

FASCISM IN THE U.S.?

a discussion paper by

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INTRODUCTION

This paper was written as a criticism of an article by Barry Litt, **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIALISM**, which first appeared in the National Lawyer's Guild newspaper, **GUILD NOTES**, in early 1974. At that time, Litt was an activist in the Guild and a lawyer with the Bar Sinister law collective in Los Angeles. Currently, he is associated with the October League's attempt to form a new communist party. I cannot say whether or not this means he still maintains the position expressed in his article, but certain general themes in it are not incompatible with October League politics.

In any case, we felt that the points which were raised in this criticism are relevant to current debates on the left irrespective of Litt's past or present positions. Certainly there is no shortage of left tendencies which invoke the danger of fascism in extremely dubious ways. On the other hand, since this criticism was written for a limited purpose and a narrow audience within the Lawyer's Guild, it is not a full and adequate expression of our estimate of political forces in this country.

Don Hamerquist for STO
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Many Guild members are concerned with fitting their work and the work of the Guild into some larger strategic perspective. Such a concern is understandable in any area of activity, but it takes on a special importance for radicals doing legal work. Defensiveness about the revolutionary 'credentials' of left legal activity combines with resistance to falling into a purely support-work role, to create a persistent search for overriding justifications.

Barry Litt's paper, "The Struggle For Socialism and the Struggle for Democracy" is an attempt to place the work of the Guild in a basic political context, but it is more than that. Though he maintains that he is not dealing with a "general strategy" for the U.S. left, in fact, he is. The programs and priorities advanced for the Guild, and, most particularly, the description of current U.S. reality, are aspects of the strategic perspective generally referred to as the united front against fascism...a perspective shared by such widely diverse left groups as the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party. The main theses of this perspective are the core of the current conventional wisdom of the U.S. left.

Nevertheless, the united front against fascism is bad theory and bad analysis. Its adoption by the Guild, particularly in an adulterated and confused way, would not be a step forward, but simply an example of the Guild's domination by current political fads.

FASCISM AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR A STRATEGY

The prime dilemma for any strategic perspective proposed for this country is the fact that the only 'truly revolutionary' class, the working class, remains quite oblivious to its historic potential. Certainly one important initial test of any strategy is the plausibility of the solution it poses to this dilemma. What process does it propose through which the working class, at present a fragmented, divided, subordinated social group, can transform itself into an categorical and comprehensive alternative to capitalist society?

For a variety of reasons, the U.S. left routinely evades this question. Instead, awed by the resilience of U.S. capitalism, and the depth and centrality of national divisions in the life of the U.S. working class, it wishfully posits 'objective processes' which will whittle these problems down to a workable size. Such appeals to history remove the necessity of dealing with U.S. society as it is, by assuming that it will shortly be something different - brought to its knees by some cataclysmic crisis. The *deus ex machina* is usually depression or fascism...or some combination of the two. This sudden change for the worse in economic and political circumstances, it is argued, will transform working class attitudes, demands, struggles and institutions which previously were reformist at best, into a social base for revolutionary consciousness and organization.

Litt's article is a case study in this tendency. By failing to deal with the strengths of U.S. capital, and the weaknesses of the U.S. working class in any but the most superficial and descriptive way, it's value is limited to another demonstration of the isolation and ideological weaknesses of the U.S. left.

The rest of this article will demonstrate the fallacies and inadequacies of such strategic perspectives. However, in case there is doubt that Litt actually maintains such a position which we criticize, we begin with the following citation from his paper:

"If the great majority of people do not realize that socialism represents democracy for them, Henry Ford and other members of his class realize that it means expropriation for them. As they move to reject bourgeois democracy and decide that it no longer provides sufficient control over the people, those who wish to share in the process of democracy will only be able to do so by opposing the capitalist class. Democracy will require stripping them of their wealth and putting it in the hands of the people - i.e., through socialism. All of those who are truly committed to democratic ideas will increasingly be able to effectuate their beliefs only by joining the struggle for socialism.

"When this point is reached, the woman who really wants to have a job that provides decent material support for her family must look to those who are fighting for a society which isn't run by a small group of people promoting economic development for their own gain; the Black scholar who really wants to break down the walls of confusion about American history must look to those who are fighting for a society which is not controlled by people who have a vested interest in hiding the story of how Black people organized themselves after the Civil War; the defendant who really wants a fair trial must look to those who are fighting for a society where juries really come from their communities and where fact-finding in the courtroom is not a game.

