that of the slaveholders, merchants, and industrial capitalists who preceded it, is the white united front. In the past, this front—which is the political expression of the objective white racial group interest—consisted principally of white bourgeoisie and white petit bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup> Today it still includes these class forces, but the key new relationship is the one between white monopoly capital and the white aristocracy of labor. The aristocracy of labor provides the critical link to the masses of white people who in this century are workers, not petit bourgeois.

Indeed, the intensification and expansion of the class contradiction under monopoly capitalism makes the white united front of even greater importance to monopoly capital than it was to the U.S. bourgeoisie in earlier periods. When the proletariat was a minority class, the developing bourgeoisie could command a political and ideological majority by strengthening the natural

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<sup>10</sup> Monopoly capital has significantly undermined the "old," self-employed petit bourgeoisie of independent farmers, craftsmen and artisans, petty manufacturers, shopkeepers, professionals and intellectuals, etc. But simultaneously it has produced a "new" petit bourgeoisie that works directly for capital consisting principally of technical, marketing, managerial, financial, medical, scientific, and legal experts whose status rests upon their monopoly over advanced educational training. Some of these occupations—for example, public school teachers—have been transformed into working class status in the course of this century as capital has been able to commodify the product of their labor and undermine their monopoly over skills. However, like the "old" petit bourgeoisie, the "new" one is overwhelmingly white in composition. This is due, in the first place, to the racist maintenance of the universities (increasingly the graduate schools) as white preserves via an educational and social system that constantly throws Black youth onto the streets and transforms their schools into prisons. It is due, secondarily, to outright racist discrimination in the petit bourgeois professions which, much more than working class occupations, are subject to arbitrary and subjective criteria for hiring and advancement since they are largely free of the minimal scrutiny and arbitration processes of unions. An increased number of Blacks gained entrance to some of these occupations as a result of economic opportunity programs and affirmative action that flourished in the late '60s and early '70s (but which are now mostly defunct). But for the most part these Blacks are tokens, window dressing for public relations and increased sales in the minority communities. Moreover they remain almost always the least stable sector of the class to which they have just gained entry.

affinities of the property owning classes on a class as well as racial basis. But today the working class is the overwhelming majority of both the population at large and of the white racial group. In addition, contradictions between the monopoly capitalist class and the petit bourgeoisie makes these latter somewhat irresolute and unreliable class allies.

In these circumstances, there is no more powerful weapon at the command of monopoly capital than the white united front. The basis for this front is for whites, no matter what their class, to act politically on the basis of their common racial interest. While this racial interest principally serves the bourgeoisie, since for the ruling class there is no contradiction between its interest in the capital relation and the race relation, it is also a factor that impacts whites in the working class. For to the extent that racism serves to protect whites as whites from an equal share in the general emiseration of the working class, there exists a material basis for significant sectors of the white workers to see their racial interest as principal over their class interest.

Of course the extent of the material basis for this racial interest directly corresponds to the location of these white workers in the stratification of the working class in general. Clearly the labor aristocracy is most susceptible to subordinating its class interest to its racial interest, while those white workers less well situated have the best basis for breaking with their racial interest. But in noting this fairly obvious point we should not underestimate the power of either relatively minor privilege or of racist illusions which enable even the poorest and least stable of the white workers to cling to aspirations—however unrealistic—of rising within the stratified class. Nor should we at all underestimate the power of racial inertia which passively reproduces the race relations independently of all attempts to break with "racial prejudice" in the realm of ideology. And finally, we should not underestimate the capacity of the labor aristocracy to make its political program and world outlook the dominant politics and ideology which other white workers will adopt as their own.

At the same time, the vulnerability of the white united front is in its class composition. The white racial interest may provide white workers with a relatively protected position within a system in which they are exploited. But it cannot protect them from exploitation. It may cushion them from the worst shocks of capitalism's contradictions, but it cannot render them shock-free. And for large numbers of the white workers, the material benefits of racism are indeed crumbs from the bourgeois table.

In this sense, a material basis also exists for the forging of an anti-racist united front capable of embracing a majority of the working class as a whole. That Black and other minority workers have the best basis to be the most resolute and militant sectors of the anti-racist front seems so obvious as to hardly require any further elaboration. Implicit in its very nature is that forging such an anti-racist united front is indispensable to the revolutionary transformation of the working class for the assault on capital itself.