


BLACK AUTONOMY in CLASS STRUGGLE



In the anti-fascist and anti-racist movement movement blacks have taken to the streets in their own self-defence. Also, since the early 1970s black workers, particularly Asians, have been in the forefront of many major industrial struggles. It is argued here that the left, predominantly white as it is, has failed to understand the specific conditions and contradictions of the black communities. It is hoped that this article, prepared by members of Big Flame's anti-racist commission, will help stimulate discussion on this question which is important for an understanding of the centrality of autonomous organisation for the building of a revolutionary movement.

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WE PRESENT this article as a direct challenge to conventional thinking within the white revolutionary left in Britain about the following subjects. What is the way forward in anti-racist struggle? What is the place of anti-racist struggle in class struggle generally? What is the role of independent, black political organisation, in these struggles?

It is vital to stress this is a 'basic first steps' article. Big Flame has worked with certain black political organisations, but our experience of grassroots black politics has certain important gaps. This grassroots politics is a much richer source of awareness than reading accounts of the situation by Black writers, however illuminating their analyses. This article should be seen then as a first statement, to be developed and deepened in a pamphlet to be brought out later in 1978 by members of the Anti-Racist Commission of Big Flame.

Here, we shall start with some comments on the situation of the black minorities, and the conventional response of the white Left to that situation. Big Flame's contrasted position will then be summarised. Certain key elements in black political organisation will then be reviewed. We shall conclude with the main lessons and prospects for class struggle, including anti-racist struggle, in the future.

THE MATERIAL BASE OF RACISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE REFORIST LEFT

Naturally, an analysis of specific forms of racism has to start from Britain's imperialist history, its promotion of slavery, its colonisation of much of the world, its exploitation of the peoples and wealth of the colonised countries both under colonialism and through neo-colonial Third World bourgeoisies. The wealth of Britain today was accumulated through the super-exploited masses of the Third World as well as by the native British working class.

A key aspect of this exploitation was the use of labour power from other countries on British soil — from Ireland continuously since the early 19th century, from the Jewish population of Eastern Europe at the turn of this century, and from the Third World since World War Two (mainly from South Asia and the Caribbean). Although sharing the experience of exploitation in common, the indigenous working class in Britain certainly benefited materially from the greater exploitation of labour in the Third World, whether there or here. Here, migrant workers were recruited for the worst jobs that had few local workers prepared to do them if they could avoid it. The ability of the capitalist class to pay higher wages increased in certain industrial sectors, through the general rise in accumulation.

This relative material advantage has been supplemented by many, many decades of imperialist and racist propaganda, including propaganda for the regular imperialist and inter-imperialist wars into which the ruling class here drew the working class. When the National Front issues its propaganda, its lies fall on fertile ground. White racist ideology feeds easily into the competition for housing, jobs, training on the job, for the right to an acceptable standard of living from employers or the welfare State, which is the daily experience of the working class as a whole under capitalism.

The official leadership of the labour movement in Britain has consistently refused to confront the problem of racism in British society at large, and in the labour movement itself, in particular. Lack of interest in the issue, and an attitude to immigration laws ranging from tolerance to support, has produced the same lack of interest in this form of politics from most members of the black minorities. Despite considerable membership of unions by black workers, experience of collusion between management and shop stewards against black workers has often made

black involvement in union organisation pointless in the short run.

This refusal to confront racism and imperialism has meant that at best the official leaders of the labour movement have produced a "we're all workers together" line. There has been no serious political analysis of the black working class from this quarter. Indeed the mainspring has been a combination of trying to ensure a Labour government stays in office, with determination not to expose their lack of living links with their members. A serious campaign against racism in the workplace would have hardened the alienation of trade unionists in many cases from their leaders, and would not have been supported by many regional officials.