"In the final analysis, then, the true democrat becomes a socialist." (GUILD NOTES, p. 18)

Neither the assumption on which this statement rests - that the U.S. ruling class will be forced to resort to fascism to maintain "sufficient control over the people" - nor the conclusion which Litt extracts from it - that fascism will force all mass reform demands and movements to become socialist and revolutionary - can be sustained; Litt spends no time arguing that fascism will lead to a revolutionary class polarization. However, this point is central to his main thesis, the significance of the struggle for democracy. If it is true that the struggle against fascism is necessarily forced to become a struggle for socialist revolution, a strategic justification for the priority on democracy is automatically established. It becomes a necessary part of the process whereby a revolutionary power is generated.

Unfortunately, it is a serious mistake to assume that fascism generates its revolutionary antithesis in such a simple and straightforward way. This does not mean that the struggle against fascism will not create revolutionary potentials. It means that it cannot be assumed that they will be realized. Indeed, the bulk of the evidence indicates that fascism, or the threat of fascism, is more likely to buttress popular illusions about bourgeois democracy than to create a consciousness of the necessity and possibility of a socialist revolution.

What determines whether revolutionary lessons are drawn from the resistance to fascism? The key factor is the role of conscious revolutionaries, the left. From time to time, Litt remarks that his perspective "assumes" that the left will "do its job." This is a surprising assumption in a country where the left has so often failed to "do its job." More important, it is an evasion of the issue. The heart of the problem is that there are radically different and mutually exclusive conceptions of the "job" of the left.

LIKELIHOOD OF FASCISM IN THE U.S.

Despite the important and controversial issues raised by the assertion of the necessarily revolutionary implications of the resistance to fascism, Litt spends little time on this question. The bulk of the paper is devoted to an elaboration of the inevitability that the capitalist ruling class will be forced to adopt fascism.

Litt does not maintain that the capitalist class prefers fascism and will introduce it as soon as it seems militarily possible. He understands that fascism is the course of desperation for the ruling class, a course to be taken only in the event of the failure of the bourgeois democratic forms of rule which have worked in this country since its beginnings. Before fascism would be on the order of the day for the ruling class, major objective problems, e.g., a depression or a major war, would have to be combined with a clear revolutionary

challenge from a mass socialist movement.

These arguments are in the mainstream of Marxist tradition which has consistently pointed out that bourgeois democracy is the ideal form of capitalist rule from the capitalist's point of view. Its virtue is that class exploitation and oppression are masked by supposedly objective and neutral institutions and processes: the market, the parliamentary - electoral system, the legal - judicial system. (For quite different reasons, Marxists have also traditionally argued that bourgeois democracy is the preferred form of capitalist rule from the point of view of the working class.) The capitalist ruling class will opt for fascism out of strategic weakness, not strength.

After laying out these important and valid propositions, Litt essentially forgets them. He points to a number of problems facing U.S. capitalism, but doesn't indicate that these problems entail a depression or a war within the time span for which his perspective is intended. However, the main problem with the argument is that the mass revolutionary movement which is an equally indispensable precondition for fascism, does not exist. In fact, the cited selection shows that Litt sees this movement developing out of resistance to fascism. His argument implies that a decisive section of the ruling class is going to opt for fascism before the social conditions which might force it to make this painful and dangerous choice have developed. There is no evidence of such near-suicidal tendencies in the U.S. ruling class.

Of course, the capitalists do not have a unified and coherent position and do not act in a totally deliberate and conscious way. Litt might argue that a mass fascist movement with only minimal initial ruling class support could conceivably gain governmental control, or some other position of power, and force the ruling class to make a decision for fascism which was tactically premature. This is somewhat the pattern followed in Italy. The Italian fascist movement had a definite role in determining the effective options open to the Italian ruling class, and this had a major influence on the eventual triumph of Italian fascism.

If Litt means that this is the way that fascism will develop in the U.S., he must provide some evidence of a mass fascist movement - or at least the ingredients of one - which could conceivably impose its will and programs on a divided and disorganized ruling class. Then, he must demonstrate that, in fact, the U.S. ruling class is, or will shortly be, divided and disorganized. However, the reality is that the U.S. ruling class is not so strategically divided that it would be unable to act decisively in the face of a fascist movement which was not objectively necessary. To repeat, fascism will only be objectively necessary when capital is faced with a real revolutionary challenge. The absence of such a challenge makes this scenario of merely academic interest.

