

What is a nation?

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What is the definition of a nation? People seem to take for granted that the U.S., France, and Britain, for example, are nations. Are not most of us indoctrinated from day one with the idea that the U.S. is “one nation under God with liberty and justice for all”? But this view ignores the fact that there are millions of people living within these countries who suffer consistent oppression, not just because of their class — what they do for a living and what they own — but simply because of who they are.

Some might say a nation is a group of people who share a common language, common heritage, and common borders. But this gives only a partial answer. V.I. Lenin, writing from the experience of building a revolutionary multinational workers’ party in czarist Russia, taught that there are nations within nations. There are nations that oppress and nations that are oppressed.

Take France, for instance. France has historically colonized and plundered whole areas of Africa, oppressing African nations. However, within France today there are also vast communities of oppressed people who were forced to migrate from those former colonies to seek a better life — people from Mali, Algeria, Ivory Coast, and Vietnam, for example. Their status of being members of an oppressed nation does not change just because they have moved geographically to the inside the oppressor nation.

The question of national oppression is not just about Third World nations and not just about skin color. National oppression grows out of the expansion of capitalism worldwide and its built-in drive for super-exploitation. Therefore, the struggle against national oppression hits at the heart of imperialism.

The Irish have been nationally oppressed by the English ruling class for over 800 years. The Basque people have been trying to win political recognition of their national identity from Spain, and many have supported an armed struggle against the oppressor. Imperialist Japan in 1910 annexed all Korea as its colony. Before World War II it seized part of China, and set up colonial administrations in much of the rest of Asia that supplanted European colonizers — Britain, France, Holland, and Portugal — as well as the United States.

The United States even today has outright colonies in Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands — in addition to its domination over scores of other countries through economic control and military pressure. These nations are oppressed in relation to imperialism. But what about inside the U.S.?

In the U.S., the billionaire ruling class that controls all the industries, agribusiness, and the banks is almost exclusively white. In addition to being an exploiting capitalist class, it also heads up an oppressor nation. Within the borders of the U.S. are many different oppressed peoples, including African Americans, Native nations, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans/Chicanos, Palestinians, Jamaicans, Haitians, Arabs, Dominicans, and many others.

All these oppressed nations have had their own unique social and historical evolution. But one thing they all have in common is being super — exploited and super-oppressed by imperialism. Although all whites in the U.S. belong to the oppressor nation, there is a big difference between the white bourgeoisie and the white working class.

The labor of the white workers is exploited by the capitalists — although, on a whole, not as intensively as that of the nationally oppressed workers. However, as capitalist restructuring and megamergers proceed, with mass layoffs and union busting, more and more whites find themselves sharing, even though to a somewhat lesser degree, the fate that for some decades seemed relegated to the oppressed people — low wages, loss of benefits, and so on.

In his theses for the Second Congress of the Communist International written back in 1920, Lenin, the leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, mentioned the special oppression of Black or African Americans in the U.S. as very significant for the worldwide proletarian movement at the time. It still is today.

Marxists argue that no economic, political, or social phenomenon can be fully understood without taking into account its historical development. No struggle takes place within a vacuum; no struggle is isolated from the general laws of nature and society. Marxists are materialists, not idealists. Marxists know that being determines consciousness — that what people think does not drop from the sky but is conditioned by their social experiences.

To fully understand the Black struggle or the Black experience in the US. and its status today, we have to view its development in relationship to the overall class struggle. The Black struggle in this country has many rich lessons for us as workers, as progressives, and as revolutionaries. Exploring the Black revolution in relationship to the class struggle will help to understand why only socialism can liberate all of humanity from this nightmare known as capitalism.

Every struggle for national liberation is crucial to building class solidarity. Any characterization that pits oppressed groups against each other or makes us

compete over the question of who's more persecuted or oppressed is harmful. Oppression in any form is degrading, dehumanizing, and unnatural.

Karl Marx wrote that the dominant ideas of any time are defined by the ideas of the ruling class. None of the working class or oppressed communities is immune ideologically from the daily doses of ABC, NBC, or CBS. For instance, every year McDonald's, Burger King, and other big corporations like to define for us what Black History Month should mean — they want us to see it from their own bourgeois, narrow view.

Black history, however, is not just about who invented what. It's not just about all the wonderful African American artists, athletes, historians, and educators who were able to rise above racism and prejudice in their own way to make contributions to the betterment of all society in the areas of science, popular culture, and the arts.

