

# Black History and the Class Struggle No. 7

**Black Soldiers Fight for Freedom**

*Slavery*



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## Introduction

As we enter a new decade, students of black history have something to celebrate with the release of the film *Glory*, an inspiring portrayal of black heroes of the Civil War. That great and terrible conflict which shaped this country would not have been won otherwise. Those men turned the tide of the war militarily, as most historians now acknowledge, yet their impressive courage and terrible sacrifices are a chapter of American history rarely taught in school. As it is the purpose of this pamphlet series to challenge capitalist myths of history—which belittle or totally disappear the contributions of working men and women of all races to the class struggle, which is the real motor force of history—we hail this powerful film and salute the real-life heroes who inspired it. Although these fighters and their descendants have been denied the true fruits of the freedom they fought for, they opened the road to that freedom for all of us by decisively smashing chattel slavery. It is our task to vindicate their sacrifices through a socialist revolution which will at last fulfill the promise of liberation which has been betrayed so many times.

In interviews prior to the release of *Glory*, actor Denzel Washington remarked that he had never known that any blacks fought in the Civil War. Yet 180,000 black soldiers served in the Union Army and perhaps as many as 29,000 in the Union Navy (comprising one-fourth of the entire naval enrollment). The materials in this pamphlet document and amplify some of the extraordinary exploits of these men and their abolitionist officers who proudly accepted the challenge to train black men and lead them in battle. Our review of *Glory*, which appeared originally in *Workers Vanguard* in slightly shorter form, supplies important historical and military background concerning the Union assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina led by the Massachusetts 54th under the command of Robert Gould Shaw.

The 54th was the premier black regiment and it was widely understood, not least by the men of the 54th themselves, that the success or failure of the initially highly controversial policy of allowing blacks to take part, arms in hand, in the war against slavery would be measured by the conduct of these soldiers. This policy had been demanded, against the hesitations of President Lincoln and Congress, by black and white abolitionists, among them Frederick Douglass,

who questioned whether freedom would have much value if bestowed by others.

From the outset of the war, blacks contributed to the Union war effort as laborers, teamsters, cooks, carpenters, gravediggers, nurses and scouts. In such capacities they were often exposed to danger and were occasionally called upon to take up arms. In October 1863 a Union outpost at Pine Bluff, Arkansas came under rebel attack. Captain James Talbot reported:

"When the skirmishing first commenced I received orders...to furnish as many men as possible to roll out cotton-bales and form breastworks. I had 300 [noncombatant freedmen] immediately brought from the camp, on double-quick, and from the short space of time in which every street opening was blockaded you may judge of their efficiency in that respect, especially when you consider that much of the work was accomplished under a heavy fire from the enemy's skirmishers.

"By the time the breastworks were complete the fight had become general, and calls for water were urgent to supply the soldiers and quench the fire that had caught to the cotton-bales from our artillery. I immediately pressed every water-holding vessel within reach, and formed a chain of negroes with buckets from the top of the bank to the water's edge. At this time a galling fire that opened on them from the enemy killed 1, wounded 3, and for a moment threw them all into confusion; but they were soon rallied, and resumed their work with the most astonishing rapidity.... Fifteen of them had arms, and were ordered to hold the point along the river; which they did throughout the action, some of them firing as many as 30 rounds, and one actually ventured out and captured a prisoner. None of them had ever before seen a battle...."

—James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War*, 1965

Thus, the question was not whether or not black men would be called upon to face danger and death for the Union cause, but whether they would do so only in obscurity. Was the Union serious enough about military victory to arm and train black men as soldiers in a war against white Southern secessionists? Winning renown by their deeds in desperate battle, the Massachusetts 54th demonstrated that blacks were a fighting force to be respected and feared, not mere passive objects of history but makers of history.

We also republish here an appreciation of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, commanded by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a regiment recruited from newly freed slaves. Higginson, a New England Unitarian clergyman, was a militant abolitionist who had parti-

icipated in the 1854 Boston courthouse raid in which a biracial group armed with axes, revolvers and a battering ram attempted to rescue Anthony Burns, an escaped slave captured and held in custody in Boston. This attempt at direct mass action, in defiance of the infamous Fugitive Slave Law which symbolized the Northern rulers' continuing efforts to reach a compromise with the Southern slaveowners, was a beacon for the militant wing of the abolitionist movement—those who understood that not "moral suasion" but blood and iron would be required to free this country from the scourge of slavery.

Unlike Colonel Shaw, Thomas Higginson lived to see the Union victory and to write his memoirs, in which he celebrated the exploits of men such as Robert Smalls, who with great courage and resourcefulness seized the steamship *Planter* from the Confederacy in Charleston harbor in May 1862.

Concerning armed resistance to slavery in the United States prior to the Civil War, our readers are referred to previous numbers of this series, in particular "John Brown and Frederick Douglass: Heroes of the Anti-Slavery Struggle" in *Black History and the Class Struggle* No. 1 and "Battle of Christiana—A Blow Against Slavery" in No. 6. See also "Harriet Tubman: Fighter for Black Freedom" in No. 5.

\* \* \*

The second historical period covered in this pamphlet is the Southern civil rights movement of the 1960s. This mass struggle grew directly out of the Civil War's aftermath—the betrayal of the promise of Radical Reconstruction. Under the protection of the occupying military forces and organized groups like the Republicans' Union Leagues, which included black Civil War veterans, blacks exercised the right to vote and vigorously pressed demands for land distribution as well as access to education and public facilities. But the "Compromise of 1877" effectively ended the victorious Northern bourgeoisie's willingness to protect black rights. What took shape in the South was a new formal system to perpetuate the brutal exploitation of propertyless black labor, which was also disenfranchised once again.

From the defeat of Reconstruction, the "Jim Crow" system took shape. The civil rights movement which began in the 1950s had to take up again the battles which had been begun and aborted following the Civil War, even taking up some of the same tactics. When Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the

bus on that famous day in 1955 in Montgomery, she followed in the footsteps of post-Civil War activists who had boarded trolleycars to demand their right to public facilities. Up until and after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954), the courts were still debating the "separate but equal" justification for inequality, which had been trenchantly demolished in one sentence by a black educator at the 1868 South Carolina constitutional convention: "Make this distinction in your organic law and in many places the white children will have good schools...while the colored people will have none" (Eric Foner, *Reconstruction* [1988]).

Foner's informative book also describes the Reconstruction measures to democratize university education at the University of South Carolina, prior to the war an exclusive preserve of the "sons of the aristocracy":

"Henry E. Hayne...became the university's first black student when he enrolled in the Medical School in 1873, whereupon a majority of white students withdrew, along with much of the faculty. In response, the legislature brought in professors from the North, abolished tuition charges, and established preparatory courses for those unable to meet admission requirements."

Thus, a century before radical students began demanding "open admissions" as an assertion of the right of students from all class backgrounds to higher education, a version of that program was implemented as part of Radical Reconstruction, the most democratic period this country has ever known. But the Northern capitalist rulers abandoned Reconstruction and these democratic gains were taken back by force by the resurgent forces of racist reaction—a hundred years later, it was necessary to begin again.

The articles in this pamphlet on the Southern civil rights movement consist of an exposé of the recent film *Mississippi Burning* and an account by a participant of a 1964 voter registration drive in Tennessee. The latter deals heavily with the agrarian question in the South at the time of the registration drive, and more generally with the character of the rural South as a region of poverty and social backwardness. An article from our press (which cannot be included here for reasons of space) summarized the limitations of the progressive content of the social program of the Northern bourgeoisie and the consequences for the South:

"The 'irrepressible conflict' exploded in the Civil War, in the course of which Lincoln, the Northern bourgeoisie's ablest political leader, found himself obliged to go much further than he had

intended in the direction of adopting the emancipation program of the abolitionists. Fifteen years before, abolitionists had been viewed as an isolated, if noisy, crew of radical fanatics.

"The Civil War smashed slavery and left behind in the South a chaotic situation and four million ex-slaves who had been promised 'freedom.' But the war and its aftermath underlined that a truly egalitarian radical vision of social reconstruction already could not be promoted by a capitalist ruling class....

"Reconstruction brought not only black enfranchisement but significant democratic reforms: the 1868 South Carolina constitutional convention drafted the state's first divorce law, while Reconstruction legislatures established the South's first public schools and went to work on liberalizing the South's draconian penal codes and reforming the planters' property tax system (which had taxed the farmer's mule and the workman's tools while all but exempting the real wealth—land). But the Northern capitalists betrayed the promise of Reconstruction, allowing it to be physically smashed by forces such as the Ku Klux Klan, even though that meant the destruction of the Republican Party in the South. Replacing slavery, a new system of racial subordination took shape: a refurbished system of labor discipline through such measures as one-year labor contracts and 'vagrancy' laws to bind ex-slaves to the plantations, and a rigid system of Jim Crow segregation. The defeat of Reconstruction shaped the post-war South into modern times: the sharecropping, the poll taxes, convict labor (the chain gang), the 'separate but equal' unequal facilities....

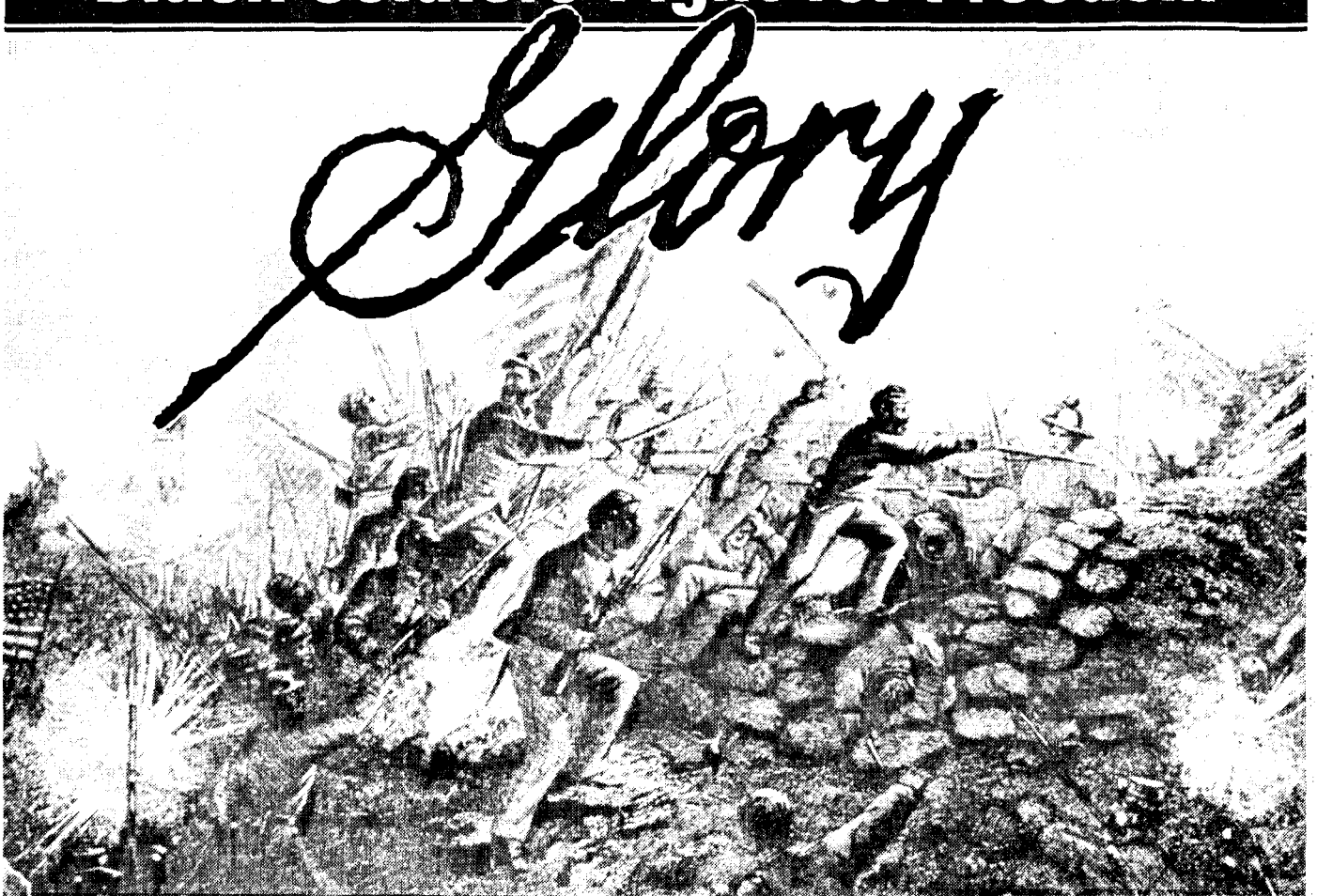
"During Reconstruction, debate raged over the agrarian question: the radical demand raised by the freedmen and destitute white Unionist Southerners that the secessionists' estates be confiscated and distributed to them. Some abolitionists saw that racial democracy could not be achieved if a class of whites continued to own the land where a class of blacks were laborers.... But the tide had turned: the triumphant Northern rulers would not permit such an attack on 'property rights' (especially as Northerners directly and Northern banks were coming to own a good deal of Southern property). Fundamentally, the federal power reinvested political power in the hands of the former 'best people' of the old Confederacy. In the sequel, intensive exploitation of black agricultural labor, rather than industrial development or capital investment in the modernization of agriculture, remained the basis of the Southern economy."

—"Black Freedom, Women's Rights and the Civil War," *Women and Revolution* No. 36, Spring 1989

The 20th century civil rights movement was sparked in part by the militancy of black soldiers who came back from war determined to claim in their own country some of the "democracy" which this country's rulers professed to champion overseas. The second

*continued on page 15*

# Black Soldiers Fight for Freedom



Library of Congress

The Massachusetts 54th, most celebrated black regiment in the Civil War, leading assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, July 1863.

## *A Review* by Francis Daly

It is certainly rare for the power of a social revolution to come through in a Hollywood movie. But that is what you see in *Glory*, the moving story of the first Northern regiment of black troops in the Civil War, the Massachusetts 54th. As the "New South" celebrates racist reaction with the 50th anniversary of *Gone With the Wind*, today's fighters for black freedom can see in *Glory* a truthful and inspiring account of the men whose actions transformed the American Civil War.