The evidence, including that which Litt introduces himself, indicates that the U.S. ruling class intends to meet the problems of maintaining U.S. world capitalist hegemony - at a profitable rate of return and with domestic tranquillity - without resort to extraordinary measures. The priority is being put on 'democratic' methods to convince people that sacrifices must be made, that the national interests require austerity. It is not being put on coercion.

This explains the ruling class concern with 'credibility' of government, the 'reform' of the political parties, and the fact that an entire administration has been impeached. In short, at present the capitalist ruling class' main concern is to make U.S. bourgeois democracy 'work' - or, more accurately, to make it appear to work.

Litt cites a good deal of international experience to support his position, but on this central point of the likelihood of fascism, he ignores the experiences which are the most relevant. The structural difficulties of U.S. capitalism are not nearly so severe as those facing Italy, France, and Great Britain. Beyond this, in each of those countries the level of working class militance and organization is far advanced over this country, and the revolutionary left is much larger and more firmly based. In other words, these countries are far riper for fascism than is the U.S.

However, rather than increasing the tendency towards fascism, the growth of class struggle and economic instability has pushed the European ruling classes to the left. This is the only possible interpretation of the changes (summarized in terms of personalities)

from DeGaulle to D'Estaing; from Andreotti to Rumor; from Heath to Wilson. In these cases as class polarization and conflict increased, the decisive sectors of capital tried to moderate the conflict, not crush the opposition. In any discussion of the likelihood of fascism in this country these experiences must be considered. If they are seen as temporary and accidental deviations from a general tendency towards fascism, this position must be supported with facts and analysis which is nowhere to be found in Litt's paper.

The most likely explanation for what has been happening in these countries is that both the capitalist class and the working class have learned some things from the attempt to introduce fascism on a global scale in the thirties. Neither liked the experience. The lessons drawn do not increase, but lessen, the inclination and the ability of the capitalists to adopt fascist methods of rule. This is particularly true in those states which are central to the world capitalist system and which therefore cannot indulge in domestic experiments without reverberations being felt throughout that system. France, for example is not Greece, nor is Portugal, Great Britain.

NATURE OF U.S. CAPITALISM

Why is Litt convinced that fascism is on the way despite the absence of a mass fascist movement; despite the clear choice by decisive sections of the ruling class to proceed in a different direction; despite the policies adopted in the other capitalist countries facing problems similar to the U. S.; and, finally, but not least important, despite the absence of a revolutionary movement placing the continued existence of U. S. capitalism in real jeopardy? The only possible answer is that Litt really believes that fascism is the best, and not the worst, form of capitalist rule from the point of view of the interests of capital. That is, Litt's argument implicitly questions some of the explicit premises of the Marxist theory of fascism which he has spelled out earlier in his paper. The paper's ambiguities and contradictions flow from a one-sided and shallow understanding of the roots and strengths of U. S. capitalism, and thus, of the consequences entailed by a ruling class option for fascism.

At the heart of the problem is Litt's proposition that, in the present period, "The tendency of the capitalist ruling class is towards a fascist form of rule which is antithetical to the most basic democratic rights of the people." There is an element of truth in this proposition, which Lenin noted in his description of imperialism as a striving towards reaction. But this grain of validity will not sustain such a proposition as the underpinning of a general perspective. For that evidence and analysis must be introduced to demonstrate that this is the dominant tendency in the U. S. monopoly capitalism in this period. Unfortunately for Litt's argument, all of the evidence, including much that he introduces himself, indicates the opposite. Thus he must locate developing fascism, not in a mass fascist movement and not in a changing political orientation of the ruling class, that is not in social reality, but in what he regards as the inner logic of capitalist development. Thus Litt 'discovers' that bourgeois democracy "contains within itself the seeds of fascism".

Of course, Litt's terminology is illegitimate. After all, the debate is precisely over whether those elements of fascism which every Marxist will agree are apparent in all forms of bourgeois rule, will grow and develop until they eventually dominate all other aspects and tendencies. The term "seeds" implies the very growth and development which is at issue.