Most recently, with the rise of the National Front, there has been more of a serious campaign than before. Even so, this campaign is axed on spreading fears among workers as to what fascism could do to them. It is not axed on the parallel attack against acceptance of racism by white workers. Once this target is left untouched, the basis for the NF is untouched. And the State can also keep up and increase its racist repression, from immigration officials through "sus" charges to destructive educational practices.

RACISM AND THE REVOLUTIONARY WHITE LEFT

In recent years the major far left organisations have supported the right and necessity for black people to organise in their own self-defence against racist and fascist attacks. The Socialist Workers Party has responded to the growth in militancy among young black people in particular by setting up a black caucus around the paper *Flame*. However, there have already been two major splits from the SWP by its black members. The other main non-sectarian revolutionary organisation, the International Marxist Group, has moved closer to a position of supporting autonomous black organisation. Witness its role in the formation of an independent Asian organisation, the Asian Socialist League, after the March 1977 by-election in Stechford, Birmingham.

However, looking at the far Left's relationship to the black movement as a whole leads to two conclusions. First, the revolutionary socialist Left is overwhelmingly white, and has failed to attract to its ranks significant sections of the black working class. Second, despite the Left's frequently repeated condemnations of racism, there exists a widespread antagonism between the political vanguard of the black minorities and the left. Why should this be?

We would say that the principal failing of the Left has been, in this regard, its failure to come to terms with the need for autonomous black organisation. The other side of this coin has been the artificial basis of recruiting attempts among black people to join Left groups.

This failing has been seen most clearly in the SWP leadership's reduction of the question of black organisation to the needs of SWP 'as a whole'. Black politics and the attack on racism are collapsed by this means into a different politics, the politics of revolutionary party-building, based on the industrial worker. Sometimes, for a short time, fighting racism can be made a priority campaign. Examples are SWP activity in summer 1976 (linked closely to the Right to Work Campaign), which sprang from racist murders of Asians, and opposition to the NF in 1977. At other times, racism resumes its also-ran position on the priority list for the SWP. This lowly place flows straight from placing basic emphasis on SWP numerical growth and recruitment, rather than giving priority to the interests of the class as a whole.

Most recently, the use of the Anti-Nazi League as a recruiting apparatus, shoving aside existing organisations against racism and fascism such as the London Women Against Racism and Fascism, Gays Against Racism, and school student groups, shows up the SWP's self-definition as the solution to all working class problems,

as well as its attempted manipulation of people's fears of heavy repression. People acutely alert to this repression, as many members of the black minorities are, do not see the merit of becoming black armies for white generals, generals who moreover are chronically short of troops, and whose strategy is only sometimes geared to the specific forms of oppression of black people.

BIG FLAME'S ANALYSIS

Big Flame opposes reducing the struggle against racism to the question of building the revolutionary party – not because we are opposed to building the party, but because in this way a valid party will never be formed. We state unequivocally that the building of an autonomous black movement, and of autonomous class organisations generally, is essential for forming a genuine revolutionary party of the working class. With equal firmness, we state that black organisations will need to continue to exist during the long transition to socialism after a successful revolution. (Our argument here stands precisely alongside our stress on the necessity for autonomous organisation of all multiply oppressed sections of the working class, such as women and gays, despite the important differences in their oppression one from another.)

The Left's understanding of black autonomous organisation has of course been affected by the cultural and political differences between the white and black sections of the working class, and the lack of involvement of blacks within the white revolutionary

specific oppression. The numerous forms of oppression experienced by black minorities over and above those currently known by white workers – labour migration from another country, heavy discrimination, police and court harassment – must make the forms of organising available to the black minorities different in qualitative terms from those relevant to the white working class. In discussing black organisations, we immediately face certain specific problems. Perhaps, apart from our degree of ignorance, the most important relates to the fact that half the black population is under 20, and was mostly born here. What exists today in the way of their parents organisations may or may not therefore have much influence on how they organise as they move into their twenties and thirties, for the rest of the century.