What is most important 365 days a year is that since the time the first African slave set foot on this soil, the African American struggle for national liberation has been part of the overall class struggle to liberate humanity.

This is what none of the history books will teach us — that the Black struggle today is part and parcel of the struggle for socialism, that is, the struggle to reconstruct human society and abolish all classes. Further, our struggle is not just about emphasizing great individuals, but about social and political movements and class upheavals.

While the history books given our children in school devote some space to a dynamic person like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., they spend little time on the mass movement he led and what conditions gave rise to it. It was the strength and momentum of this movement that won progressive gains like civil rights legislation for the Southern Black masses, even if only within the framework of bourgeois legality.

But to understand why the civil rights movement had to take place, to understand the Black Panthers or even the controversy surrounding the Nation of Islam, we have to go back some 100 years to a period known as Reconstruction. What was Reconstruction? It was the post-Civil War period that began in 1866 and abruptly and tragically ended in 1877. It marked the rebuilding of the South and the process of enfranchising an estimated 4 million Black former slaves, who had been stripped of all political and economic freedoms under cruel, inhuman bondage.

During Reconstruction the U.S. government set up Freedmen's Bureau agencies throughout the South. Their stated goal was to oversee the

establishment of institutions that would help provide literacy, land, and total suffrage for the freed people, all under the protection of federal troops. That this purpose was betrayed does not negate the fact that Reconstruction was an important attempt to win full economic and political rights for Black people under the early stages of capitalist development in the U.S.

Osborne Anderson's stirring eyewitness account, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, helped to explain an important episode in the struggle to destroy slavery and lay the basis for Reconstruction.

Many books with diverse interpretations have been written on the Reconstruction period. Three exceptional ones were used for this brief overview. The first, by the great Marxist scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, is called *Black Reconstruction in America*. The second is by another Marxist, James S. Allen, and is called *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy, 1875-1876*. And the third, called *Background for Radical Reconstruction*, contains many important documents and was edited by Hans L. Trefousse.

The Civil War between the North and the South, which resulted in at least half a million people losing their lives, was not fought to bring an end to chattel slavery for some 4 million people of African descent. It was not a war between oppressed and oppressor.

It was a class war between two different exploiting classes; it was a war between two social systems.

On one side was the outmoded slavocracy, which was even more oppressive than the feudal landlord class overthrown in Europe in the 1848 bourgeois revolutions.

On the other side was the budding capitalist class in the North that needed industrialization, the expansion of the railroads, and pioneer settlements throughout the West. The West was still inhabited by the Native nations, but they were being systemically driven off the best land and exterminated by the genocidal methods of the U.S. government and cavalry. The genocidal methods of the U.S. government and cavalry. The U.S. had just taken over at least one half of Mexico in the war of 1846 to 1848.

The slaves in the South faced conditions very similar to those of the serfs in feudal Europe. The slaves were like the serfs and the slave masters like the lords. The difference was that the slave had no rights and was owned outright by the slave owner, whose brutality was tempered only by his financial interest in preserving his "property." Du Bois eloquently speaks on this in his book:

Slaves were not considered men. They had no right of petition. They were 'devisable like any other chattel.' They could own nothing; they could make no contracts; they could hold no property, nor traffic in property; they could not hire out; they could not legally marry nor constitute families; they could not control their children.... They could not testify in court.... A slave [had] no right to education or religion... A slave might be condemned to death for striking any white person.[4]

The slaves had no control over any aspect of their lives, including no right to sell their ability to work in exchange for wages.

And what was the relationship of the white workers in the North and South to the slaves? In the North, industrial capitalism was on the rise and a trade union movement was in formation. Many of these workers were first-generation immigrants escaping poverty and oppression in Europe.

Some white workers were very sympathetic to the plight of the slaves; many became active in the abolitionist movement. But even in the North, there was much racism toward the slaves and the free Black people who had managed either to buy their freedom or escape from slavery.

Many white workers in lower-paid, menial jobs viewed Black people as competitors and accused them of driving down wages. Unfortunately, most leaders of the craft unions then in existence did not instill within the workers a class view that the Northern industrialists and the slavocracy were both their enemies and that their fight should be not only for the abolition of slavery but for the full equality of Black people.