What are Litt's "seeds of fascism"? The most important "seed" is repression. Litt only recognizes in a formal way that since all class society and thus all forms of capitalist rule rest ultimately on coercion, repression is inherent and necessary to capitalism. His argument that a "process of fascization" is transforming bourgeois democracy into fascism pictures each incident of capitalist repression as a link in a chain which must inevitably end with fascism.

Even if Litt had demonstrated that repression is increasing, which he doesn't do, it would not necessarily follow that this was a movement leading towards fascism. Repression and concession are inseparably linked essential mechanisms of capitalist rule. They operate at every point in time and at every stage of capitalist development. As social contradictions

intensify, leading to basic class and national polarization, capital must rule more actively and decisively, not relying on mass inertia and acceptance of routine. In such conditions there is always an increase in repression, both of the official (state-sanctioned) and the vigilante varieties. Not so paradoxically, the same conditions also lead to more, and more significant, concessions. A period of struggle and conflict entail both a greater use of police power and more substantial concessions. For Litt to extract repression from these general characteristics of capitalist rule, and then to picture it as a "process of fascization", is just as naive and one-sided as the opposite tendency which was current in the left only a few years ago – the "new left" position which saw only the system's capacity to pre-empt struggle with concessions, and concluded that U.S. capitalism had virtually unlimited ability to absorb reform movements and demands. It is interesting that the word 'co-optation' which was so prominent in left debates in the sixties has disappeared almost without a trace.

Doubtless, Litt will complain that he knows these arguments and agrees with many of them. However, this is not clear from a reading of his paper. Most significantly, the paper completely fails to deal with the unique and defining characteristic of U.S. capitalist rule – the systematic oppression and repression of Third World peoples along with, and to a degree as the condition of, the development of bourgeois democratic forms limited, primarily, to the white population. The viability of any strategic perspective for the U.S. depends on its grasp of this historically specific aspect of U.S. capitalism.

It is apparent that the impact of capitalist rule on white people is quite different from its impact on Third World people living within the current borders of the U.S. For Black, Latin, Asian, and Indian peoples repression is much less selective and certain democratic "rights" which have some reality for white people, are non-existent or purely formal for them. On the other hand, concessions to Third World peoples tend to be token and symbolic. Even when they are more substantial, they never permanently and substantively reduce the relative advantages of whites.

Litt, of course, does not deny these facts, at least not in their general outline. However, he misinterprets them. He places the totality of national oppression in the context of the pressures and tendencies towards fascism within contemporary U.S. capitalism. This is a radically mistaken conception potentially productive of all sorts of liberal reformist illusions. Despite the fascistic aspects of the oppression of Third World people, in fact, national oppression and its manifestation in the institution of white supremacy are essential and defining features of U.S. capitalist – that is, of WHITE SUPREMACIST bourgeois democratic rule, the only "democracy" which has ever existed in this country with the exception of a brief period in the South following the Civil War.

I will deal with implications of this difference for the fascism thesis after spelling out our conception of the significance of national oppression to U.S. capitalism.

U.S. capitalist society is fundamentally marked by its origins in the genocidal expropriation of the Native Americans and in the exploitation of Black slave labor. Capitalist rule is exercised neither over an undifferentiated mass of individuals, nor over a homogeneous working class. It is exercised over a working class which contains a fundamental division between oppressor and oppressed nations that determines decisive elements of the form and content of mass organization and consciousness. One result is different and distinct modes of capitalist rule within one capitalist state. The reliance on repression to maintain rule over non-white people is no accidental deviation from some ideal bourgeois democratic norm. It is the sine qua non of bourgeois democracy in the U.S. The denial of rights and privileges to Third World people has been (and is) the condition making it both feasible and prudent for the ruling class to extend bourgeois democracy to white population.

Racism is not just something foisted on the workers by the capitalists to keep them divided. It is true that white racism is only in the class interests of the capitalists, but it has a broad social base throughout the population based on relative advantages in political, economic, and social conditions available to all white people – including white workers – solely because of the color of their skins. This combination of white racist ideology with the system of relative advantages for white people make up the institution of white supremacy. The

fact that white supremacy is not in the class interest of white workers must be tempered by the knowledge that these relative advantages provide the basis for white workers subordinating their class interest to racial and national group interest. Historically this subordination of class interest has been manifested in white worker's acquiescence in the oppression of non-whites. In fact, it has been acquiescence at best. At worst, white workers have been active promoters of, and participants in, the oppression of Third World people. From Reconstruction to busing in Boston, one main strand in the rhetoric of racism has been the 'defense' of the white workers'.

