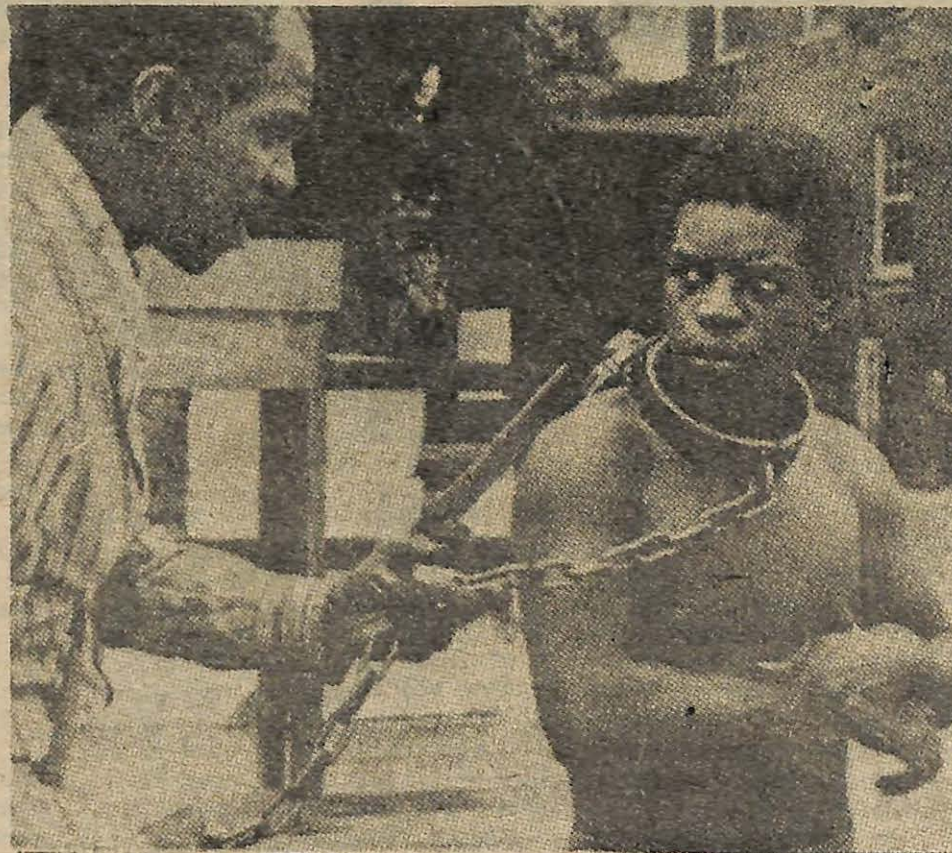


Roots Raises Questions Slavery Then, Slavery Now

It's been almost two months now since the showing of ROOTS and people are still discussing it. This is not surprising, since ROOTS showed a whole side of American history that has been virtually hidden from us. For most working people, Black and white, the immediate reaction to ROOTS was a burning hatred for the crime of slavery. But the television series, whatever the intentions of its promoters, did more than just bring out outrage over the injustices of the past. In discussions in living rooms and bars, on the subways and on the shop floors people debated what implications ROOTS had for today.

Naturally quite a bit of the discussion focused on the position of Black people in this country today. It is pretty obvious that the discrimination and oppression suffered by Blacks has its beginnings in the vicious slave system. In a future article we will go into what ways and why Black people are still held in an oppressed condition.

In this article we want to focus in on one of the questions that kept coming up all across the country: what are the similarities and the differences between the position of the slaves of the Old South and the workers



IN THE DAYS OF ROOTS SLAVES HAD CHAINS THEY COULD SEE. TODAY'S WORKING CLASS HAS CHAINS IT CAN FEEL.

of all nationalities in the US today.

In a Cincinnati auto plant, for example, one worker welded together a set of chains and wore them into the plant. In an electrical plant in Chicago, the boss tried to intimidate workers from signing a petition over a grievance. They brought in several guards to throw two stew-

ards out of the plant. One woman compared the scene to the whippings of Kunte Kinte.