These white workers were ignorant of the reality that it's the bosses who drive down wages, not oppressed Black labor. During the 1830s, before the Civil War, a number of race riots took place. In Cincinnati and Philadelphia, Black people were killed by racist mobs. Many freed slaves emigrated to Canada to escape this repression.

On the other hand, some white workers who had come from England and Germany were more class-conscious on the question of fighting the slavocracy and understood the need for class solidarity with the slaves. Many of these workers had been influenced by the 1848 revolutions and brought those experiences to the U.S. In fact, the First International Workingmen's Association, based in England and founded by Karl Marx and others, came out militantly against chattel and wage slavery.

It was Marx who made the famous statement, "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." [5] In other words, the struggle against capitalism as a system of wage slavery is inseparably linked to the political and economic emancipation of Black people.

In the South, there were an estimated 5 million white workers and farmers, the majority of them very poor and without slaves. These whites were for the most part also without land because the big landowners or planters controlled most of it. Some poor whites called for the overthrow of the landlords, but did not call for an alliance with the slaves. As a general rule most landless Southern whites would have opted to become brutal overseers in hope of one day rising to the status of a planter.

The slaves had no really formidable allies within the South. They had no choice but to look to the North – where some whites were sympathetic — as the only option to freedom. With the outbreak of the Civil War, thousands of slaves took the opportunity to escape, not giving it even a second thought that they were "violating" the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This act stated that any escaped slave could be legally caught outside the boundaries of the slave states and brought back to the plantations. The Dred Scott decision by the Supreme Court in 1857 reaffirmed slavery in the new territories of the West.

This brings up a point not often raised about the Civil War and the role of President Abraham Lincoln. As it became more and more possible that a war would erupt around the question of the expansion of slavery vs. its Dred Scott containment, Lincoln did not behave as the great friend or emancipator of the slaves he has been ade out to be. He was more concerned about whether slavery would spread to Kansas or Colorado or some other area in the West on which the capitalists had set their sights for expansion. In fact, there was real concern in the North and South that a guerrilla movement made up of abolitionists and ex-slaves, like the one led by John Brown, might try to free every slave in the country.

Lincoln actually endorsed the return of "fugitive" slaves to their masters early in the war. It was only after many slaves had escaped their inhumane situation that Lincoln was forced to sign into law the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which ratified what had already taken place.

You could say that at least 500,000 slaves were carrying out their version of a general strike against intolerable conditions. A similar situation occurred in 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson was forced to sign civil rights legislation because the masses were demonstrating in the hundreds of thousands for it.

Were it not for escaping slaves joining the Union Army in the tens of thousands, the North could have lost the war militarily. Before Black men were given guns, they performed such tasks as cooks, spies, and personal assistants to the Union officers.

At first, the Union Army discouraged Black men from joining its ranks; some officers even attempted to deport these ex-slaves back to the South. But so many white troops deserted that the Union Army had no choice but to accept Black men, especially after they had “proved” themselves on the battlefield. The Confederate legislature even considered passing a bill to allow the recruitment of slaves into its army in order to stop the flow of the slaveholders’ “property” to the Union Army. But the slavocracy was forced to surrender before the law was enacted.

What is crucial to understand about the surrender of the Confederacy is that it was primarily of a military character. The U.S. government under the tutelage of the Northern bourgeoisie took some measures to confiscate the lands of the former slave owners and put them under the jurisdiction of the federal government. But they did not smash the slavocracy as a class. They refused to uproot every vestige of slavery.

This served to deter a transition from a reactionary feudal period to a bourgeois democracy in the South, at least as far as the Black masses were concerned.

This abandonment of the freed slaves on the part of the Northern bourgeoisie laid the basis for the racist, terrorist counter-revolution that was to take place, which gave birth to the Ku Klux Klan, White Citizens Councils, and others.

The freed people did have some allies in the Congress in the form of the Radical Republicans, led by Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner. The Radical Republicans were the left wing of the Republican Party. Both men were strong advocates for bourgeois democracy, but Stevens was the more radical of the two. He initiated strong legislation that could have brought political equality for the ex-slaves and economic empowerment as well — especially where the question of land was concerned.

Once again, this type of progressive legislation was confirming legally what was already taking place. Even before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, Black people took it upon themselves to confiscate the land that they had made productive and divided it up among themselves.

This began to occur wherever the Northern troops armed the slaves after overrunning Confederate positions. On the other hand, there were times when the Union Army would intervene and put down slave insurrections. In the “Ogeechee Negro rebellion,” some five to twelve hundred armed slaves tried to take over the plantations near Savannah, Georgia.