Certainly the clashes between the younger generation's militancy against racist attacks, and the older generation's restraint, in Caribbean and South Asian communities, suggest change is likely. On the other hand, grassroots experience of Caribbean youth contradicts the inflated hope that there is developing a "political refusal to work" movement among young blacks. There is a refusal to take shit, either in the shape of a dead-end job or in the shape of an SB official's hostile attitude. But the destructive impact of joblessness, racist schooling and similar experiences often deadens young people's political reactions. Refusal of all work is the political attitude of very few.



Left. The result has been the Left's isolation from black struggles, and so its domination by simplified angles on those struggles drawn from "Black and White Unite and Fight (at Once)!" politics, or police brutality politics, or home country politics (Manley, Burnham, Gandhi, Bhutto). The incredibly bad situation of many black women is a theme that rarely appears; its absence is symptomatic.

Any linkage in practice between white revolutionary socialists and black struggles must take account of three fundamental issues, at least. One is the diversity of the various black minorities from each other, apart from their common experience of racism. The division between people of Caribbean and Asian origin is only the most obvious one on this level. Second, is that the starting point for the political identity of black people in Britain lies *outside* the workplace – in their own "communities"; in their family networks; in their countries of origin, especially if they are not born here; and in their experience of systematic and pervasive racism, from the immigration procedures on in. Third, these different minorities must be organised by members of their own minority – only the colonial mentality operating under the banner of marxism cannot appreciate this simple truth.

PRELIMINARY COMMENTS ON BLACK POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

A serious marxist analysis must give full weight to the ways different sections of the working class are conditioned by their

Two other issues need bearing in mind in discussing black organisations: their class orientation, and the degree of organisation in terms of national origin. In most cities there exist cultural, political and religious groups within each black community, often with overlapping membership, but frequently divided on political grounds. Here we restrict ourselves to the political groups, though one of the strengths of black minorities can often be the close relationship between what the English tend to separate from each other, as "politics" and "culture".

South Asians have their own political groups by nationality and usually by class as well. The best known is the Indian Workers' Association, split into a revolutionary section aligned with Peking, and a reformist section aligned with Moscow. Both sections are represented in most major cities. Their degree of involvement with white politics varies, though the pro-Moscow section often is involved with the local community relations apparatus. Often political activity is centred on gaining control of the local Sikh temple, a good instance of the fusion of religion, culture and politics among Punjabis of the Sikh persuasion. Tentative steps in a new direction may be represented by the militancy of the local IWA in Wolverhampton early in 1978 in anti-racist struggle, also by the formation of the Asian Socialist League by Asian IMG members during the Stechford by-election in 1977, and of the Southall Youth Organisation and the Bolton Asian Youth Movement in 1976 and 1977.

The Bangladeshi Workers Association is similarly divided between a revolutionary pro-Peking wing, and an openly reformist pro-Moscow wing. A larger proportion of Bangladeshis are from peasant backgrounds than are Sikhs, and perhaps as a result their distance is greater from the community relations apparatus. Their self-defence groups have been active, as has the Bengali Housing Action Group in Tower Hamlets, East London.

The tenacity of Asian communities in struggle has been shown repeatedly, especially in the Imperial Typewriters strike, the Mansfield Hosiery Strike and of course Grunwicks. Often too it has been women workers who have been to the fore. Their community solidarity offers material and personal support, and their lack of reliance on the official trade union apparatus means a greater intensity of struggle.

Caribbean workers of the older generation were greatly influenced by the great distances separating their islands from each other, each one having a much closer relation to the British metropolis than to the others. This reflects itself in the existence of island associations, whose main role is cultural and social, but which may take on a political colouring under some circumstances, for example speeches by Powell, or parents' discontent at racism in education. This "parochialism" is however far less in evidence than it used to be, particularly in London.