Few workers watched the overseer in the second and third episodes of ROOTS without at least thinking of a particularly hated foreman who abused the workers and drove them like a tyrant. After all, such people are not commonly called "slave

drivers" for nothing. You couldn't help but feel that there was at least something in common with the present situation and the slaves pictured in ROOTS.

But it is also obvious that there is quite a difference between being a slave in the old South and a worker. After all, nobody is allowed to own today's workers as property. The companies aren't allowed to whip you, although their cops beat people up on picket lines and elsewhere. And it's only permissible to chop off your foot if it's an "industrial accident".

FREEDOM?

The show itself ends by the family declaring that they were "free at last" after arriving in Tennessee. And this was one of the most hotly debated points in some plants. What about today? Are Black people and workers of all nationalities free?

Despite its overwhelming positive nature, one of the weaknesses of ROOTS was that it didn't show clearly that slavery was a system based on exploiting, ripping off, the labor of the slaves. There were plenty of slaves like most of those pictured in the series who

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were forced into the humiliating and degrading position of being personal servants of the slavemasters. But the great majority of the slaves worked from "can't see in the morning til can't see at night" in the cotton fields to enrich a small handful of parasites. The slave owners took for their own all that was produced by the back breaking labor of the slaves. This robbery was the heart of the slave system. Without it there would have been no mansions, no plantation system.

Of course one thing that has been hammered into our heads since childhood is that we are free. And in a certain sense we are. We are only the "property" of the employers during the hours we are working, though they shape the whole society by their power. And we are also told that if we don't want to work, we don't have to, a choice that was never offered to the slaves on the plantations. Who hasn't heard a boss say, "If you don't like it here, why don't you leave?" Nobody offered Kunta Kinte this choice. But for the great majority of workers "escape" is just as impossible as it was for him.

It's pretty clear why Kunta Kinte couldn't escape--he had no place to go. Except for the few slaves that were able to escape the slave catchers and make it to the north, what could they do? Show up at the plantation down the road and offer to work for wages? Obviously not, for the whole set-up was based on slave labor. A Black man would be re-enslaved pronto.

In the same way it is impossible for most workers to escape their positions slaving for the capitalists. True, you can tell your boss to go to hell and quit. But what then? You have to eat. The first thing you have to do is hit the streets and try to sell your ability to work to some other boss. Just as the slavemasters of the Old South had a monopoly on the land, so today the



TODAY THERE IS A NEW TYPE OF SLAVERY WHERE THE PERSONNEL OFFICE REPLACES THE AUCTION BLOCK AND THE TIME CLOCK AND THE BILLS REPLACE THE CHAINS

capitalist class owns the means of production--the factories, mills, mines, and almost everything else. The worker on the other hand, has only one thing besides a few personal possessions--his ability to work. Instead of being sold for life, the worker is forced to sell himself, day by day and week by week.

ARE WE SLAVES?

At this point some people will probably object, pointing out that the worker is paid for his labor, and for damn sure Kunta Kinte never got a paycheck. But even the most exploited and driven down slave received something from his master. Not out of the goodness of the slaveowners' heart, but for the very real reason that they had to keep him alive to work another day.

He received a lousy shelter, coarse clothing and enough food to keep him working and usually even a day off once a

week so that he wouldn't collapse before the master had wrung all the work he could out of him.

Sure workers receive a paycheck. But what does this check amount to? Just enough to keep the worker and his family alive at some sort of basic standard of living, and now-a-days it usually takes two paychecks to keep a family going. Few workers don't experience living "from paycheck to paycheck" with usually just enough money to keep their heads barely above water and make it back to work Monday morning. And when people are out of work for any length of time it usually means near-disaster. After a lifetime of labor, few workers have anything to show for it other than a modest home, if they are lucky, and a pitiful social security check.

Certainly the system that we live under today, capitalism, is very different than the slave sys-

tem. But what they have in common is that both outright slavery and capitalism are systems based on robbing the laborer of the fruits of his labor. It is exactly because capitalism is a hidden and disguised form of this robbery that communists refer to it as wage slavery.