The main issue during the post-Civil War Reconstruction period was the seizure of the land in the South. The most famous of these battles for land took place in the Sea Islands off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina. This was a valiant struggle, indeed, when you consider that by this time the White House was occupied by a sympathizer with the slavocracy — Andrew Johnson — who had become president following the assassination of Lincoln.

On May 29, 1865, Johnson issued a proclamation giving unconditional amnesty to those who fought on the side of the Confederacy. All they had to do was take an oath of loyalty to the U.S. government. High-ranking Confederate officers and those planters who controlled more than \$20,000 (a very large sum in 1865) were given a slap on the wrist for their crimes against humanity.

Johnson appointed provisional governors within the Southern states who allowed the amnestied voters to resume seats in their respective state governments. Instead of ordering the federal troops to root out and destroy every vestige of the slavocracy, Johnson’s traitorous actions allowed the former Confederate ruling circles back into the driver’s seat.

The ex-plantations in the Sea Islands were occupied by Black people a year after the Civil War ended. When the U.S. government made attempts to legally restore these islands to the former slave masters, armed guerrilla fighters organized some successful resistance to secure their settlements. These freedmen were exercising their right to seize lands that their slave labor had made productive but which had enriched the privileged slavocracy.

In 1866 and 1867, Congress held hearings of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction. Many witnesses from the North and South, Black and white, testified on the economic, political, and military conditions following the Civil War.

Brigadier General Charles H. Howard was brother of the head of the Freedmen’s Bureau and an inspector for the bureau in Charleston, South Carolina. In his testimony, Howard testified on the conditions of the newly freed Black masses in the Sea Islands.

Question: Can you state how these islands are now principally occupied?

Howard: A number of plantations on each, and sometime entire islands, have been formally restored to their former owners. They were all abandoned during the war. On several of the islands Negroes have been located and have been engaged in cultivating the land. Some, and a considerable number, previously to General Sherman's celebrated order [setting aside a strip along the coast for the use of black farmers], issued last winter at Savannah, and a large number under the provisions of that order, have been located on the different islands. A considerable number have received formal titles to forty acres each on these islands. Where there were large numbers of them on any given plantation they still remain in possession; but where there were very few on a plantation, the plantation has been, in some cases, restored. The understanding was that the orders were that where there were very few Negroes on a plantation the plantation should be restored if the Negroes were properly provided with homes. [6]

General Rufus Saxton, a military governor of the Sea Islands, became assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau. He was removed from his position by President Andrew Johnson for refusing to carry out orders requiring him to restore Black people's lands in the Sea Islands to the Confederacy. Here is part of his testimony:

Question: Are you aware that the blacks have arms to any considerable extent in South Carolina?

Saxton: I believe that a great many of them have arms, and I know it to be their earnest desire to procure them.... I can further state that [former Confederate soldiers called Regulators] desired me to sanction a form of contract which would deprive the colored men of their arms, which I refused to do. The subject was so important, as I thought, to the welfare of the freedmen that I issued a circular on this subject, which circular not having been approved by the military commander was not published, as I was required by my instructions to get his approval to all my circulars before I issued them.... I will further add, that I believe it to be the settled purpose of the white people of South Carolina to be armed and thoroughly organized. And to have the whole black population thoroughly disarmed and defenseless; I believe that is the settled policy.

Question: What would be the probable effect of such an effort to disarm the blacks?

Saxton: It would subject them to the severest oppression. and leave their condition no better than before they were emancipated, and in many respects worse than it was before. [7]

A number of Black conventions were organized throughout the South for the purpose of organizing mass opposition to the Johnson government and the reactionary Black Codes — as well as to help the ex-slaves continue upon their revolutionary path for complete democracy. What were the Black Codes? These codes were passed by the ex-plantation owners and were really no different from the slave codes. While each Southern state was allowed to enact its own codes, they were generally the same.