The film illuminates one of the blank pages of official American history—that black soldiers played a *decisive* role in the Union victory. "I don't want Americans to think that blacks went from

slave ships to Martin Luther King," said *Glory*'s producer Freddie Fields. "They contributed to American history greatly, yet few know it."

*Glory* is based on the hundreds of letters of the commanding officer of the 54th, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, and two books: *Lay This Laurel*, by Lincoln Kirstein, which tells the story of the 54th and the monument on the Boston Common by sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens erected in their honor; and *One Gallant Rush*, Peter Burchard's history of Shaw and the regiment, from its formation through the assault on Fort Wagner, a key Confederate bastion protecting the batteries guarding the Charleston harbor. It is the movie's accuracy which gives it its power, as director Edward Zwick lets history show the revolutionary force unleashed as blacks were finally able to take up arms in the fight for freedom. It is the

story of heroic fighters in a war against oppression.

### For an "Abolition War"

At the outset, the "War of the Rebellion" was being fought only to "preserve the Union" (and fought badly by incompetent and politically unreliable Union Army generals). In opposition to Lincoln, abolitionists sought to transform the war into a *war of emancipation*. The great abolitionist leader and former slave Frederick Douglass hammered away that a Northern victory against the slavocracy was dependent on an all-out battle to smash the slave system at its root. Douglass thundered: "*Let the slaves and free colored people be called into service, and formed into a liberating army, to march into the South and raise the banner of Emancipation among the slaves.*"

For over a year, Lincoln's endless compromises with the border states, and

his generals' failure to meet the Confederate army in the field, had led to disaster. Despite the policy of Lincoln and the War Department, General John Phelps raised three regiments of free black "Native Guards" in Louisiana. In Kansas, the Jayhawkers—"free-soilers"—had engaged in a border war with Missouri slaveholders, a dress rehearsal for the Civil War. With the onset of the war, the free-soilers were more than willing to arm black soldiers. One Jayhawker told the slaveholders that if they "objected to being killed by Negroes... 'let them lay down their arms'." One of these Jayhawkers was James Montgomery, a former lieutenant of John Brown in "bleeding Kansas," who went on to head the 2nd South Carolina Colored Volunteers in the Sea Islands off South Carolina and Georgia. The Sea Islands were the scene of an early and rare Union victory in the war, when in November 1861 units seized Beaufort, South Carolina and established the Union Army's Department of the South. It was here that the "Gideon's Band" of New England abolitionists established the famous Port Royal experiment, organizing the society of thousands of liberated slaves along the coast. Heading the Union Army forces was General David Hunter, who demanded authority to arm the freed slaves, known as "contrabands," who were flocking to the Union lines. For months Hunter battled Lincoln and the War Department. Even after Congress finally authorized the War Department to raise black regiments in July 1862, Lincoln at first refused to permit blacks to enter the war as anything other than laborers. The story of the South Carolina regiments, made up of former slaves, is told in the history of their abolitionist commander, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*.

### "Men of Color, To Arms!"

*Glory* opens with the bloody slaughter at Antietam in September 1862. There were no black troops there, only gravediggers and labor battalions. It was the victory of Union forces at Antietam that encouraged Lincoln to set forth the Emancipation Proclamation, to go into effect on 1 January 1863. Despite the continuing capitulation to the existence of slavery in the border states, there was no doubt that the "abolition war" had begun. As Douglass had been urging, finally the Union would "unchain against her foes, her powerful black hand."

On the heels of the Emancipation Proclamation, the abolitionists stepped up the campaign to enroll black troops in

the Union Army. By the end of the war over 15 percent of the entire population of Northern black men had volunteered. The honor of fielding the first black regiment was to go to Massachusetts. On January 26 Secretary of War Edwin Stanton issued the order which created the 54th:

"Ordered—that Governor Andrew of Massachusetts is authorized, until further orders, to raise such number of volunteers, companies of artillery for duty in the forts of Massachusetts and elsewhere—and may include persons of African Descent, organized into special corps."  
—quoted in *A Brave Black Regiment*, Luis F. Emilio (1894)

Frederick Douglass, in "Men of Color, To Arms!," his famous call to black freedmen in the North, appealed for recruits for the Massachusetts 54th: "We can get at the throat of treason and slavery through the State of Massachusetts." His sons, Lewis and Charles, were among the first to join the regiment.

The black characters in *Glory* are not based on real individuals, but represent all the diverse layers from which the Union volunteers were drawn, both free blacks (like most of those in the 54th actually were) and former slaves. Morgan Freeman plays John Rawlins, a gravedigger who becomes a sergeant in the 54th; Andre Braugher portrays Thomas Searle, a well-educated young Northerner; Jihmi Kennedy plays Sharts, a South Carolina field hand; and Denzel Washington is Trip, an angry and rebellious escaped slave. The officer corps of the black

regiments was recruited with sharp political consciousness. Many, like Colonel Shaw, were the sons of prominent abolitionists, men who backed the true opening shot of the Civil War—John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry.

In the opening battle scenes at Antietam, and later at Fort Wagner, *Glory* captures the carnage of the Civil War, where concentrated troops were slaughtered by massed firepower. As in all wars, the generals were fighting this war with the tactics of the last one. On the eve of the Civil War the rifle was transformed into a weapon of mass killing, with the introduction of the minie ball which enabled unskilled riflemen to rapidly load and accurately fire.

Shaw leaves the battle of Antietam slightly injured, and is soon offered the command of the 54th by Governor Andrew. In the film, Matthew Broderick captures both the hesitancy Shaw actually felt about assuming the command, and his subsequent development as an officer. *Glory* shows the coalescing of the 54th at camp in Readville, Massachusetts. In one moving scene, following the Confederacy's proclamation that both black troops and their white officers would face execution if captured, Shaw finds not one man has opted to leave the regiment.

In another scene (which actually took place later in South Carolina), the troops find out that the government has reversed its commitment to pay blacks equally with white troops, instead cutting their



Tri-Star Pictures

Scene in *Glory* shows black soldiers of the 54th parading through Boston on their way to the South.

pay almost to half. Led by Trip, the regiment rebels, refusing to accept their pay (a protest which went on for 18 months, as the 54th received nothing except their original bounty of \$50 upon joining). Not until June 1864 did Congress authorize equal pay for black soldiers. Shaw refuses to accept pay for himself and his officers, as long as the regiment refuses theirs.

Even as the Union Army battled the slavocracy, it was rife with the racism of American society. Of 180,000 black troops, only 90 served as officers—and those were appointed in defiance of the War Department. *Glory* shows the struggle of black regiments for decent clothing and equipment, and the disproportionate discipline meted out to black troops. In one scene, Trip is flogged for “deserting” camp in search of shoes. Even the hard-nosed Irish drill sergeant is taken aback when he exposes the years of scars on Trip’s back. Denzel Washington said that the whipping scene shocked the cast as they saw “a very basic nightmare in American history” (*New York Times*, 28 December 1989). Burchard, the author of *One Gallant Rush* and a consultant on the film, may be correct when he doubts that Shaw would have allowed the whipping.

### Total War

When the 54th sails south to join Hunter’s command at Beaufort, South Carolina, they arrive just as a raiding



Frederick Douglass House  
**Revolutionary abolitionist Frederick Douglass campaigned for blacks to join the Union Army.**

party of the 2nd South Carolina Colored troops is returning. Under the command of Kansas Jayhawker James Montgomery, the raid was guided by the famed conductor on the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman. Montgomery and Tubman were employing a policy of *total war* to break the economic power and

**MEN OF COLOR**  
**To Arms! To Arms!**  
**NOW OR NEVER**  
**THREE YEARS' SERVICE!**  
LIFE FROM LE FREEDOM THE  
**BATTLES OF LIBERTY AND THE UNION**  
**FAIL NOW, & OUR RACE IS DOOMED**  
**SILENCE THE TONGUE OF CALUMNY**  
**VALOR AND HEROISM**  
**PORT HUDSON AND MILLIKEN'S BEND,**  
**ARE FREEMEN LESS BRAVE THAN SLAVES**  
**OUR LAST OPPORTUNITY HAS COME**  
MEN OF COLOR, BROTHERS AND FATHERS!  
**WE APPEAL TO YOU!**  
**STRIKE NOW!**

morale of the slavocracy. This was later to become the hallmark of General Sherman’s march through Georgia and Sheridan’s devastation of the Shenandoah Valley. When a Mississippi planter rode up on a mule and complained to one of Grant’s commanders that Union troops had robbed him of all his possessions, the general replied: “Well, those men didn’t belong to my division at all, because if they were my men they wouldn’t have left you that mule” (quoted in James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* [1988]).

One of the 54th’s first actions is depicted in *Glory*, as Shaw and his men join Montgomery in a raid on the town of Darien, Georgia. In the film Shaw angrily protests, as he actually did, the looting and burning of the town. Shaw and the Boston abolitionists were furious at the “border war” tactics that Montgomery employed, and they protested vigorously. Shaw was worried that news of the raids would “produce a reaction against arming the Negroes” in the North and provoke retaliation by the enemy against black troops.

While overwhelmingly accurate, *Glory* does misfire on some of the history of the black regiments and their officers. *Glory* fabricates an assault in Darien by one of Montgomery’s soldiers on a white woman, and the shooting of the soldier by Montgomery. The same scene disparages the South Carolina “contrabands”



National Archives

**The crew of the Union gunboat *Hunchback*, which operated along the coastal rivers of Virginia and North Carolina. Black sailors served in the Union navy from the beginning of the war.**

as wild and undisciplined marauders compared to the disciplined and dignified men of the Massachusetts 54th. Montgomery, fresh from the Kansas front, represented a different wing of the abolitionist movement, one frequently at odds with the New England abolitionists represented in the Department of the South by Shaw and Higginson. Dudley Taylor Cornish noted in his early work *The Sable Arm, Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865*: "Higginson, the romantic, had raised money to send Sharps rifles to Kansas in the fifties. Montgomery, the realist, had used them."

### The 54th in Action

*Glory* does justice to the heroic 54th, particularly in the inspiring battle scenes, first on James Island and finally in the assault on Fort Wagner. In strikingly realistic battle scenes, but without appeals to pacifism, *Glory* shows what the Civil War was all about. On 16 July 1863 the 54th was employed in a feint on the Confederate position on James Island, below Charleston harbor. Under assault by a superior enemy force, the 54th held its ground, saving the 10th Connecticut from being cut off. A white soldier in the 10th wrote home: "But for the bravery of three companies of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth (colored), our whole regiment would have been captured.... They fought like heroes" (Joseph Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*). Not shown in *Glory* was what was happening in New York City even as the men of the 54th were shedding their blood for the Union on James Island. Beginning on July 13, racist Irish mobs rioted for four days, lynching blacks and burning down the Colored Orphan Asylum.

Two days after the engagement on James Island the 54th was chosen to lead the assault on Fort Wagner. Although they had gone for two days without rest or food, nothing could have stopped the men of the 54th from taking their place of honor. Fort Wagner was a heavily protected installation which guarded the batteries at Charleston harbor. In preparation for the assault, dozens of Union ships bombarded the fort. At sunset on July 18, the Union troops formed up on the beach, with 600 men of the Massachusetts 54th in the vanguard. Shaw sought the lead, and told his troops: "The eyes of thousands will look on what you do tonight."

The 54th marched into Fort Wagner's guns, which exacted a horrible toll. Shaw was killed as he led his men up the ramparts; so many of the 54th's officers fell that Luis F. Emilio, the most junior captain, had to assume command. The regi-



Association for the Study of Negro Life and History  
**Sergeant William H. Carney won Congressional Medal of Honor for planting flag of the 54th at Fort Wagner.**

ment held its position on the edge of the fort for three deadly hours. All told 247 men, 40 percent of the regiment, were killed or wounded in the assault. Following Union regiments were also wiped out. Harriet Tubman described the battle:

"And then we saw the lightning, and that was the guns; and then we heard the thunder, and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling, and that was the drops of blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped."

In their racist hatred for Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th, the enemy stripped the young colonel's body and, in the words of Confederate officials, "buried

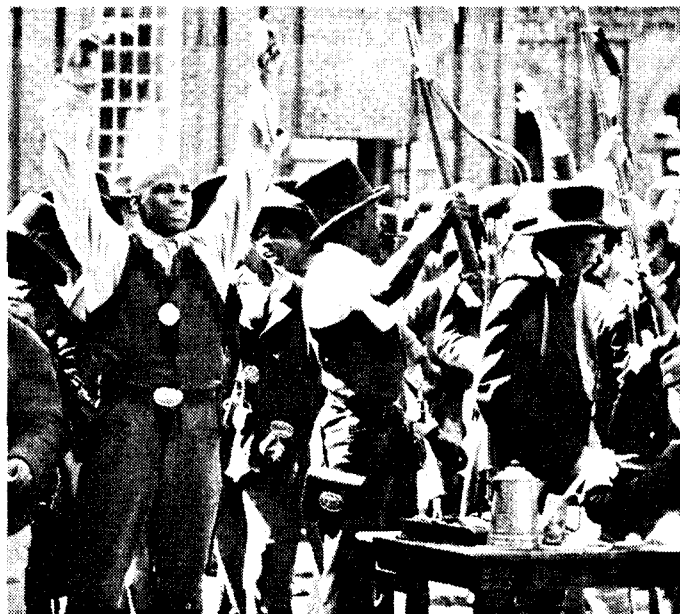
him with his niggers." When Union troops sought to retrieve Shaw's body, his father insisted that the enemy's unintended honor be left alone: "We hold that a soldier's most appropriate burial-place is on the field where he has fallen" (Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*). Fort Wagner would not fall until September 6, after a prolonged siege.

The Massachusetts 54th served for the rest of the war, fighting at Olustee, Florida, the siege of Charleston, and the battle of Honey Hill. After a triumphant march through Boston, the 54th was mustered out on 2 September 1865.