For younger West Indians, clubs based around sound systems were the nucleus of rebellion at Carnival in Notting Hill in 1976 and 1977, as well as in Chapeltown, Leeds, in November 1976. Such clubs and dances have been the focus of police attacks and of militant black resistance. Most cities also have overtly political groups, with a news sheet and/or community centre, which will try to organise campaigns on police harassment, etc.

There are also political associations based on support for one or other political party "back home" in the Caribbean; one with interesting potential is the youth wing of the Jamaican PNP, Manley's party.

The discussion, to be complete, would require analysis of Rastafarian tendencies and their political implications. Although political passivity is the message of traditional Rastafarianism, there are several signs that this could develop into a more militant and activist position under the pressure of British (and Ethiopian) political realities.

The main other tendency in West Indian politics is of course black nationalism of the separatist kind, represented by a paper like *Grassroots*. It is important to recognise that while many black people would not join such a group, its position does reflect the deep distrust of white society running through the West Indian minority, including its "respectable" elements. Sometimes such groups have an anti-capitalist position, but in practice it takes a very subordinate place. It is an ideology also offering much scope to emerging petit bourgeois black leaders in their struggle to consolidate their own position and to attack socialism as irrelevant to black needs.

Autonomous black socialist groups, like the Croydon and Brixton Collective, stand for the need for unity *on their own terms* with anti-racists and revolutionaries in the white working class, for the overthrow of capitalism, and the need to expose and defeat petit bourgeois leaders in their own community. For them the issues of racism and class are intertwined. Most accept the need for a revolutionary party to destroy capitalism, but have little faith in the leaderships of existing revolutionary groups either to provide a sound basis for unity, or to ensure the cultural and political identity of black people in a post-revolutionary society. We agree with this perspective, and consider that for Big Flame to grow qualitatively it must take it with the greatest seriousness.

Given then the experience of multiple oppression and exploitation by black minorities in Britain; given the importance of different national cultures, from Sikhism to Rastafarianism; it is apparently obvious that black liberation must begin in black-run organisations on the revolutionary left in particular, and in autonomous black organisations in general. Only so can the black minorities build up their own strength, their own base, their own position of confidence from which to organise with white groups and to challenge white political groups' understanding of racism and the class struggle. The weak or non-existent understanding among the revolutionary left of the importance of even the bourgeois concept of 'citizenship' in the black struggle for survival against state immigration policies, is witness to how important this independent development is for the revolution. Often the specific and urgent concerns of the black minorities are written off as minor matters. Individual black recruitment to revolutionary groups, though to be welcomed as a valuable contribution to the groups' perspectives, cannot by itself transform the political consciousness of the black minorities or unify them across nationality barriers.

CONCLUSIONS

We have looked at the official Labour Left's approaches to the black working class, and the revolutionary left's. Big Flame considers that as Marxists we base our analysis on the material division within the working class, and insist we have to take these as our starting point for organisation. They are not divisions based on will-o'-the-wisp notions, but on different experiences of oppression and even of the degree of exploitation. The political strength of certain multiply oppressed sectors can only be developed autonomously; otherwise 'unity' will still be based on one sector dominating another.

Our insistence on the necessity for black autonomous organisation is not based on a romantic view of a black united vanguard to save the white working class from itself. Our preliminary comments on black political organisation must make that clear. At the same time, black political organisation, even in its separatist phase — which we reject — reflects the absence of many standard myths about imperialism, immigration laws, the police and the courts, and other issues, which circulate freely and far in the white majority. In so far as black defence still exists, it is in the older generation. The existence of this clearer angle of vision, and its political organisation and expression, must be actively amplified by the white revolutionary left. White revolutionaries must learn from black socialist analysis and from supporting black struggles.

Conversely, they must not evade the issue or make it worse, by thinking that recruiting some token black people proves their credentials, or by riding to public acclaim by sudden flooding of black defence committees, or by dictating to black groups their own group's growth as condition for support. Collaboration and co-ordination between equal partners in the revolutionary struggle is the only viable method of building the working class's political strength.