Here is how historian James Allen described them:

The Black Codes can be compared with the vagrancy acts of Western Europe at the end of the 15th and through the 16th centuries. Due to the breaking up of the feudal estates of Western Europe. a large body of future proletarians were cut loose from the land and from their masters. Industry. however, could not yet absorb them and the vagrancy laws were used to imprison and put to forced labor this large landless and jobless mass. In the South, 4,000,000 Negro slaves had become masterless. There was no industry to absorb them; they were propelled instead towards seizing large landed estates. Counter-revolution replied with the Black Codes, consisting of vagrancy and apprenticeship acts designed to force Negroes to labor on the plantations under conditions imposed by the planters. [8]

The Freedmen's Bureau, established by the federal government under President Grant to help establish schools and social services for ex-slaves, stated in a report that the Black Codes "actually served to secure to the former slave-holding class the unpaid labor which they had been accustomed to enjoy before the war." [9] A number of freed Black people were asked to provide testimony on the issue of wages under Reconstruction. Oscar J. Dunn was a runaway slave who bought his freedom and eventually resided in New Orleans. He was elected lieutenant governor of Louisiana and served from 1868 until 1871.

Question: Has there been a branch of the Freedmen's Bureau here in the city?

Dunn: Yes, sir; and I have had occasion to send a great many freedmen to it. The planters, in many portions of the state, would make arrangements with them and fail to perform their part of the contract. There have been many instances the present season where planters have employed laborers at \$15 a month. The contract specified that the planter should be allowed to retain one-half the monthly salary; they would retain it in that way until the cotton was picked, and then manage to get into a quarrel with them and drive them away without paying them. I have had several come to me with such information, and some of them I have taken to the Freedmen's Bureau. This is a common thing through all the parishes. The Freedmen's Bureau is a great eyesore to the planters; they do not like it all; and I am sorry to say that in many instances agents in the parishes do not act exactly just towards the freedmen. [10]

Daniel Norton was a Black physician who practiced medicine during the Civil War in Virginia.

Question: How do the returned rebels treat the colored people?

Norton: They have in some cases treated them well, but in more cases they have not. A number of persons living in the country have come into Yorktown and reported to the Freedmen's Bureau that they have not been treated well; that they worked all the year and had received no pay, and were driven off on the first of January. They say that the owners with whom they had been living rented out their places, sold their crops, and told them they had no further use for them, and that they might go to the Yankees The slaveholders, who have owned them, say that they will take them back, but cannot pay them any wages. Some are willing to pay a dollar a month, and some less, and some are only willing to give them their clothing and what they eat. They are not willing to pay anything for work....

Question: In case of the removal of the military force from among you, and also of the Freedmen's Bureau, what would the whites do with you?

Norton: I do not think that the colored people would be safe. They would be in danger of being hunted and killed. The spirit of the whites against the blacks is much worse than it was before the war; a white gentleman with whom I was talking made this remark: he said he was well disposed toward the colored people, but that

finding that they took up arms against him, he had come to the conclusion that he never wanted to have anything to do with them, or to show any spirit of kindness toward them. These were his sentiments. [11]

The Black people did what they could to turn back this growing counter-revolution. Besides arming themselves in self-defense, they participated in Constitutional Conventions throughout the South where, for the first time, Black people voted for their own representatives. In many instances, the Black representatives were still outnumbered by whites.

But in the South Carolina Reconstruction legislature, 84 of the 157 representatives were Black. In fact, South Carolina and Louisiana had the two predominantly Black parliaments in the South. These delegates represented the left wing of the parliaments. They initiated laws that would benefit both Black and poor white people in opposition to the plantation owners.

It is important to return to the question of the role of the labor movement during the Reconstruction era. As we said, class conscious German immigrants played an active role in fighting slavery. Many joined the Union Army; others joined the Radical Republicans; still others formed Communist Clubs.

Among the German emigrés who migrated to the South to fight against the slavocracy were Hermann Meyer, a member of the International Working Men's Association, and Adolph Douai. Meyer and Douai were both forced to leave the South because of their bold activities.

The trade union movement as a whole, however, while demanding an end to slavery, did not make any real attempts to integrate Black workers into the then predominantly white male workers' movement. The trade union leaders in the North saw the Black workers as unskilled competitors with white labor. This attitude made it easier for the Northern capitalists to bring in Black scab workers when a strike occurred, in order to further divide Black against white. The same tactic was used against low-paid Chinese laborers, who provided the backbone for building the railroads in the West.

The biggest strategic mistake that the Northern trade union movement made was not to recognize and unconditionally support the political and economic struggle of the newly emerged Black workers. Black workers were therefore forced to organize their own trade union organizations — laying the basis for segregated shops. This did not stop these Black workers from taking internationalist and class — conscious positions on a number of questions.