White supremacy is the key element in capitalist rule in the U.S. It is key, not primarily because of the impact of racial and national oppression on non-whites, but because of the disorganizing and disorienting impact of white supremacy on the white workers. White supremacy determines the main forms and much of the content of working class opportunism and class collaborationism in the U.S. It lies, as well, at the roots of the cynicism and pessimism of both white and Black workers about the potential for working class solidarity on any but the narrowest base of immediate individual interest. While Third World workers have a revolutionary alternative to class solidarity – the solidarity of oppressed peoples – white workers have only the alternative of solidarity with the ruling class of the oppressor nation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FASCISM THESIS

Litt places national oppression and white supremacy in the framework of the "seeds of fascism" within bourgeois democracy. There is certainly no question but that U.S. fascism would be decisively white supremacist. However, as we have pointed out, so is U.S. capitalism in general. In no way is the political centrality of national oppression reduced by the denial that it contains an inherent pressure towards fascism. On the contrary, the view that the oppression of Third World people should be seen as foreshadowing what capitalism has in store for everyone, is more likely to lead to a downplaying of the importance of national oppression.

What Litt does not see is that so long as the bulk of the white working class sees its interests mainly in terms of skin color, not class position, the likelihood of fascist rule being extended to the society as a whole is minimal. The dominance of white supremacy within the white sections of the working class works effectively against the development of a mass revolutionary movement on that terrain. However, at least some elements of such a movement are needed to mount a serious challenge to U.S. capitalism. Since this serious revolutionary threat is a necessary factor to convince the ruling class of the necessity of fascism, it follows that, contrary to Litt's assertions, there is little likelihood that the ruling class will resort to fascism to "maintain social control" over the working class as a whole while white supremacy is doing such an admirable job. To a large degree bourgeois democracy in this country is a white privilege. It would be almost suicidally stupid for the capitalist class to undermine white solidarity as a base of political support in the working class, by launching a general fascist attack on democratic rights.

Clearly, when Litt and others predict the imminence of fascism, they are not basing the prediction on a concrete analysis of real political forces. Instead, they are searching for shreds of evidence to support a strategic perspective which they would like to be viable – the classical united (popular) front. When the oppression of Third World people is seen as the beginnings of fascism, it is routine to proclaim that the white worker is next on the list of victims. The postulated "danger" of the spread of fascism beyond the Black, Latin, Asian, and Native American communities becomes the basis of unity in the initial formations of the united front. The approach to white workers is not to attempt to win them to a stand of class solidarity with oppressed peoples, but to convince them that they are next on the list. The oft-cited Paster Niemoller reference to the spread of fascism in Germany: "First, it was the communists, then the Jews, then the trade unions, and then it was too late," is the

operative substance of such politics.

The problems with this perspective are many. It is not plausible either to white workers or to third world people that such a base of unity is practicable. More important, it is, at best, a defensive strategy, and even if it has momentary success there is every reason to believe that unity will stop at the borders of the ghetto, blocked by the institution of white supremacy. The difficulty for all popular front perspectives, including Litt's, is transforming unity against fascism - that is, against certain policies and tactics of the capitalist ruling class - into unity for proletarian revolution. Though this is not a burning practical problem at the moment, to say the least, it is a central strategic question. For Litt, it is not necessary to confront the national divisions within the working class in a practical and programatic way because the inevitable spread of fascism will remove the importance of these divisions. In fact, according to this line of thinking, it is a positive danger to emphasize them. It will disrupt the "maximum unity" around the "minimum program" of the defense of democracy.

Thus Litt just presents another argument that white supremacy can be transcended in the course of struggle. However, it is more of an assumption than an argument, and it is an argument which flies in the face of the history of mass movements and struggles in the United States. Time after time, popular insurgencies have collapsed or disintegrated in large part because of an inability of the white working class to make a decisive break with white supremacy. And in each case the assumption by the left that white supremacy would lose out "as the struggle developed," has been its achilles heel.

The critical weakness of Litt's article is its failure to see the oppression of non-whites as basic to the entire history and fabric of U.S. capitalism. When this reality is given the centrality it merits, it is clear that no struggle for democratic rights which is not at the same time an explicit struggle against white supremacist bourgeois democracy, can be a part of a revolutionary strategy.