Like the heroism shown by black fighters at Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend, the actions of the Massachusetts 54th at Fort Wagner resounded across the country; the floodgates were open for massive recruitment of black troops. By the end of the war, 186,000 had served in 167 regiments; more than 123,000 were under arms at one point. It was the black troops that turned the tide of the war. At the mustering-out speech of Higginson's regiment, one of its officers pointed to the debt owed the 54th:

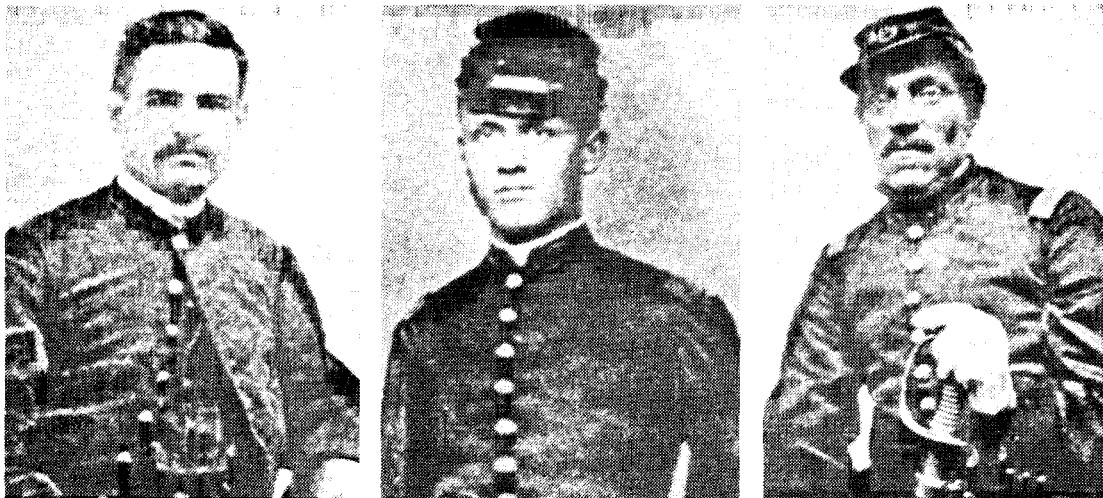
"Near you rest the bones of Colonel Shaw, buried by an enemy's hand, in the same grave with his black soldiers, who fell at his side; where, in future, your children's children will come on pilgrimages to do homage to the ashes of those that fell in this glorious struggle."

The black troops fought with the promise that "The ground over which you march, the fields on which you fight are to be your own" (*Rehearsal for Reconstruction*). And the sacrifices of the hundreds of thousands of black and white Union soldiers who fell in the Civil War ushered in the most democratic period blacks have ever known in this country.



Ti-Star Pictures

**In *Glory*, men of the 54th rip up their pay slips after U.S. government reneges on the promise of equal pay for black and white soldiers.**



Johnson Publishing Photos

**Real-life heroes of the Massachusetts 54th: (left to right) First Lieutenant Stephen Atkin Swails moved to South Carolina after the war and became a Republican state senator; First Lieutenant Frank Welch, wounded at Fort Wagner; First Lieutenant Peter Vogelsang.**

Black rights were enforced in the Reconstruction South at riflepoint by the interracial Union Army. But the economic power of the former slavocracy was never destroyed. In a dozen years, signaled by the Compromise of 1877, ascendant Northern capitalism abandoned the freedmen, making peace with Southern landowners and destroying the gains that blacks had paid for in blood. The planters re-established their power, exploiting black labor in a sharecropping system reinforced by vicious Jim Crow segregation.

Robert Lowell wrote "For the Union Dead" to publicize the effort to save the Saint-Gaudens monument from destruction in 1964. Lowell captures the hatred that today's deeply racist ruling class feels for the image of the Massachusetts 54th, blacks and whites fighting together arms in hand for freedom: "Their monument sticks like a fishbone in the city's throat."

The makers of *Glory* can be proud that they have earned the enmity of the haughty London *Economist*, which labels *Glory* "no less a distortion of the Civil War than *Gone With the Wind*" and claims that *Glory* "dehumanizes" whites of the Confederacy. The *Economist* whines that "In its early stages, after all, the war was not about slavery." Some 125 years ago, another mouthpiece for British capitalism, the London *Times*, wrote of the Emancipation Proclamation: "This liberation of the slaves can only be seen as monstrous, reckless and devilish."

In his review of *Glory* (*New Republic*, 8 and 15 January), the eminent Civil War historian James M. McPherson noted:

"If in this narrow sense the attack [on Fort Wagner] was a failure, in a more profound sense it was a success of historic proportions. The unflinching behavior of the regiment in the face of an overwhelming hail of lead and iron an-

swered the skeptic's question, 'Will the Negro fight?' It demonstrated the manhood and courage of the race to millions of white people in both North and South who had doubted whether black men would stand in combat against soldiers of the self-styled master race."

The participation of black soldiers in the struggle to smash slavery required nothing less than "a radical evolution of the scope and purpose of the Civil War," McPherson observed in praise of the film. And he concluded that:

"This was the most revolutionary feature of a war that wrought a revolutionary transformation of America by freeing four million slaves and uprooting the social structure of half the country. Arms

in the hands of slaves had been the nightmare of Southern whites for generations. In 1863 the nightmare came true. It achieved a new dignity, self-respect, and militancy for the former slaves who fought for the Union. It helped them achieve equal citizenship and political rights—for a time—after the war. "That is the real story told by *Glory*."

To fully pay homage to the heroes of the Massachusetts 54th will take a third American revolution, a proletarian revolution led by the multiracial American working class, to complete the unfinished tasks of the Civil War and the broken promises of Reconstruction, and open the way forward at last to a socialist society of equality, dignity and freedom. ■

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Eakins Press

## Marching Toward Black Liberation

# In Memory of Colonel Shaw and the 54th

On Beacon Hill in Boston there is a statue honoring Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the white commander of the first regiment of Northern free blacks to fight in the Civil War. Shaw sits astride his horse, sword in hand; but this is not just another military-man-on-horseback statue. All around Shaw march black soldiers, rifles held firmly on shoulders, eyes front, ever advancing on the impregnable Fort Wagner in South Carolina. There they died in 1863. Officer and men are buried in a common grave, and they have been memorialized in one of this country's most politically interesting and noble sculptures.

It took the great American sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, more than 12 years to achieve this testament to the fraternity of struggle in bronze bas-relief. Dedicated in 1897, today the statue is neglected and worn, and there is now an attempt to restore it. The marble is cracked, the bronze is corroded, something resembling paint seems to have been poured over it. Certainly time and the weather have done their destructive work, and perhaps even vandals have joined in. However, if the statue was the target of politically motivated vandalism, it would be difficult to say with assurance what spot on the political landscape the vandals might occupy. For the statue on Beacon Hill is a sore point for philistines of all sorts. For the racists it represents an obvious abomination: blacks and whites, arms in hand, fighting to the death for a social revolution in America. But for certain leftists, the Saint-Gaudens statue offends. They see that the lone white man is an officer while the blacks are the ranks. Shaw

rides while his men walk. A symbol of racism?

Ignorance of history is not excused by a double dose of liberal moralism. As one historian recently said of Saint-Gaudens' work: "He caught in bronze the moment that explains the Civil War." Perhaps it can also explain something of American black military experience and leadership, as it looks to future "moments."

There were no blacks in the regular U.S. army at the start of the Civil War, and federal law prevented blacks from serving in state militias. Although free blacks had fought against the British in the Revolution of 1776 and the War of 1812, they were immediately demobilized when the manpower shortage was over. As soon as the cannons fired on Fort Sumter, blacks tried to join the Union Army, but they were turned away contemptuously under the slogan: "This is a white man's war." Indeed, the question of black troops asked what the Civil War was all about. Abolitionists tried to make emancipation the issue and argued therefore for the use of black troops. Frederick Douglass implored the North to "unchain against her foes her powerful black hand." But most Northern whites viewed the war aims as only the preservation of the Union, not a struggle for emancipation, still less a fight for the full citizenship of American blacks. Lincoln, worried about holding the loyalty of the border states, could write as late as 1862 that "If I could save the union without freeing any slave, I would do it." But he couldn't do it. By the end of 1862 the war was going badly for the North, and Britain whose economic interests co-

incided with the free-trade South was thought to be considering recognition of the Confederacy. Furthermore the Union Army simply needed more men. It became obvious that if the war was to be won, it would have to crack the slave base of the South. Thus at the beginning of 1863, Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation and the War Department started to recruit black soldiers.

By the end of the Civil War 180,000 blacks had served in the Union Army, spilling their blood in nearly every major battle, taking nearly 70,000 dead. But the Massachusetts 54th was first. Massachusetts' abolitionist governor John Andrew secured permission to recruit a black regiment, and the abolitionists traveled the North seeking recruits. Douglass and Martin Delany became recruiting agents. But for the abolitionists both black and white, the recruitment of black troops was an essential part of making emancipation part of the aims of the war. As Douglass said in *Mission of War*, it "ought to be an Abolition War and an Abolition Peace." Two of Douglass' sons enlisted and fought with the new Massachusetts 54th regiment.

On May 28, 1863 the 54th left Boston to join David Hunter's command in South Carolina. The regiment marched in review before 20,000 people in Boston, the largest gathering for a regiment in that city during the war.

The Confederate army acted against the black regiments and their white officers with a special racist vengeance. Re-enslavement was by no means the worst consequence awaiting captured black troops. After the battle of Fort Pillow on the Mississippi above Memphis



Women and Revolution

### Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th Regiment by Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

in April 1864, scores of blacks were massacred after surrendering. Some were buried alive. But the effect of the racist massacres was to make the black soldiers fight harder. There was no point in surrender. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the famed white abolitionist commander of the black South Carolina Volunteers, wrote in 1870: "They fought with ropes round their necks, and when orders were issued that the officers of colored troops should be put to death on capture, they took a grim satisfaction.... With us, at least, there was to be no play-soldier" (*Army Life in a Black Regiment*).

Shaw's 54th attacked Fort Wagner on Morris Island in South Carolina July 18, 1863. They went through the hail of storm and shot and shell, trampling over the dead bodies of their comrades, falling back and then advancing again. When it was all over, the Union had suffered an overwhelming defeat. More than 1,500 Union casualties were counted on the bloody battlefield with only 174 for the Confederacy. Of the ten Union regiments participating the 54th suffered the most casualties with 247 dead or wounded.

Robert Gould Shaw was killed at Fort Wagner too. As the white officer of a black regiment he was seen by the Southern army as the worst sort of race-betrayer. They took the body of this

25-year-old officer from a prominent abolitionist family who had distinguished himself at Antietam, and they did what they thought would be the most insulting and humiliating. Later, when the Union Army searched for his body, they were told by Confederate officials: "We have buried him with his niggers." Thus Shaw was twice honored, once by Saint-Gaudens and once, unwittingly, by his enemies.

### "The Third American Revolution"

Historically, blacks have seen participation in America's wars as an opportunity to advance demands for equality. But unlike the Civil War which destroyed the "slavocracy" and with Reconstruction completed the bourgeois revolution, U.S. wars thereafter were no longer in the interests of black people or workers. There were no more "Abolition Wars."

The Union Army, of course, was rampant with racism as was every institution in America, even as it fought against the Southern slave system. Black soldiers were subject to more than the paternalism of the white abolitionists. The pay for black privates was just over half that of white privates. In protest, blacks in the Massachusetts 54th refused to accept their pay for months. In *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. Dubois argued that

blacks were often used as shock troops. And most importantly, blacks could not serve as commanding officers.

But black leadership is no longer shackled to the slave system and backward Southern agriculture. As part of the industrial proletariat the future black leaders of the "Third American Revolution"—the Socialist Revolution—are being trained now. Not at West Point, to be sure, but on the front lines of the class war.

As targets of increasing racist attack, black people see all around them that the main enemy is at home. This was summed up dramatically in the 1960s antiwar slogan attributed to Muhammad Ali: "No Viet Cong ever called me nigger!" Today, young blacks—many of whom see the armed forces as the only way out of the ghetto—do indeed comprise fully one-third of the volunteer army. But the U.S. ruling class views this largely black army with increasing distrust, as black youth have little ideological allegiance to the government's imperialist aims. The economic conditions facing black people are so overwhelming that it has become an article of common sense as well as Marxist program: the problems facing black people cannot be solved this side of the socialist revolution.

Thus in the Third American Revolution blacks will lead the way; organized as part of the Trotskyist vanguard, blacks will lead united working-class victory over capitalism. Then, at last, America's rotting ghettos can be swept away with the class that created them. And we are confident that in the new socialist cities there will be a place of honor for the statue of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his courageous troops of the Massachusetts 54th. ■

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## Colonel Higginson and the First South Carolina Volunteers

# Black Troops in Battle Against Slavery



Culver Pictures

**Freed slaves in First South Carolina Volunteers fight Confederacy near Doboy River, Georgia.**

"The question of slavery is a stern and practical one. Give us the power and we can make a new Constitution...how is that power to be obtained? By politics? Never. By revolution, and that alone." Those words were spoken by Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1857, and by 1862 Higginson took a commanding role in that revolution as the colonel of the first black regiment to fight in the Civil War. For Black History Month, *Young Spartacus* is proud to reprint (with our commentary in italics) excerpts from Higginson's account of his service with the First South Carolina Volunteers, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1984).

Higginson was an abolitionist, an agitator for women's rights and school desegregation, and in the last years of his life an anti-imperialist opponent of U.S. occupation of the Philippines. He was an ardent supporter of John Brown through both the fight for "Bleeding Kansas" and the raid on Harpers Ferry. When others

of Brown's supporters were diving for cover during the hysterical witchhunt following the raid, Higginson endeavored to break Brown out of the Charlestown, Virginia jail where he awaited hanging. When Brown refused to condone a rescue attempt, Higginson went to North Elba, New York to bring Brown's wife down to see him.