For instance, at the Colored National Labor Convention in Washington, D.C., in 1869, resolutions were passed in support of Black and women's suffrage, along with one supporting the Cuban struggle against Spanish colonialism. Their platform also called for equality in industry and protested discriminatory practices within trade unions. Free immigration for all nationalities was accepted. At the same time, Chinese labor — known then as “coolie” labor, a racist term — was labeled “slavery in a new form.”

This is not to say that there were no links between Black trade union leaders and the trade union movement. The International Workingmen's Association in Chicago carried out political activities in the Black community there. In 1872 a split-off section of the IWA nominated the great Frederick Douglass and Victoria Woodhull, a leader in the women's suffrage movement, for vice-president and president of the United States, respectively.

On September 13, 1871, at a march calling for the eight-hour day, members of the Black waiters' union and Black plasterers' union marched in the IWA contingent. These Black workers received some of the biggest applause from the onlookers, who were chanting “Vive la Commune” in response to the Paris Commune uprising.

And just three months later, on December 18, 1871, a Black militia known as the Skidmore Guard participated in a demonstration to protest the execution of three leading Parisian Communards. So despite any racial barriers, Black workers contributed greatly to the advancement of the US. labor movement and also the growing socialist movement.

As Black people continued to make political gains in the South, the ex-slave owners and their allies tried every maneuver to advance the counter-revolution. When the divide-and-conquer tactic of splitting the Black masses from the Radical Republicans failed, alongside attempts to attract Black people to the conservative Democrat Party, these racists looked toward the backward white masses for the answer — through a campaign of whipping up hysteria based on white supremacy. Tragically, the majority of the white masses eventually succumbed to this most dangerous of all divide-and-conquer schemes.

Clandestine racist terrorist organizations sprang up throughout the South to attack organized meetings of Black representatives and progressive anti-racist whites.

The KKK had been around since 1865, when it was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee, by a group of ex-Confederate officers. The former slave masters

regained authority in North Carolina when the federal government refused to send troops to crush Klan-organized terror. In fact, the final blow came when the Union Army was withdrawn from the South in the period 1876 to 1877. This marked the decisive betrayal of the Reconstruction era, ushering in a new stage of outright fascistic reaction.

The Black people were forced into a situation of semi-slavery. They and the revolutionary institutions they had fought so hard for were now left defenseless by those they had thought were their Northern allies. In the meantime, the KKK was on its way to becoming an instrument of state terror on behalf of the capitalist repressive state.

In his book, *The Klan and the Government – Foes or Allies?*, Sam Marcy, chair of Workers World Party, wrote that

...the KKK is not merely an organization that grew up autonomously and spontaneously to promote racism. It is an offspring of the capitalist state of which the Southern states once again became an integral part. The Klan has always been part and parcel, sometimes secretly, sometimes openly, of the capitalist state, especially in the police and military forces of the U.S. Their targets vary from time to time, but their general objective is the same — the destruction of the democratic rights of the workers and oppressed. They are the closest approximation to a fascist apparatus. Always they grow out of a period of acute class struggle.
[12]

The period following Reconstruction led to the outbreak of lynchings throughout the South. Over 3,000 lynchings were officially recorded from the late 1800s through the 1920s. This prompted Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh to characterize African Americans as “one of the most oppressed groupings of people on earth.”

In the historic *Plesry vs. Ferguson* ruling in 1898, the U.S. Supreme Court institutionalized segregation throughout the South and many areas of the North with the infamous “Jim Crow” laws.

So how did the defeat of Reconstruction impact on the Black struggle and the class struggle in general against capitalism in this country? What is the common thread running through every one of these struggles? What various forms have these struggles taken?

These periods hold very rich lessons for the working class and all the oppressed. This brief essay cannot do justice to them.

One important figure was Booker T. Washington, a Black educator. Notwithstanding his political conservatism and accommodation to the capitalist establishment, Washington founded Tuskegee Institute (now University), in Tuskegee, Alabama, several years after the collapse of Reconstruction. Washington appealed to Northern industrialists to help finance the first of many important agricultural and industrial colleges in the Southern Black Belt to encourage former slaves and their descendants to become self-reliant and independent from their former slave masters.

There was the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People by W.E.B. Du Bois and other members of the Niagara Movement. Their aim was to organize mass and legal opposition to the lynchings, including legal lynchings of Black men by the racist courts.