The point is who feeds whom? Under the slave system the slave labored his life away and the riches that resulted from his labor went to the masters. Under capitalism the same thing is true. Just as in the slave system the workers receive but a fraction of the value of the goods they produce, while a small handful of capitalists takes the rest, and run society. Just as under the undisguised form of slavery the product of the workers belongs not to the laborer but to the person that owns his ability to labor, whether for life or by the week. By masquerading this slavery as a system of work for wages they hope to hide the fact that the same robbery goes on.

Under capitalism this exploitation of the labor of the workers is hidden by the wage system. On the surface it appears, unlike slavery, that the worker receives the full value of his labor, that you get paid for the work you do. But what the capitalist pays for in wages is not the wealth that a worker creates in his eight, ten or more hours of work, but simply the amount that is necessary to keep him alive and functioning, and to rear a new generation of workers to take their place at the capitalists' machines.

To the capitalists, the worker's ability to work is just another commodity like so much cotton or a new machine. They even refer to workers as "the labor market". They think of us as just another part of their "cost of production". But unlike a machine or raw materials, human labor is the only thing that can create

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value, whether by digging the raw materials out of the ground or refining them in the mills or running them through machines in the factories. The capitalists appropriate this value as they take it as their own and they take it as their profit.

In one ROOTS episode, after the Civil War, one defeated slave owner pointed out to the others that "the land is worthless without the niggers to work it." The same is true under capitalism. Their machines, their factories--you name it--none of it can operate without the labor of the workers. Because they own these means of production, they make it seem like they are giving us something when they hire us. It is basically the same line run by the "good" slavemaster in the early part of ROOTS. "We're all one big happy family, only there are some rules that we must all obey." And what is the basic rule? That the slaves do all the work and the slavemaster takes all the product of their labor.

But where do they get factories and machines

(not to mention the yachts, huge bank accounts and present day mansions) in the first place if not from the unpaid labor of the workers?

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST OPPRESSION

Obviously workers in this country today are materially better off than the slaves of the Old South. But the reason workers today live at a higher standard of living is because capitalism has concentrated more and more workers into the factories and other work places and this has put workers in a stronger position to wage collective struggle and force higher wages from these bloodsuckers. By reducing the majority of people in society to the position of wage-slaves they weld us into a class, the working class. This class is composed of workers of all nationalities who share this common exploitation and a common struggle against it. This class is the strongest and the most powerful in human history. It's potential strength and power comes out every time workers enter into battle with the capital-

ists: For as one old song puts it "without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn." But these battles are just skirmishes compared with the battle the working class must wage to abolish slavery altogether.

In ROOTS Kizzy asked the slavemaster's daughter why she can't be free. Basically she is told that is just the way it always has been. Some people are born to be slaves, others to own them. Today, this is an obvious absurdity.

But if you ask a capitalist why one person is forced to sell their labor to the capitalists for a living they will answer the same way as in ROOTS. It's human nature, it's always been this way. We provide the factory, they say, and you provide the work--isn't that fair? But the capitalist system "dictated" by human nature is no more eternal than the system of the old "slavemasters dictated" by human nature.

There is no reason why the workers have to be enslaved to the capitalists--to spend a lifetime enriching others. No reason, that is, except for the

capitalist system itself, and the fact that the capitalists run this society lock stock and barrel. They run the schools, control the media and have the police and they use them all to make sure that things stay the way they are and people don't consider seriously that they could be any other way.

But the working people in different parts of the world have already broken out of this condition of wage slavery by waging revolution and building new societies, as in China and Albania, where their labor goes to the improvement of life for society as a whole and not to enrich a few.

The slaves of the Old South struggled valiantly to be free. It was the role of the slaves that turned the tide in the Civil War that defeated the slaveocracy. People have always struggled against oppression. But the working class has the potential to accomplish what the slaves could only dream of--abolishing the whole system of exploitation of man by man. Only with the revolution of the working class will it be possible to truly say that we are all "free at last."