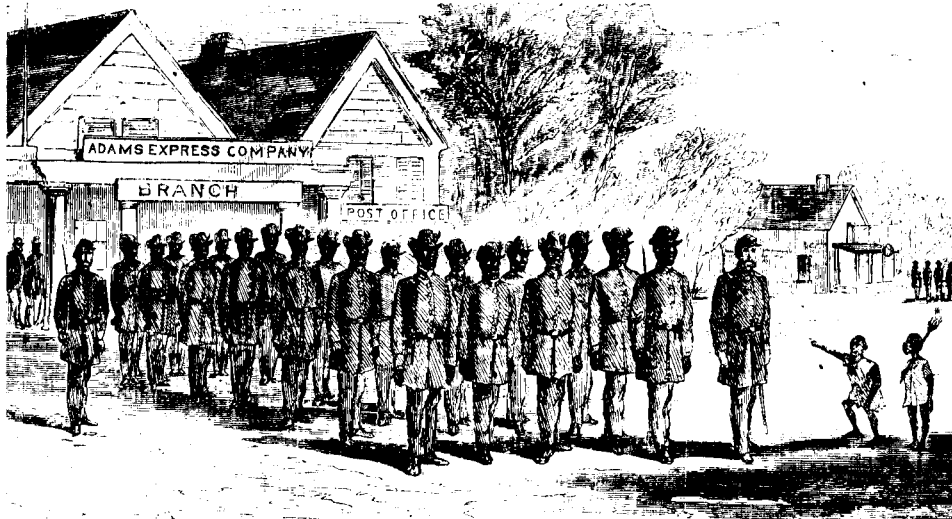
In 1862 Higginson was exactly where old John Brown had always wanted to be—at the head of a black regiment wiping the scourge of slavery from the face of the land. The vacillating and hesitant Northern bourgeoisie had refused to use black troops. In fact, when Higginson was called to lead the First South Carolina Volunteers—all former slaves led by white officers—he wrote, "Had an invitation reached me to take command of a regiment of Kalmuck Tartars, it could hardly have been more unexpected." But the war was going badly for the North, and it was finally recognized that if the Civil War was going to be

won, slavery would have to be abolished and, as Frederick Douglass said, the "Black Phalanx" unleashed.

The slave system had created its own gravediggers, with four million slaves in the South. The First South Carolina was the Black Spartacus, and their mighty battle cries for liberation sent shock waves throughout "The Secesh" (the Confederacy). They were the first black regiment, but 200,000 of their black comrades followed in their footsteps before the slaveholders' rebellion was smashed in 1865. In Higginson's words, "We had touched the pivot of the war.... Till the blacks were armed, there was no guaranty of their freedom. It was their demeanor under arms that shamed the nation into recognizing them as men."

\* \* \*

*After two months of drill and training on the South Carolina Sea Islands, the First South Carolina Volunteers were ready and eager for battle. In January*



Culver Pictures



Houghton Mifflin Co.

**Troops drilling in Beaufort, S.C., headquarters of Department of the South (left); Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1862 (right).**

1863, the regiment proved its mettle under fire as they traveled up the St. Mary's river in search of lumber and recruits. These black soldiers, bearing arms and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, had a magnetic pull on their brothers in bondage. They had an equal if inverse impact on the slaveowners who recoiled in shock and horror when confronted with their escaped "property" in Union Army uniforms.

It was after midnight when we set off upon our excursion. I had about a hundred men, marching by the flank, with a small advanced guard, and also a few flankers, where the ground permitted.... Corporal Sutton marched near me, with his captured negro guide, whose first fear and sullenness had yielded to the magic news of the President's Proclamation, then just issued, of which [Massachusetts] Governor Andrew had sent me a large printed supply;—we seldom found men who could read it, but they all seemed to feel more secure when they held it in their hands. We marched on through the woods, with no sound but the peeping of the frogs in a neighboring marsh, and the occasional yelping of a dog, as we passed the hut of some "cracker." This yelping always made Corporal Sutton uneasy; dogs are the detective officers of Slavery's police....

I feared no attack during our ascent,—that danger was for our return; but I feared the intricate navigation of the river, though I did not fully know, till the actual experience, how dangerous it was.... No piloting less skillful than that of Corporal Sutton and his mate, James Bezzard, could have carried us through...at last we dropped anchor before the little town of Woodstock, after moonset and an hour before daybreak,

just as I had planned, and so quietly that scarcely a dog barked, and not a soul in the town, as we afterwards found, knew of our arrival.... I took a survey of the premises. The chief house, a pretty one with picturesque outbuildings, was that of Mrs. A., who owned the mills and lumber-wharves adjoining. The wealth of these wharves had not been exaggerated....

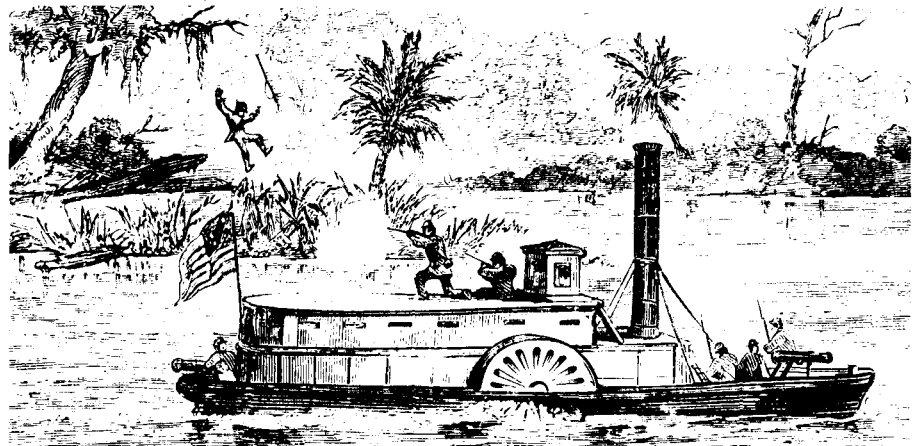
When the morning was a little advanced, I called on Mrs. A., who received me in quite a stately way at her own door with "To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit, Sir?"... I wished to present my credentials; so, calling up my companion, I said that I believed she had been previously acquainted with Corporal Robert Sutton? I never saw a finer bit of unutterable indignation than came over the face of my hostess, as she slowly recognized him. She drew herself up, and dropped out the monosyllables of her answer as

if they were so many drops of nitric acid. "Ah," quoth my lady, "we called him Bob!"

It was a group for a painter. The whole drama of the war seemed to reverse itself in an instant, and my tall, well-dressed, imposing philosophic Corporal dropped down the immeasurable depth into a mere plantation "Bob" again. So at least in my imagination; not to that person himself. Too essentially dignified in his nature to be moved by words where substantial realities were in question, he simply turned from the lady, touched his hat to me, and asked if I would wish to see the slave-jail, as he had the keys in his possession.

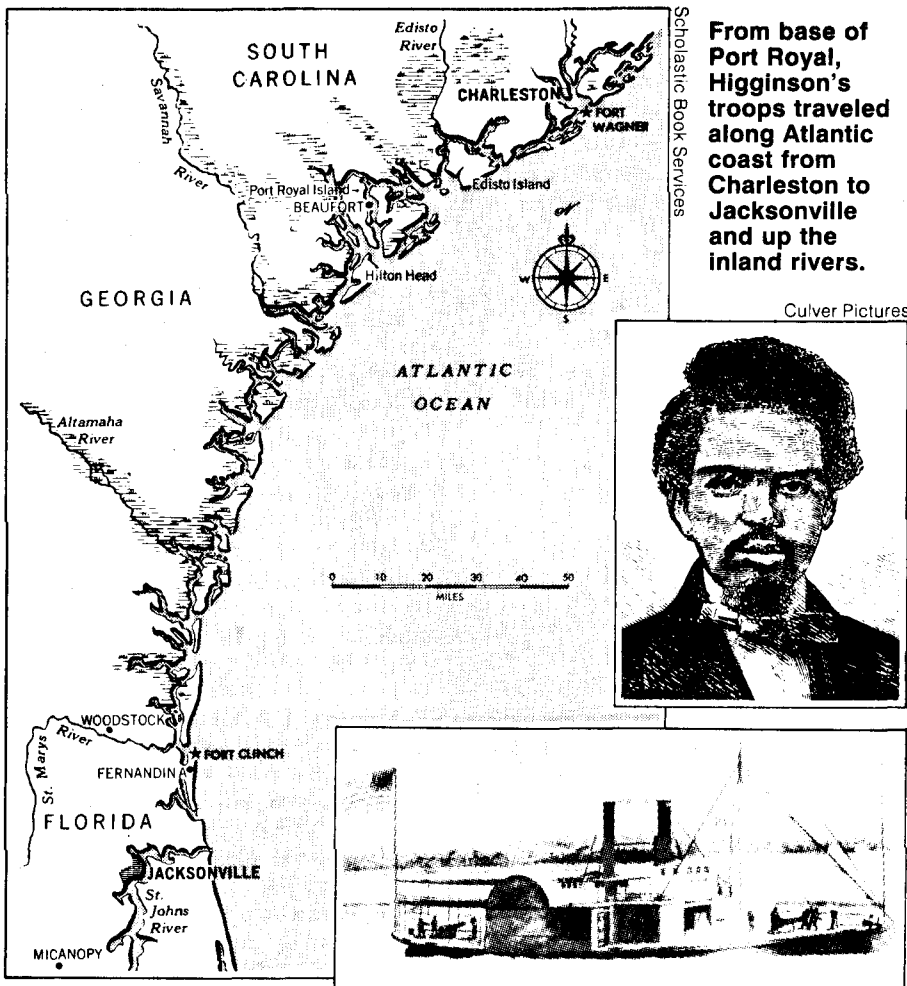
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*In the spring of 1863, the First South Carolina Volunteers took Jacksonville, Florida, establishing the only mainland Union post in the Department of the*

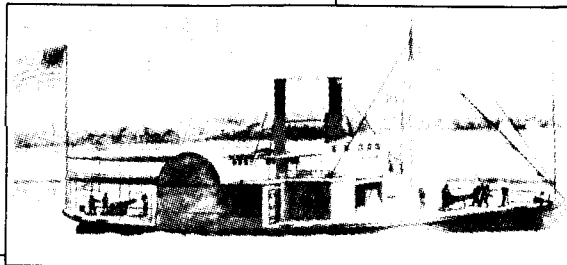
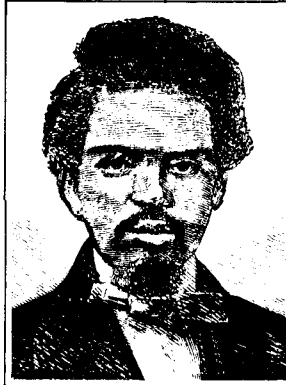


Milton Meltzer

**Corporal Robert Sutton navigated the John Adams along treacherous waterways, facing Confederate sharpshooters. He brought the regiment to Woodstock, Georgia, where he had formerly been enslaved.**



**From base of Port Royal, Higginson's troops traveled along Atlantic coast from Charleston to Jacksonville and up the inland rivers.**



Dorothy Sterling

**Robert Smalls pirated the Confederate gunboat *Planter* in daring escape from slavery, bringing the ship laden with guns and cannon to the Union fleet. The *Planter* was used to transport Higginson's men to their first mission, a foray up the St. Mary's River in January 1863. Smalls was later promoted to captain of the ship. After the war he served as a South Carolina lawmaker, and was elected to Congress in 1875. He was denied his seat in 1886, along with other black Congressmen, as part of the betrayal and defeat of Reconstruction.**

*South. But the posting of Higginson's regiment still hung in the balance of shifting national policy, which swung from daring offensives against the slaveryocracy to attempts at reconciliation. Nothing disappointed the First South Carolina more than the orders to evacuate Jacksonville. Here for the first time, black and white Union troops fought side by side, black NCOs led white soldiers, and ex-slaves were the victorious occupation force in the town of their former masters. Recalled to picket duty at Port Royal Ferry, and later at Camp Shaw (named in honor of the colonel of the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth regiment who had been recently killed in battle and buried along with his fallen black troops at Fort Wagner), Higginson recounts two stories showing the determination of black troops to win this war.*

The one military performance at the picket station of which my men were utterly intolerant was an occasional flag of truce, for which this was the appointed locality. These farces, for which it was our duty to furnish the stock actors, always struck them as being utterly despicable, and unworthy the serious business of war.... It goaded their souls to see the young officers from the two opposing armies salute each other courteously, and interchange cigars. They despised the object of such negotiations, which was usually to send over to the enemy some family of Rebel women who had made themselves quite intolerable on our side, but were not above collecting a subscription among the Union officers, before departure, to replenish their wardrobes. The men never showed disrespect to these women by word or deed, but they hated them from the bottom

of their souls. Besides, there was a grievance behind all this. The Rebel order remained unrevoked which consigned the new colored troops and their officers to a felon's death, if captured; and we all felt that we fought with ropes round our necks. "Dere's no flags ob truce for us," the men would contemptuously say, "When de Secesh fight de *Fus' Souf*" (First South Carolina), "he fight in earnest."

#### *At Camp Shaw:*

The men had that year a Christmas present which they enjoyed to the utmost,—furnishing the detail, every other day, for provost-guard duty in Beaufort. It was the only military service which they had ever shared within the town, and it moreover gave a sense of self-respect to be keeping the peace of their own streets....

Then, when once posted, they glorified their office, you may be sure. Discipline had grown rather free-and-easy in the town about that time, and it is said that the guard-house never was so full within human memory as after their first tour of duty. I remember hearing that one young reprobate, son of a leading Northern philanthropist in those parts, was much aggrieved at being taken to the lock-up merely because he was found drunk in the streets. "Why," said he, "the white corporals always showed me the way home."...

One of the sergeants of the guard, on one of these occasions, made to one who questioned his authority an answer that could hardly have been improved. The questioner had just been arrested for some offence.

"Know what dat mean?" said the indignant sergeant, pointing to the chevrons on his own sleeve. "Dat mean *Guv'ment*." Volumes could not have said more, and the victim collapsed. The thing soon settled itself, and nobody remembered to notice whether the face beside the musket of a sentinel were white or black. It meant Government, all the same.