There was the mass movement known as the Universal Negro Improvement Association, led by Marcus Garvey in the early 1900s, which advocated Black people going back to Africa. Whether one agreed with the program or not, this anti-colonial movement galvanized more than a million Black people in the struggle.

And then there was the civil rights movement that propelled millions of people, Black and white, to pick up the torch left by the freed people following slavery and Reconstruction to fight the Jim Crow laws. The civil rights struggle was also a forerunner to the gay and women's liberation movements.

There was the Black Panther Party inspired by the great Malcolm X and founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1967. This was the most revolutionary party within the Black community until it was decimated by the FBI and the US. government in the early 1970s. This organization called for the armed self-defense of Black and other oppressed peoples against the repressive state — the cops, the courts, the FBI, and so on.

They considered themselves internationalists in solidarity with revolutionary struggles in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East as well as other struggles in this country. In fact, Panther leader Huey Newton wrote a document in the early 1970s in support of the gay struggle, calling upon progressives to ally themselves with the gay movement.

Capitalist democracy in the U.S. has proven incapable of solving racism and the national question as well as other forms of oppression — let alone

economic inequality. After all, it has been over a century since Reconstruction, yet deep inequality remains.

Bourgeois democracy is but a form of capitalist rule. After all is said and done, capitalist democracy serves the rich and the super-rich. The explosion of the prison -industrial complex exposes the utter bankruptcy of bourgeois democracy and the deepening repression that it heaps upon the poor, especially people of color. The statistics speak for themselves.

The U.S. has the largest prison population in the world — 1.8 million people. This number is expected to rise to 2 million by the year 2000. It equals the combined populations of Atlanta, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Des Moines. and Miami. The California state system is actually the biggest in the Western industrialized world — and is 40 percent larger than the Federal Bureau of Prisons. California alone has more people incarcerated in its jails and prisons than the prison populations of France, Great Britain, Germany, Japan, Singapore, and the Netherlands put together.

Since 1991, the rate of violent acts has decreased by 20 percent while the number of people in prison has increased by 50 percent.

Due to a decline in drug rehabilitation programs on the outside and an increase in drug-related arrests and harsh convictions with racial disparities, close to one half of the prisoners in the U.S. are African American. One out of fourteen Black men is incarcerated. One out of every four Black men is likely to be caught up in the vicious web of the criminal justice system at some point during his lifetime.

The number of women prisoners — now 80,000 — has multiplied by twelve since 1970. Many are locked up for alleged drug-related offenses and other nonviolent acts. Seventy — five percent of these women are mothers; African Americans make up the largest group.

Seventy percent of the prisoners in the U.S. are illiterate. An estimated 200,000 have a serious mental illness. While 60 percent to 80 percent have a substance addiction, only one out of every ten inmates receives any kind of drug treatment in prison.

What are the economic factors regarding prisons? Private corporations are investing an estimated \$35 billion annually in some aspect of the prison-industrial complex. This includes some of the largest architectural and construction firms, along with Wall Street investment banks that pour millions of dollars into supporting prison bond issues and the privatization of prisons. The telephone conglomerates are raking in profits by the fistful off of prisons.

The expansion of prisons has had a big impact in impoverished rural areas. With devastating layoffs in other industries, prison construction has created an economic boom in correctional jobs and has led to the growth of other related industries. This is especially true of New York State — two thirds of the state's counties are classified as rural. One county that had only two prisons a quarter of a century ago today has eighteen and a nineteenth under construction. The town of Dannemora has more inmates than free people.

A captive work force can make super-profits for local, state, and national governments. — and slave labor can be pitted against other workers with better paying jobs.

Prisoners are often forced into taking jobs that unionized workers could be doing — like telemarketing for big commercial firms. Shouldn't the unions make it their business to organize these prisoners, and demand union wages and conditions, so they can't be used as scab labor?

Even as prisons are privatized, the U.S. government is spending more money on jails than ever before. In 1996 Washington spent more money on prison construction than on university construction — almost a billion dollars. This was the same year that President Bill Clinton signed away welfare. The Clinton administration has also outdone its Republican predecessors in placing “illegal aliens” and minimum — security inmates into private prisons.

The bottom line is this: under capitalism, investors and bankers will put their money into any sector of the economy, no matter how anti — human it may be, in order to maximize profits. This is not a matter of policy but is based on the independent laws of capitalist development that drive big business to gravitate to wherever the rate of profit is highest.