\* \* \*

*Higginson not only led his troops in battle against the slave system, he also fought the War Department and Congress to wrest equal pay from the government for black soldiers. Finally in April 1864, the War Department ruled that black soldiers would receive equal pay—provided they were free men by 19 April 1861. Higginson was outraged by this decision which denied the hundreds of black soldiers who escaped slavery after April 19 their due. Higginson petitioned Congress to redress this inequality and*



Confederate Museum

**RADICAL MEMBERS  
OF THE S<sup>C</sup> LEGISLATURE.**

**Radical members of the South Carolina legislature during Reconstruction. First South Carolina sergeants Prince Rivers and Henry Hayne became legislators, along with Planter captain Robert Smalls.**

white man is bound to respect. He is incapable of making a contract.... Any employer, following the example of the United States Government, may make with him a written agreement, receive his services, and then withhold the wages. He has no motive to honest industry, or to honesty of any kind. He is virtually a slave, and nothing else, to the end of time.

\* \* \*

*All honor to the First South Carolina Volunteers!*

No doubt there were reasons why this particular war was an especially favorable test of the colored soldiers. They had more to fight for than the whites. Besides the flag and the Union, they had home and wife and child. They fought with ropes round their necks, and when orders were issued that the officers of colored troops should be put to death on capture, they took a grim satisfaction. It helped their *esprit de corps* immensely. With us, at least, there was to be no play-soldier. Though they had begun with a slight feeling of inferiority to the white troops, this compliment substituted a peculiar sense of self-respect. And even when the new colored regiments began to arrive from the North my men still pointed out this difference,—that in case of ultimate defeat, the Northern troops, black or white, would go home, while the First South Carolina must fight it out or be re-enslaved. This was one thing that made the St. John's River so attractive to them and even to me;—it was so much nearer the everglades. I used seriously to ponder, during the darker periods of the war, whether I might not end my days as an outlaw,—a leader of Maroons.... ["Maroons" were bands of runaway slaves who set up "liberated zones" in the rugged areas of the Caribbean islands, jungles of Brazil, and prior to the Seminole War of 1818, the Everglades of Florida.]

The operations on the South Atlantic coast, which long seemed a merely subordinate and incidental part of the great contest, proved to be one of the final pivots on which it turned. All now admit that the fate of the Confederacy was decided by Sherman's march to the sea. Port Royal was the objective point to which he marched, and he found the Department of the South, when he reached it, held almost exclusively by colored troops. Next to the merit of those who made the march was that of those who held open the door. That service will always remain among the laurels of the black regiments. ■

*fired off dozens of letters to Northern newspapers, excerpts from which we reprint below.*

**To the Editor of the New York Tribune, 22 January 1864:**

I have not seen even a proposition in Congress to pay the colored soldiers, from date of enlistment, the same pay with white soldiers; and yet anything short of that is an unequivocal breach of contract, so far as this regiment is concerned.

Meanwhile the land sales are beginning, and there is danger of every foot of land being sold from beneath my soldiers' feet, because they have not the petty sum which Government first promised, and then refused to pay.

**To the Editors of the Evening Post, 10 July 1864:**

On the 2d of July, at James Island, S. C., a battery was taken by three regiments, under the following circumstances:

The regiments were the One Hundred and Third New York (white), the Thirty-Third United States (formerly First South Carolina Volunteers), and the Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts, the two last being colored. They marched at one A. M., by the flank, in the above order, hoping to surprise the battery. As usual the rebels were prepared for them, and opened upon them as they were deep in one of those almost impassable Southern marshes. The One Hundred and Third New York, which had previously been in twenty battles, was thrown into confusion; the Thirty-Third United States did better,

being behind; the Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts being in the rear, did better still. All three formed in line, when Colonel Hartwell, commanding the brigade, gave the order to retreat. The officer commanding the Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts, either misunderstanding the order, or hearing it countermanded, ordered his regiment to charge. This order was at once repeated by Major Trowbridge, commanding the Thirty-Third United States, and by the commander of the One Hundred and Third New York, so that the three regiments reached the fort in reversed order. The color-bearers of the Thirty-Third United States and of the Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts had a race to be first in, the latter winning. The One Hundred and Third New York entered the battery immediately after.

These colored regiments are two of the five which were enlisted in South Carolina and Massachusetts, under the written pledge of the War Department that they should have the same pay and allowances as white soldiers. That pledge has been deliberately broken by the War Department, or by Congress, or by both, except as to the short period, since last New-Year's Day. Every one of those killed in this action from these two colored regiments—under a fire before which the veterans of twenty battles recoiled—*died defrauded by the Government of nearly one half his petty pay.*

**To the Editor of the New York Tribune, 12 August 1864:**

In other words, a freedman (since April 19, 1861) has no rights which a

## Introduction...

(continued from page 3)

interimperialist world war, waged by America to deny markets to Germany and Japan, drew its ideological strength from the widespread popular hatred of the ultra-racist totalitarianism of the German Nazis, augmented by promises of new "freedom" at home. Expectations were aroused not only by the rhetoric but by the economic advancement of sections of the black population who left the backwaters of the rural South and flocked to the cities to take jobs newly opened to them in the war industries. This population shift permanently transformed the black question in America: no longer an atomized mass of illiterate, impoverished rural agricultural laborers, black people were incorporated into the unionized, urban working class.

Particularly the Korean War, and later the losing war in Vietnam, spurred black militancy among returning soldiers. Korean War veteran Robert F. Williams of the Monroe County, North Carolina NAACP organized armed self-defense against the racist terrorists of the KKK. (On black soldiers and veterans in the fight against racism, see *Black History and the Class Struggle* No. 4, "Black Soldiers in the Jim Crow Military.")

In the post-World War II period, something of a new "sectional conflict" erupted. The Southern political establishment saw no reason why anything should change in the "Jim Crow" system which had served the regional ruling class so well for decades. But with America, the big victor of the war, looking toward a new ideological and military crusade against Communism throughout the world, the glaring formal and legal discrimination against Southern blacks was becoming an embarrassment to the more far-sighted wing of this country's rulers. To be sure, if blacks had not been clamoring loudly and visibly for their civil rights, the capitalists would not have discovered any "moral" objection to the continuation of the Southern status quo. But when vicious local repression proved unable to put an end to blacks' demands for an end to official segregation, the federal government became willing to press for greater formal equality in the South.

What took shape was an "alliance" between the hypocritical "reforming" wing of the capitalist rulers and the most conservative section of the black leadership, which rightly feared that continuing frustration of demands for minimal legal equality could give rise to militant, independent and even pro-communist

currents within the black movement. The government-supported civil rights "projects" of the 1960s, such as the one described in detail in this pamphlet, were wedded to "non-violence"—in other words, reliance on the federal government and FBI. CORE's James Farmer described the strategy of the 1961 "freedom rides" which challenged segregation of interstate busing: "We felt that we could count upon the racists of the South to create a crisis so that the federal government would be compelled to enforce the law" (*Eyes on the Prize*, PBS-TV documentary).

In 1957, federal troops had been sent to Little Rock by the Eisenhower administration to restore order when racist riots greeted the admission of nine black students to Central High. Likewise the Kennedy administration finally acted in Birmingham in 1963 after Bull Connor and his cops became an embarrassment to the "image of America" on national and worldwide television. Particularly in Birmingham, it was becoming clear that local blacks would not be restrained by the movement's commitment to "non-violence" while cop truncheons, dogs and firehoses were being turned against mass marches of black children.

Today, the younger generation is taught that the civil rights movement was a success because it got new laws passed which supposedly safeguard the legal rights of black people. But even prior to this "victory," such laws already existed; what was lacking was the power to make them more than pieces of paper. The 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments passed after the Civil War overthrew the Dred Scott decision and established that blacks are citizens of the U.S. entitled to all the rights and protections of citizenship including the vote. And the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1877, making it a crime to conspire to deny the civil rights of any person or group of people, has been on the books now for more than a century.

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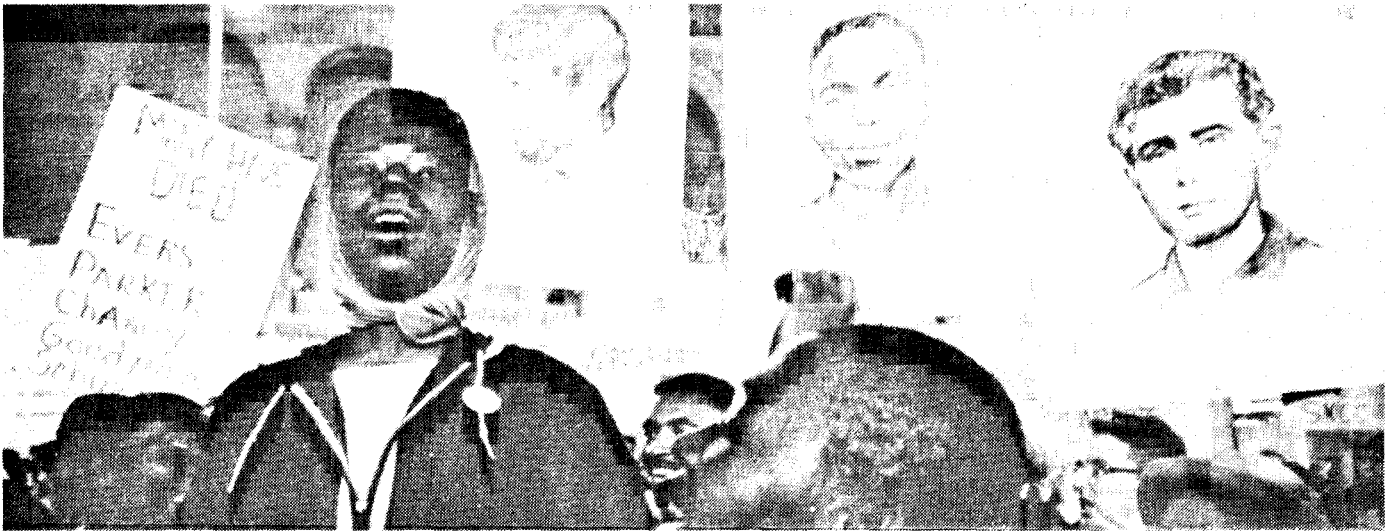
As a Marxist organization in the United States, the Spartacist League and its press analyze and seek to present a program to fight against black oppression in this country today. The limited format of this pamphlet enables us to reprint only a few articles. Many other subjects from the past year might have been considered: the racial politics of New York City and the election (by the narrowest imaginable margin) of its first black mayor; the "drug war" rationale for cop terror against the ghettos and regimentation of the population; the San Francisco earthquake where skilled

workers and community residents were forcibly stopped from rescuing victims by the authorities (who then provided services and even luxuries to displaced yuppies while devastated communities like the Mexican American farmworkers of Watsonville received no help, or worse than no help). Nor can we include here our articles on such subjects as "The Impoverishment of America," the furor over Spike Lee's ultimately liberal but incisive and vibrant film *Do the Right Thing*, or our continuing fight for militant, union-based labor/black mass mobilizations to stop fascist provocations against working people, immigrants and minorities in the major cities of America and internationally. Serious students of the role of black working people in American history past and present—readers who are, as we are, concerned to understand the crucial social struggles of the past in order to shape the struggles of the future—are urged to subscribe to *Workers Vanguard*, the Spartacist League's biweekly paper.

We are reprinting here WV's article on Huey Newton. Newton's death last year provided an occasion for a retrospective look at the Black Panthers, who were synonymous with black militancy for a generation of young people. This assessment of Newton's political career was written by a Spartacist comrade who was formerly a Panther supporter.

Finally, we include some important material from the Partisan Defense Committee, the legal and social defense organization associated with the SL, concerning the PDC's urgent campaign against the racist death penalty in America. In two speeches from united-front rallies opposing "legal lynching" and championing the fight to free death row political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, PDC co-chairman Charles Brover outlines the history of the death penalty and its racially unequal application in America as derived from the old "slave codes" and explains why Mumia's case must become the rallying point for death penalty abolitionists today. Mumia, a radical Philadelphia journalist, former Panther and today a supporter of the MOVE organization, earned the enmity of the racist rulers as an outspoken partisan of the oppressed. Today he continues his work from behind prison walls. We include here two columns by Mumia. "Tribute to the May 13th Martyrs" appeared in WV last spring on the anniversary of the massacre of eleven black men, women and children by the Philadelphia mayor and police in collusion with the FBI and federal government.

—February 1990



Bob Adelman

Civil rights activists raised placards of their martyrs (from left to right) Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, in protest against deal seating Dixiecrat delegation at Democratic convention, August 1964.

# How Mississippi Burning Rewrites History

## *Young Spartacus Film Review* by A. Stevens

It's Hollywood's first attempt at a blockbuster on the civil rights movement. It's slick enough to make you cry, true enough in depicting the raw racism and terror of the Ku Klux Klan to rip your guts out, and so full of lies that *Mississippi Burning* leaves viewers who know anything about the civil rights movement infuriated. Set in the "Freedom Summer" of 1964, the movie is an action-packed melodrama based on the true case of three civil rights workers, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, murdered by the sheriff's department/Ku Klux Klan in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Director Alan Parker has made a gripping Hollywood film of a lie that's been honed over 25 years—that the U.S. government and its FBI men supposedly stood on the side of the black freedom struggle against violent Southern race-haters.

A fictionalized account of the FBI's 44-day manhunt for the missing bodies, *Mississippi Burning* turns the entire civil

rights movement into missing persons. Black people are transformed into a quivering mass backdrop for the heroics of two white FBI agents. Alan Parker admits, "Our heroes are still white. And in truth, the film would probably never have been made if they weren't." Indeed, the paucity of films on the civil rights movement is in itself a damning comment on the racism of American culture. Parker fills the breach with a promotion of the status quo. Black people are disappeared because to show the truth, that it was the masses of blacks, along with anti-racist whites, united *in struggle*, who smashed Jim Crow segregation, would explode the whole lying premise of the film: that federal good guys supposedly busted the balls of reactionary crackers while the oppressed never got off their knees.

If *Mississippi Burning* depicts a certain amount of FBI ineptitude and bungling (there's even a reference to J. Edgar Hoover's obsessive anti-Communism), it's only in order to more effectively obscure the essential truth that the government was and is the deadly enemy of the fight for black liberation. As Ben Chaney, the younger brother of James Chaney, told *Time*, "It is a dangerous

movie because it could lead to complacency. Things haven't changed that much."

Things have changed so little that Philadelphia, Miss. has become a *de rigueur* political pit stop for aspiring presidential candidates to shore up the white racist vote. In 1984, Reagan made a speech there about the inviolability of "States' Rights." Last year, visiting the Neshoba County Fair 24 years to the day since the murders, "liberal" Democrat Dukakis deliberately did not mention the bloody crime that put Philadelphia on the map. White church groups have threatened an economic boycott if the film is shown in the local theater. John Proctor (the real-life Southern FBI agent that Gene Hackman's role is fantasized from) is chummy with the local Klansmen he convicted, and noted of *Mississippi Burning*, "It's going to be about as popular around here as a turd in a punch bowl!" (*People*, 9 January).

This controversial film searingly portrays race relations and the meanness of life in the rural South. If it weren't for the '60s model car the G-men were driving, you couldn't tell whether the desperate poverty of black sharecroppers was



a scene from 1870, 1964 or 1989. In fact, the rows of shacks on dirt roads on the black side of town were no movie set but the homes of black families today who were, cast in the film. As hundreds of FBI agents and Navy reserves search the swamps and bayous, a white farmer in the film says, "Around here, Negroes have been treated awful bad for a long time." Sitting in the same slop with his pigs, he goes on, "They say we've got to eat together and use the same bathroom as the niggers, and that's awful hard for some Mississippi folks to do." A white lady in the beauty parlor is "sorry if them two civil rights boys is dead" (the third, James Chaney, is black and therefore doesn't count).

This film evokes an image of the KKK as hulking, slobbering, pea-brained racists who hold blacks in thrall by a tyranny of fear. What that leaves out is the fact that the Dixiecrats ran the KKK from the courthouse (controlled by the White Citizens Councils), the big house (Dixiecrat Senator Eastland's vast plantations were just a spit away from "Jessup," the movie's fictional county symbolizing Neshoba County, Miss.) and the State House where governors across the South called for "massive resistance" to integration. As Francis M. Wilhoit wrote in *The Politics of Massive Resistance* (1973):

"For it was, after all, the region's political parties—particularly the dominant Democrats—that bore the chief responsibility for politicizing the segregationist masses and getting them to the polls on election day to vote for anti-integration candidates. Furthermore, since membership in Southern parties overlapped with membership in the Klan, the Councils, and other resistance groups, it appeared for a time that the segregationists would get a stranglehold on policy making in the racial area, and prevent even tokenism."

It's as if the Confederacy had won the Civil War. The images in the film are vivid, terrifying, and true. Hooded gangs lie in wait for blacks after evening church services, then chase them through the dark, beating, kicking, terrorizing every man, woman and child they can land a boot or a blackjack on. A black man who was questioned in public by the FBI is forced to flee his home when the Klan shows up that night; he gets tortured in a wire cage in a cotton field and dumped on Main Street the next day. "Can't have blood on Main Street," quips the sheriff who routinely orchestrates the release of his prisoners into the hands of the Klan.

The strength of the film is that it shows—so graphically that many who partici-

ment wept even as they raged against the deliberate distortions—the raw reality of Klan terror. Unlike muddle-headed libertarians who today champion the KKK's supposed right to "free speech," *Mississippi Burning* shows the KKK is not interested in debating their "point of view" but exists for racist murder. In scene after scene the KKK "speaks" for white supremacy through beatings, firebombings, castrations, lynchings and shootings of blacks, Jews and "nigger-loving commies." Multiply the violence of Jessup a thousand times—for every village, town and city throughout the South and the segregationist enclaves in the North—and you know it's going to take a full-blown revolution to *finish the Civil War* and overturn the enslavement and oppression of black people that has existed for 400 years. Despite itself, the movie shows that freedom cannot be won through demonstrating an endless capacity to suffer, but only through a fight for power.

### Mississippi Lies

Into the Deep South swoop two G-men—Mr. Ward (Willem Dafoe) and Mr.

Anderson (Gene Hackman). Ward is an idealistic young Northern Kennedy liberal who's pathetically ignorant of race relations in the South and gets a lot of black people hurt by sticking to the letter of the law instead of the law of the land. Anderson is a white Southerner and ex-sheriff who "gets down in the gutter" to play hardball with the Klan. Together this FBI odd couple cracks the case, mainly thanks to Anderson's understanding of the local psychology and willingness to dispense with the ineffective "bureau procedures" favored by Ward.

The brutal violence against blacks is so visceral that viewers are tempted to suspend disbelief—it's satisfying when the feds get the Klan. (As Julian Bond aptly put it, it's like "Rambo Meets the Klan.") As the level of frustration mounts, finally you see a man who will no longer submit to white tyranny and stands up for black dignity. In the dramatic high point of the film, a heroic black avenger kidnaps the mayor and threatens to cut off his balls, thus persuading him to spill the beans on who killed the civil rights workers. But it turns out the avenger is an FBI man too!

## FBI Rode With the Klan

FBI "informant" Gary Rowe (inset) organized bloody rampage by 1,000 Klansmen in 1961, beating Freedom Riders and burning the buses.

CORE



UPI



(In fact the only blacks on the FBI payroll at the time were J. Edgar Hoover's five personal slaves—three chauffeurs, a doorman and a "houseboy.")

Anderson seduces the wife of the deputy sheriff who tells him where the boys are buried. She is then beaten within an inch of her life by her husband and his Klan buddies, but says she ain't leaving town because there's a lot of good people who are proud of her for

boy with the beard." Schwerner had been in Mississippi for six months, registering blacks for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which was planning to challenge the state's Jim Crow Dixiecrat delegation at the upcoming Democratic Party national convention. Twenty-year-old Andy Goodman was shot and buried alive on his first day in Mississippi; he was unearched from the dam with a hardened lump of Mississippi clay clutched

The murderers were charged with federal "civil rights violations." In the state of Mississippi, the corpses of Schwerner and Chaney couldn't even be buried in the same cemetery. Twenty white men were indicted, including the sheriff and his deputy. Eight were convicted and sentenced to up to ten years—none served more than five. Mississippi never charged the racist killers with any crime.

There was more than a little bitterness for Southern blacks in the fact that the FBI's massive manhunt for two Northern white college students also turned up the corpses of more black men murdered by the Klan/police forces—but these murders were never investigated. Charlie Eddie Moore, a black college student from Alcorn A&M, and his friend Henre Dee, both 19 years old and known to have participated in protest demonstrations, turned up floating in a bayou after being beaten to death. The body of a 14-year-old black male wearing a CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) T-shirt turned up in the Big Black River but was never even identified. Since Reconstruction, no white man has ever been convicted of murdering a black man in Mississippi.

### G-Men Ran the Klan

While *Mississippi Burning* depicts an FBI locked in mortal combat with the local sheriff's office, in reality the FBI rode with the Klan. The Klan could hardly take a match to a freedom school or knot a noose without federal agents knowing. As Patsy Sims relates in *The Klan* (1978), "in the mid-sixties FBI informants held top-level leadership roles in seven of the then fourteen Klan groups and headed one state organization. At one time in 1965, nearly two thousand of the FBI-estimated ten thousand Klan members were its own informers." Unlike the agents the government placed in black and left organizations to disrupt and spy on them, the FBI "informers" in the Klan served as loyal dual agents of both organizations. They doubled as the "kleagles" and "kluds" who perpetrated racist terror.

The FBI's most infamous informant in the Klan was Gary Rowe, a leader of a KKK "action squad." Rowe was involved in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963 which took the lives of four little black girls. Rowe organized the May 1961 attack by 1,000 Klansmen which left freedom riders lying in pools of their own blood in Southern bus terminals. In 1965 Rowe was in the car from which civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo was shot to death on a highway outside Selma, Alabama.



Wide World

**Lunch counter sit-in against Jim Crow segregation. Civil rights militants in Northern cities picketed Woolworth's in solidarity.**

what she did. The killers are sent to jail and black and white unite in Mississippi, singing hymns together amid the charred embers of a black church burned to the ground by the Klan. So much for the fantasized story line of *Mississippi Burning*. The reality is precisely the reverse.

Even the martyrs are nameless in this film and their story untold. On 21 June 1964, the very first day of "Freedom Summer," Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney were picked up by Neshoba County sheriff's deputy Cecil Price on a phony speeding violation. They were on their way home from investigating the burning of a black church, the first of many that were burned to the ground that summer. They were held for several hours and released after nightfall. Ten miles outside of town, their car was again stopped by the deputy sheriff, this time accompanied by a large party of Klansmen.

Mickey Schwerner, a 24-year-old experienced activist, was on a KKK hit list, known to them as "Goatee," "the Jew

in his fist. James Chaney, a 21-year-old black Mississippi civil rights organizer, was beaten so bad his bones were pulverized, then shot three times.

The bodies were found when the FBI lined the pockets of a Klansman with \$30,000 for the information and kept him safe from prosecution. A conspiracy of silence reigned in Philadelphia, Mississippi and the reaction of most whites when the bodies were found in an earthen dam was "Who told?" Buford Posey, one white man who spoke out, was run out of town with a Klan death contract on his head. Posey pointed to the sheriff's department from the start, and as he was leaving he threw a brick through the window of the *Neshoba Democrat*, his old nemesis. The paper's editor had hounded Posey since 1946 when he demanded that blacks, who fought this country's wars, be given the right to vote. (Posey, the first white NAACP member in Mississippi, was stripped of his own voting rights for challenging the paper's editor to a duel.)

Subsequently the Liuzzo family brought a \$2 million suit against the FBI in 1983, charging that Rowe was in fact the triggerman in that murder.

Different federal agencies competed to get their piece of action in the Klan. This was crystal clear in the 1979 massacre of five anti-Klan protesters in Greensboro, North Carolina. An "ex"-FBI agent working for the Greensboro police was present in the Klan/Nazi motorcade. And an "informer" from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in the local Klan/Nazi organization not only knew in advance of the murderous attack, but participated in planning meetings and even advised the killers how to transport weapons to the site! A state police cruiser brought up the rear of the KKK cavalcade as it left the highway, and local police were informed when to get there—late enough to allow the fascist death squad a leisurely departure and in plenty of time to arrest the surviving wounded victims, like Nelson Johnson.

FBI complicity with the KKK is not and was not a matter of aberrant rogues directed by reactionary throwbacks like J. Edgar Hoover. It was *government policy*, directed by the likes of liberal darlings like Bobby Kennedy. As an arm of the capitalist state, the FBI's mission was to disrupt, derail, and "neutralize" black and red organizations because the struggle for black equality represents the social tinder that can blow this country apart. In 1963, then-attorney general Robert Kennedy authorized FBI wiretaps on Martin Luther King, part of a years-long FBI campaign against him which included spreading gossip and innuendo about his personal life in an attempt to drive King to suicide. RFK's Justice



Reed/Black Star

**Ku Klux sheriffs who murdered Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner: Deputy Cecil Price (left) and Lawrence Rainey at arraignment. Rainey walked away free; none of the killers served more than five years.**

Department "observers" were notorious for coolly standing aside and jotting down notes while racist thugs cracked open the skulls of civil rights marchers. Sometimes FBI men openly joined in the beatings or took information from trusting civil rights workers seeking protection and promptly forwarded it to the Klan for action.

The illusions in the federal government propagated by this movie are all the more dangerous because at the time all wings of the civil rights movement appealed to the feds, often with disastrous results. Federal intervention on behalf of blacks was demanded during the 1957 school desegregation struggle at Little Rock Central High, but Eisenhower sent troops to Little Rock only *after* outraged groups of black youth battled and dispersed

white racist mobs and fought with cops. Even the most militant section of the civil rights movement, embodied in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), looked to Washington to defend blacks. Yet when Kennedy deployed federal troops in 1963 in response to the movement in Birmingham it was not to protect blacks but to restore "order" after blacks took up sticks, rocks, knives and bottles to defend themselves in the streets against the racists. When troops were sent to "protect" the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march, they were precipitously withdrawn as the protesters reached Montgomery, leaving the marchers to make the return journey to Selma utterly defenseless in the face of brutal beatings.

The Deep South was not simply a scene of racist terrorization and black fear, but also of heroic black resistance to Jim Crow terror. *Mississippi Burning* portrays blacks as utterly helpless—the one man who does reach for his shotgun in self-defense gets clobbered and then lynched without firing a shot. However there were areas in Mississippi where the *absence* of racist violence corresponded directly to the practice of black armed self-defense, not only of their own homes and property but organized in defense of freedom schools and community centers. Most black sharecroppers probably had guns—the question was not weapons so much as *organization*. The example for militant blacks across the region was set as early as 1959 in Monroe, North Carolina by Robert F. Williams, whose courage in organizing self-defense against the Klan earned him the enmity of the liberal NAACP which disowned him as the FBI hounded him out of the country. In 1965

## What Strategy for Black Liberation? Trotskyism vs. Black Nationalism

(Marxist Bulletin No. 5 Revised)

\$2.50 (64 pages)

Selected documents and articles on the black question in the U.S., 1955-1977.

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AP

**FBI boss  
J. Edgar Hoover's  
COINTELPRO  
program targeted  
black leaders:  
'prevent the  
rise of a  
'black messiah'.'**

Airtel to SAC, Albany  
RE: COUNTERINTELLIGENCE PROGRAM  
BLACK NATIONALIST-HATE GROUPS

nationalist activity, and interested in counterintelligence, to coordinate this program. This Agent will be responsible for the periodic progress letters being requested, but each Agent working this type of case should participate in the formulation of counterintelligence operations.

**GOALS**

For maximum effectiveness of the Counterintelligence Program, and to prevent wasted effort, long-range goals are being set.