There are more than three thousand political prisoners in the U.S. These heroic women and men, the majority of them from nationally oppressed communities, either entered prison as activists during the 1960s and 1970s or became political in jail — -like the murdered Panther leader, George Jackson. They all have at least two things in common: they stand against racist repression and other forms of injustice, and the capitalist state wants to silence them. The 1971 Attica prison rebellion for a brief moment exposed the hideous oppression behind the walls and the existence of political prisoners.

Many political prisoners are well known, like Leonard Peltier, the MOVE 9 and the remaining Puerto Rican political prisoners.

The most recognized prisoner on death row is Mumia Abu- Jamal, “the voice of the voiceless.” Mumia is more than just another innocent man, like so

many who languish in artheid-like dungeons. In the eyes of the U.S. government, he is “guilty” of being an uncompromising, unwavering revolutionary who has helped to expose police brutality, the death penalty, and other forms of racist atrocities since he became a member of the Black Panther Party as a teenager.

Mumia’s fight for a new trial has stimulated unity among progressives and revolutionaries of all nationalities and ages. The struggle to free Mumia and all political prisoners is tied to the overall struggle against a class system that persecutes the poor, workers, the oppressed, and all who resist the tiny clique of parasitic bosses and bankers.

Any discussion of the evils of capitalism leads inevitably to the next question: what can replace it? Only the socialist revolution, a revolution achieved through the organization of the working class and all the oppressed. That is what all the struggles of modern times have come down to: the need to reorganize society to serve human needs and not to pile up profits for a small class on top.

Only socialist revolution can fully emancipate all people of color, along with the entire working class on a worldwide scale. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the bloc of countries allied to it may have been a terrible blow, but the class struggle will be revitalized there and throughout the world. The horrible conditions for the workers and the revival of vicious national antagonisms that have accompanied the restoration of capitalism there prove once gain even if by negative example — that only socialism can establish true democracy based on the workers of all nationalities running society in a cooperative manner.

William Mandel, the author of *Soviet But Not Russian*, a book about the great progress made by the many nationalities during the time of the Soviet Union, talks about what socialism might look like in the U.S.: “Imagine that Third World people in the US. were employed in the mass media in proportion to their number in the population, one in five – eight times their present representation, which is one in forty. Imagine a Black governor of Mississippi, statues of Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X on the State House lawn in Richmond, Virginia, instead of the generals who fought for slavery, which stand there now. Imagine the children of Spanish-speaking farmworkers not being taken out of school to follow the crops. Imagine an Eskimo woman as governor of Alaska, like the Chukchi woman who governs the Soviet territory that faces Alaska across the Bering Straits? [13]

Sam Marcy really said it best:

A working class party such as Lenin tried to build should promote every right that a Black person is deprived of that a white one has achieved. We promote and must propagate the right to self-determination. but which road to take for liberation must be decided by the oppressed nation itself. A revolutionary working-class party promotes class solidarity irrespective of which option an oppressed nation chooses. The neutrality of the party in this respect is the strongest pillar of working-class multinational solidarity in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. The bourgeoisie denies and closes the road to both separatism and integration. They neither wish to complete the bourgeois democratic revolution for political equality nor allow social and economic equality. Nor will they permit the development of a movement for an independent separate state.... [T]he whole struggle of the working class as well as the oppressed people and their allies everywhere is to recognize that there can be no real independence, freedom, or equality as long as the monstrous system of capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression remains. The struggle for any and all concessions must and will go on, and each concession won is a building block in the struggle for emancipation from imperialist finance capital. [14]

FOOTNOTES

[4] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: S.A. Russell Co., 1956), 10.

[5] Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: international Publishers, 1977). vol. 1, 30].

[6] *Background for Radical Reconstruction*, edited by Hans L. Trefousse (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 45.

[7] *Ibid.*, 39.

[8] James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), 58.

[9] *Ibid.*, 59.

[10] *Background*, 4.

[11] *Ibid.*, 11-12.

[12] Sam Marcy, *The Klan and the Government — Foes or Allies?* (New York, World View Publishers, 1983), 36-37.

[13] William M. Mandel, *Soviet but not Russian* (Edmonton, Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1985), 34.

[14] Sam Marcy, "Black nationalism and white chauvinism: Marxism and national oppression," *Workers World*, May 17, 1984.