1. Prevent the coalition of militant black nationalist groups. In reality there is strength; a true coalition of black nationalist groups might be the first step toward a real "Bau Bau" in America, the beginning of a true black revolution.
2. Prevent the rise of a "messiah" who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement. [redacted] might have been such a "messiah;" he is the party of the government today. [redacted] all aspire to this position. [redacted] is less of a threat because of his age. [redacted] be a very real contender for this position should he abandon his supposed "obedience" to "white, liberal doctrines" (nonviolence) and embrace black nationalism. [redacted] has the necessary charisma to be a real threat in this way.
3. Prevent violence on the part of black nationalist groups. This is of primary importance, and is, of course, a goal of our investigative activity; it should also be a goal of the Counterintelligence Program. Through counterintelligence it should be possible to pinpoint potential troublemakers and neutralize them before they exercise their potential for violence.
4. Prevent militant black nationalist groups and leaders from gaining respectability, by discrediting them and three separate segments of the [redacted] discrediting black [redacted]

was also riveted on the kick in the teeth the civil rights movement got later that summer, up North in Atlantic City at the Democratic Party National Convention. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had registered over 80,000 black voters and went to the convention, convinced that they represented the true interests of the national Democratic Party, to challenge the Dixiecrats who had disenfranchised blacks. Instead they learned that you can't fight the Dixiecrats from within *their* own political party.

The entire white delegation was seated and in a deal brokered by liberal Lowenstein the MFDP was offered only two at-large seats. To its credit, the SNCC leadership didn't go for the rotten deal but took to the street in protest in front of the convention with placards bearing the likenesses of the three recent martyrs. The convention was a watershed for SNCC, leaving no doubts in the minds of militants that the federal government stood by its Dixiecrats. The spectacular failure of the whole liberal strategy of the civil rights movement propelled militants in the direction of independent political action.

### Finish the Civil War!

In a powerful eulogy delivered after the funeral of James Chaney, Dave Dennis, a senior black civil rights worker, said:

"As I stand here I not only blame the people who pulled the trigger or did the beating or dug the hole with the shovel. I blame the people in Washington, D.C., and on down in the state of Mississippi for what happened.... I've got vengeance in my heart tonight, and I ask you to feel angry with me.... The white men who murdered James Chaney are never going to be punished. I ask you to be sick and tired of that.... We've got to stand up. The best way we can remember James Chaney is to demand our rights. Don't just look at me and go back and tell folks you've been to a nice service. Your work is just beginning."

What happened to that anger? What happened to those militants who broke with the liberalism of the civil rights movement? Rejecting the liberal strategy of Democratic Party pressure politics, SNCC activists electrified the movement with the "Black Power!" slogan in 1966. In part the slogan was an escape into the rhetoric of power in response to their own felt powerlessness to achieve full equality. But Black Power also meant organizing independently of the Democrats and championing the need for self-defense. The Lowndes County Black Panther Party, although only one local response, was a case in point.

However, isolated from the social power of the integrated working class,

the Louisiana-based Deacons for Defense and Justice organized patrols that protected blacks and civil rights workers. The recognition that the government was the enemy was the beginning of wisdom.

At about the same time, in Gulfport, Mississippi, the black longshoremen's union intervened in an escalating confrontation between civil rights activists and local racists, threatening to shut down the port if the young activists were injured or arrested. From the Virginia Tidewater area to Savannah and New Orleans, black workers organized in ports throughout the South possessed the tremendous social power of their own labor and could shut down the economy. As a Spartacist comrade who was active in the Gulfport struggle told *Young Spartacus*, "It worked! Not only were we not arrested or beat up, but the restaurant began to serve blacks. It was an impressive demonstration of how the power of labor could be brought to bear."

### Scratch a Democrat and Find a Dixiecrat

The civil rights movement aimed to abolish Jim Crow segregation and inequality in the states of the Old Confederacy through mass protests that would force the federal government to intervene and establish equal rights before the law—"Northernizing the South." The Southern system of American apartheid complicated the government's efforts to portray the U.S. as leader of the anti-Soviet "free world." But John F. Kennedy and

his "Camelot" courtiers were worried that more than cosmetic changes might be demanded. They feared the movement could escape the control of liberal preachers and bust up their alliance with the Dixiecrats. By the summer of '64 the bitter experiences of many activists led to a radicalization. SNCC activists grew weary of Martin Luther King's turn-the-other-cheek pacifism in the face of vicious assaults.

Liberal anti-communists like CIA-connected Allard Lowenstein were employed to try and keep the movement within mainstream Democratic Party protest politics and isolate and rebait the militants. Lowenstein brain-trusted the summer voter registration project which was calculated to restore faith in the system by throwing a national spotlight on racist degradation in Mississippi, bringing hundreds of white student volunteers in to build freedom schools, conduct literacy drives, and register thousands of Mississippi blacks to vote. The students who joined the integrated Southern civil rights movement were privileged, skilled, idealistic, naive, and above all courageous. Experienced black civil rights fighters stressed to the young activists in training sessions that they would be facing risks such as they had never faced—harassment and intimidation, beatings, and perhaps death—risks that Southern blacks faced every day.

The murders of Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner threw a spotlight on Mississippi, all right. But the nation's attention

the "Black Power" advocates were unable to make any fundamental changes in the lives of the black masses and increasingly moved toward a reactionary utopian program of nationalist *separatism*, identifying all integrated organizations with the sellout liberals and union bureaucrats who had stabbed them in the back. The nationalists also isolated themselves from the majority of black people, who remain overwhelmingly determined to struggle against all segregationist barriers for full equality. And as the liberal civil rights movement smashed up against the economic foundations of black oppression when it went North, even the Black Panther Party's militant rhetoric, combined with social work programs, could not address the systematic and special oppression of blacks as a race-color caste forcibly segregated at the bottom of American capitalism.

"Black Power" never found the bridge to *workers power*. In contrast to the MFDP, the newly founded Spartacist organization called for a South-wide Freedom Labor Party, to break labor from its bondage to the Democrats and link the black struggle to the organized workers movement. We called as well for a massive organizing drive to unionize black labor in the open-shop South. This call was part of our fight for the program of *revolutionary integrationism*, for black emancipation in an egalitarian socialist society. It was the criminal abstention and tailism from afar of groups like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) that obstructed the formation of black communist cadre. This was one of the central issues in the fight of the Revolutionary

Tendency (predecessor of the Spartacist League) against the degeneration of the SWP in the early '60s.

In an amendment to a 1963 SWP conference resolution, the Revolutionary Tendency argued:

"As regards the South today, we are witnessing from afar a great mass struggle for equality. Our separation from this arena is intolerable. The party should be prepared to expend significant material resources in overcoming our isolation from Southern struggles. In helping to build a revolutionary movement in the South, our forces should work directly with and through the developing left-wing formations in the movement there."

The SWP opposed this perspective, supporting nationalism as an excuse for their own cowardly abstention.

While the SWP called to "bring our boys home from Vietnam" and send the "troops to Mississippi," we fought hard against any illusions in the federal government. *Spartacist* No. 4 (May-June 1965) wrote, "Once the Negro people begin to assert their *real* power and independence, and attempt to use these laws for their own political action, these same troops will be turned against them in the interests of racist oppression." Our understanding was based on the programmatic documents written by comrade Dick Fraser who opposed the call for federal troops even before the events in Little Rock.

Various reformists also have noted that *Mississippi Burning* falsifies the role of the FBI. They know this well, because the axis of their political program at the time was pressuring the Democrats to get the feds to come in—thus fostering the

same illusions as the film. Thus the *People's Daily World* (8 December 1988) writes that "the feds finally, begrudgingly, agreed to investigate," only under "popular pressure." The central question then *and now* is to break labor and minorities from the Democratic Party, which is no "lesser evil" but the main institution that shackles the oppressed to their oppressors.

Today Jim Crow is "officially" dead, but blacks are three times as likely as whites to be poor. Over half of black families are headed by single mothers, and the poverty rate for black kids under age 18 is a shocking 67.1 percent. In 1986 only 40 percent of all black men had full-time jobs. This contradiction between formal legal equality and the pervasive social inequality inherent in racist American capitalism is resolved through *systematic police terror against black people*. Last year, the murder of Loyal Garner, Jr. in East Texas stoked memories of 1960s-style racist Southern terror. Picked up on a traffic violation, he was thrown in a jail cell and beaten to death. He thought he had rights—he asked to make a phone call.

The civil rights movement tried to fulfill the unfinished business of the Civil War—the promise of black freedom. To fulfill that promise requires a socialist revolution against the exploitation of all the working people. A key section of the working class and often its most combative sector, black workers can take the lead in this fight and open the road to real freedom for all mankind. *Finish the Civil War! Black liberation through socialist revolution!* ■

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# Cornell Students in Fayette County, Tennessee

## An Activist Recalls the “Freedom Summer” of 1964

*This article is based on a public talk given in New York during Black History Month last year by comrade Helene Brosius. A personal account of the project which sent Cornell University student volunteers to register black voters in rural Tennessee during the summer of 1964, this oral history is particularly valuable in light of the falsification of the civil rights struggle presented in Mississippi Burning, which casts the racist U.S. government, particularly the FBI, as the hero of the story, writing out of history the millions of people who risked much in fighting for their rights. For the purpose of this pamphlet, the talk has been edited and additional source material, including from comrade Helene's letters written at the time, incorporated.*

\* \* \* \* \*

A woman named Maggie Mae Horton down in Fayette County had this to say about her life there:

“I'm already in hell. This is it. This is hell here. This is all I expect to go to. Well, we've had our portion of it. I don't think I'll wait around for all this peace and happiness to come. I'm gonna raise all the hell I can to move some of this away.”

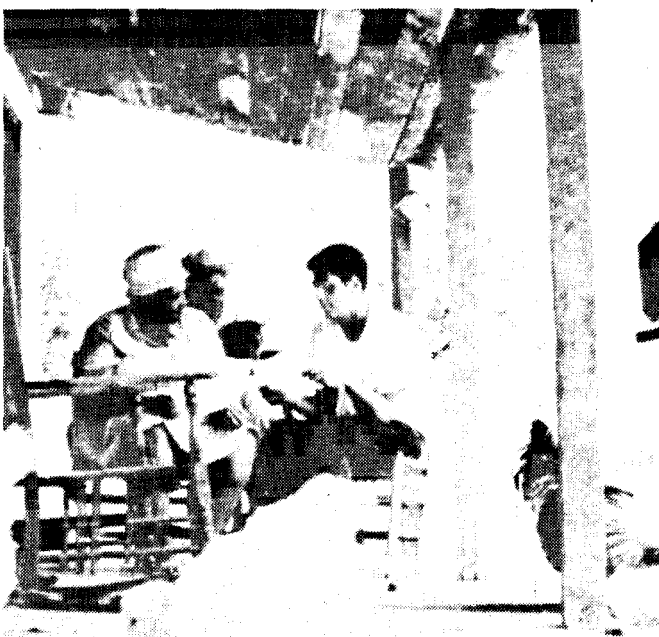
I decided to join the project—the Cornell-Tompkins County Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Fayette County, Tennessee. It was January 1964 and SNCC was preparing for Freedom Summer in Mississippi. SNCC was sending hundreds and hundreds of Northern students and others to carry out voter registration down in Mississippi, and to run freedom schools. We up at Cornell had a bunch of training sessions, every Sunday for months, on the techniques of nonviolence, the sociology and economy of Fayette County (it was the third poorest county in the nation at that time), the geography and history of the place.

But nothing prepared us for what we found in that county in rural West Tennessee, bordering and sociologically very much like Mississippi. When we



Spartacist

Nick Lawrence



**Coming to rural West Tennessee was like going “a hundred years into the past.” Civil rights workers sought out sharecroppers in their homes to talk about voter registration drive.**

drove down from Ithaca, New York in our donated jalopy which broke down on the way, we drove a hundred years into the past, into an era that took shape after the betrayal of Radical Reconstruction after the Civil War. Technologically, socially, politically, it was an anachronism to us. Culturally, linguisti-

cally, it was like a foreign land, and we were the foreigners.

### Early Struggles in Fayette County

The civil rights movement wasn't new to Fayette. In 1959—four years after Rosa Parks initiated the era of di-



Nick Lawrence Photos

### Fayette County, Tennessee, 1964

rect action in civil rights by refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus—the first voter registration drive was started by blacks in Fayette County. It was the first one in the South. It was a very rural county, 30-40,000 people, twice as many blacks as whites. The voter registration drive was part of the broad social explosion in America which broke through the stifling reaction of the McCarthy period.

The drive met with immediate, intransigent resistance from the white population down there. Hundreds of blacks standing in the blazing heat outside the courthouse, only to get turned away from the door on which the registrar had pinned a note: "gone for coffee." But they kept trying until they had managed to register a few thousand blacks, and in the course of this built one of the strongest and most cohesive indigenous leaderships in the South in that period.

The white power structure simply refused to let them vote even after they were registered. The Negro leaders filed a suit with the U.S. Justice Department against the County Democratic Committee. Eventually they won that suit. So the whites changed tactics. The Klan, which had been founded in Tennessee in 1866, and the notorious White Citizens Council were very active in Fayette County. They circulated lists of "agitators," meaning of course blacks who had registered and whites who supported them. And basically they tried to starve them out. Blacks who had registered couldn't get groceries, gas, feed, farm supplies or medical help. They had to drive to Memphis 50 miles away for everything.

Then the evictions began. Sharecroppers and tenant farmers, whole families, were thrown off the land. In 1960 they established Tent City on the field of a Negro landowner, which brought Fayette County national publicity. Hundreds of families spent as much as two years on this land—summer and winter. The Klan used Tent City for target practice.

One of the Negro leaders, John McFerren, established a store so the Negroes would have someplace to buy their supplies. His store was the center for the civil rights movement in Fayette County.

They filed another Justice Department suit in 1960, charging 74 white merchants and landowners and one bank, ordering them to stop the economic intimidation of blacks who registered. The evictions were legally "stayed" by the court. But what really happened was everything stayed the same in Fayette County. In '64, right before we went down there, the Justice Department was again appealed to. And this was the reply: "The Negroes of Fayette County won a great victory in the courts; don't ask us now to rub salt in their wounds" (*Step by Step*, Douglas Dowd and Mary Nichols, eds. [1965]).

### The 1964 Fayette County Project

So it was the summer of '64, and 35 students, professors and others went down to Fayette. For the blacks of the county it was merely an episode in decades of struggle. For us it was a big deal.

The purpose of the project was to



work in cooperation with the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League, the black organization which had been developed during five years of struggles. The purpose was to register Negroes to vote in the coming local elections. Here was the perfect liberal test-tube case—to show that democracy works. You have this county with twice as many blacks as whites. They were going to show how the citizens could get a white integrationist elected sheriff and a black man tax assessor, and equality could come to Fayette County.

The candidates were very courageous men. The white man, L.T. Redfearn, was a 46-year-old farmer. He of course had been ostracized in the white community—they had one two-word phrase for him. June Dowdy, a black preacher, was running for tax assessor. Both were running independently. The sheriff, C.E. Pattat, was running as a Democrat.

People had a lot of courage. Through this whole period, they literally faced death. But the movement's goals were strictly limited to the framework of liberal reformism. Even within this framework, the project was a perfect failure.

Like other civil rights activists, I didn't go South as a communist. I thought I was a socialist but I didn't know much. But this summer broke my anti-communist prejudices and smashed a range of liberal illusions that I couldn't even have articulated.

The impotent strategy of the Fayette County Project reflects the liberal worldview. The strategy is self-sacrifice designed to provoke benevolent intervention of the state. But the state is not



Nick Lawrence Photos

benevolent, or neutral. The state is armed bodies of men. It exists to defend particular property forms—particular economic, political and social relations. In this case, landowner against agricultural worker.

### The Legacy of Reconstruction's Defeat

How did this system work in Fayette County? I and my coworker in my district lived with Sylvester Lewis, his wife Nora and their seven kids. They were tenants on the land, that's to say they were better off than the sharecroppers. They owned their own tools, supplies, and the fruits of their planting. They paid rent to the landowner, who lived in Memphis. Sharecroppers own absolutely nothing, but work for a portion of the crop with deductions for rent and supplies. Both are variants of the peonage system devised after the Civil War to replace slavery. Lenin called it semi-feudal, semi-slave.

During Reconstruction there was an opportunity for radical restructuring of society. The rich plantation owners had lost the Civil War. Blacks, ex-slaves, could exercise political rights in the South. Far-reaching social reform was debated, but this promise was betrayed. Northern capital made sure political control remained in the hands of the white landowning aristocracy, based on brutal exploitation of the blacks. The need was for land reform, expropriation and redistribution of the land, to open the door to any possibility of equality. Without this, slaves emerged from bondage, as the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass said, naked to the world.

In this racist society mere legal reforms like the vote or access to social institutions like schools and restaurants

could not protect the black man. Laws are easily flaunted and ultimately reversible without the economic basis. Douglass said, "The law on the side of freedom is of great advantage only where there is power to make the law respected." This was the lesson of the failure of Reconstruction and it was also to be one of the lessons of the civil rights movement. Voting can't smash the entrenched system any more than slavery could have been voted out. It took the Civil War to do that, and we still have to finish the Civil War.

At the Lewises' we eleven people slept in two rooms, females in one and males in the other. There was a kitchen with an iron stove, an outhouse a bit too close to the well. It was a shack, but I learned pretty quickly that the Lewises were pretty well-off. They had a radio. This was very important. The Tennessee Valley Authority had brought electricity to this area. Especially with most of the people we worked with being illiterate, the radio was very important. Sylvester Lewis owned a tractor. That is, he was paying on it. He was still paying on it when he got killed by it two or three years after we left Fayette County—it ran him right over. But in the other farms that we visited we saw wooden plows—mules or people hand-plowing with wooden plows. Technology seemed virtually the same as in the Civil War era. The soil was devastated by lack of knowledge and lack of money.

The schools: there was a black secondary school, called the Fayette County Training School. Schools would be integrated a couple of years after we left—that struggle began in 1966 and continued into the '70s. At this time, schools for the black kids worked on a different schedule from schools for the

white kids, according to the cotton crop. They were off one month, on one month, depending on when the kids would be needed to go pick the cotton.

I could never figure out what these kids learned in school. In fact the first night I arrived there, I started writing a letter and the seven kids were all standing around me, watching. Later I figured out that to sit down and write a letter was somehow not something they'd seen before. They could quit school any time they wanted—laws on compulsory education clearly didn't apply to them. There was no public transportation at all except the school buses, and we saw the school buses, I was told that some had as many as 90 kids in them. The white kids' school buses we never saw because we very rarely went on the paved roads.

The Southern agricultural system is frozen in time and not productive. There is not enough money to be scratched out of that dirt and by those methods. But why should this country's rulers care? If one guy makes a living out of it, the landowner, the bank, while the rest of the people work it and practically starve, that's the way the system works.

What has changed is that the black population of America is no longer mostly Southern and rural. The migrations to the North when the world wars opened up industrial jobs for blacks, the organizing of industrial unions, meant that black people got some power—as workers—to fight for social change.

You can see this movement of population in Fayette County, where there were lots of old people and lots of young people. And most of the people once they left Fayette County went to Chicago or to Memphis to get jobs in industry. They would come back as city



slickers and tell people there what it was like in the real world.

### Voter Registration Obstacle Course

Our job in the first weeks was to get people down every Wednesday to register at the courthouse. Every day we drove through the flat countryside, often with a native of the particular area, a member of the Civic and Welfare League, visiting each family and marking each scattered wooden shack on a map that we made ourselves—there were no maps. We wrote down how many people lived there, whether we thought they would come to register, whether they needed to be picked up.

There were always kids playing around these shacks—anywhere between five and twenty kids playing in the red dust or, after it rained, in the copper-colored mud. It happened that someone had donated to the project a trunkful of Emko contraceptive foam. We would sit down and talk to the women, out of sight of the men. And we found out that there was nothing these women wouldn't have done to stop having kids. They were having a baby every single year. Every one of them had a lot of kids and came from families the same size. And they all had had other kids that had died. But there was no way their husbands were going to let them use contraceptives. They told us they would get killed if their husbands found out. And in those shacks with 20 people, you can't keep a secret, there's no place to hide anything.

We got a tremendous reception. We'd drive up to the porch, get out, shake hands with everybody. It was probably, for many of those people, the first time they had talked with a white person. Frequently they wouldn't look at you for the first hour or so, sometimes they would start looking you in the eye after that—sometimes. People were intensely curious and eventually, quietly, asked all kinds of questions.

We would talk about registering, voting. They were pretty wary. Rural Tennessee was a long way from Somerville, the county seat. And Somerville wasn't anywhere black people went. Nobody had any reason to go there—it was white man's territory. And they knew the consequences.

Every Sunday we went to church two or three times. The churches were organizing centers. Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner were killed after visiting the Mount Zion Methodist Church in

Neshoba County, Mississippi, which had just been burned to the ground. But churches were also a place for release. The music was incredible. The services were very, very emotional. We were always asked to speak. Though the tone of the service was otherworldly, we could make a political speech and it was always accepted. Afterwards, there would be lots of homemade food.

There's one story that we heard in church, the minister told it. The minister asks the congregation, "OK, you all want to go to heaven?" Everybody raises their hand, except this one fellow. So he asks this fellow, "What's the mat-

ter, you don't want to go to heaven?" And the guy says, "Yes sir, I want to go to heaven, but not in the first load."

So we were trying to get the first load to register, and it was a struggle. But every Wednesday we got a few hundred people to go down and stand in the blazing heat, and a dozen people would get registered. They could take 15 minutes over one application, just writing the name. There was one aged registrar. And every week they'd been changing the rooms.

July 1, the last Wednesday to register for the election, was fairly typical. It started for us at dawn. We went around picking people up, driving them into Somerville. Some would show up, some wouldn't. By mid-morning there were 400-500 people waiting in the heat to register. We hauled 40 gallons of water

for people, because there wasn't any way we could get anything in that town. Of those hundreds, 72 were registered. There were a bunch of croppers' houses up on a hill. One day we drove up there and talked to people. And then we walked down to our car. And as we were walking down we met this notorious landowner, Mr. Petrosky, who looks a lot like some of the people in *Mississippi Burning*. We met him walking up the driveway on our way back to the car. He didn't say anything to us. But the next time we worked this road, we heard what had happened. He'd gone back to his house and gotten his chains and



Spartacist

**Waiting to register at Somerville courthouse—only a fraction even got inside to apply.**

blackjack to work people over. The sharecropper told our guide not to bring us back there. So there was good reason for people to be very wary.

On registration day we went to pick up five people in that same area where Petrosky's land was—he owned a lot of land up there. And when we got there, there was only one lady there, all dressed up in her Sunday best. She told us when they had moved in—it was a two-room shack, five adults and twenty children—Petrosky had promised the family \$50 a month, and then they were supposed to get about 75 cents per day, depending on how much cotton they chopped. They had been there several months and Petrosky had paid them about half of what he was supposed to. And they'd finished chopping all the cotton on that land. But Petrosky had

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Nick Lawrence Photos

come that day, on that morning of registration day, and talked to that family. And he'd offered every adult \$3 that day if they went and chopped another guy's cotton. In fact he ordered them to do it. It was a lot more money than they'd been making, so four of them took him up on it. The fifth was this lady. She'd hidden under the bed, until he left, because she wanted to register. So she came along with us. She was one of the several hundred who waited all day and didn't get registered.

### The FBI and the KKK

Despite five years of badgering the Justice Department with no visible results, the strategy of the project, like the strategy of Freedom Summer in Mississippi, was still to bring pressure to bear on the federal government to enforce the civil rights laws. For every violation of the election laws, for every instance of harassment of us or anybody we were working with, we duly registered a complaint with the FBI. Often we had to drive to Memphis to do so, drive the 50 miles, hauling witnesses, often waiting for hours to be interviewed. Sitting for hours staring at the Mississippi River, and that's about all we got out of it. Nothing ever happened as a result. But that was the strategy of the project.

This is from a letter I wrote at the time:

"Two of our guys were shot at. Now it's not as bad as it sounds. They were on some cropper's farm and a guy came over and said they were trespassing. So they left. The guys followed them down the road and when they reached a gas station some guys hanging around asked them to stop. Of course they didn't so the others hopped in a car and took out a shotgun and sprinkled the back of the car. They went to the sheriff to show him

the pellet marks that had been left in the dust of the back window. He leaned over, took his finger and calmly rubbing them out one by one said, 'now that's not a pellet mark, and that's not one.' The boys saved a few—also the paint was scratched in places, round little chips—and took it to the FBI in Memphis who took pictures."

One of the fellows down in Fayette, who hadn't been active before we were down there, got active during the project. Toward the end of the project, he gave a speech at one of the meetings and this is what he said:

"Some people are saying I'm going to get myself killed.... But even if I did. At least I'll be killed while I'm fighting for my rights.... But if something should happen to me, I want you to listen to me. There is something you can do about it now. You call the FBI. The FBI. They are in the phone book.... You just call them and talk to them and they will listen to you, and they will come, too. You just tell them what happened to me, and they will come. But the white people know they will come, too, so they ain't gonna try to kill me."

That's a lie. And that was taught to this guy. It was the premise of the mainstream of the liberal civil rights movement. It was also the glaring lie of *Mississippi Burning*. But the fact is that *the FBI rode with the Klan!* At the time we were working in Tennessee, an estimated one-fifth of the Klan members were FBI, supposedly "infiltrators," actually collaborators and perpetrators in KKK beatings, burnings, bombings and assassinations. They worked hand in hand with the local cops, the federal government, with the Kennedy boys.

That was known just as everyone knows in the South that the people riding under those white sheets at night are the same ones you see leaning on the

porches around the square in the day, running the town bank, the feed store, the town newspaper, the police. But illusions were deliberately promoted by civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King who wanted to tie the civil rights movement to the state and to the capitalist system. Here's what Spartacist said about the movement's reliance on federal troops and FBI:

"These same troops will be turned against them in the interests of racist oppression. The civil rights movement will then find itself witchhunted, its meetings raided and supporters arrested by the same FBI it is presently beseeching to protect it."

Now in Fayette, the croppers all had guns, everybody had guns. There was no problem about that. The question was organization and program. When they needed to, they could organize. For example, one of the things going on was that McFerren couldn't get gas for his store. Major oil companies refused to supply his store, which was the only place where Negroes in that county could get gas, for their tractors, for their cars. And during one period McFerren had an anonymous friend, a white guy—I never found out who he was—who brought him gas in the dead of night. But McFerren's tanks were above-ground. And when the whites found out that he was getting gas, they started driving by and shooting at those tanks. Well, McFerren knew how to deal with that. And stopped it. They knew about organized self-defense but it wasn't understood as counterposed to relying on the federal government, as part of another strategy. It was just another tactic.

*Mississippi Burning* leaves out the role of black activism as the motor force of the civil rights movement. But they portrayed the whites pretty accurately. Now Fayette County was a pretty conservative place. But blacks were willing to face real danger for what they perceived as betterment. The whites we had virtually nothing to do with, and when we did it was bad news. We lived entirely on the dusty red dirt back roads of the county, always willing to take off for the nearest sharecropper's shack if there was a problem. And we learned the reflex of caution every time we saw a white face.

There were a lot of incidents. You got run off the road, you got shot at, ambushed, you got arrested for trespassing. A letter I wrote at the time will give you a sense of our naiveté and the whites' mentality:

"We were talking to a woman on her porch when we saw from the next house

about five white people come screaming towards us. It was their 'damn land' and we should 'get the hell off.' One of them had a shotgun which made it seem as if they were screaming very loudly.... We told him that he looked like the most rational one and couldn't we talk to him. That got him to put down the shotgun."

People from the rural South faced incredible pressures if they became active in the movement. In her memoir, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody, then a student at Tougaloo College, described writing to her mother prior to taking part in one of the first lunch counter sit-ins at the Jackson, Mississippi Woolworth's in the spring of 1963:

"She wrote me back a letter, begging me not to take part in the sit-in.... It hurt to have my family prove to me how scared they were. It hurt me more than anything else. I knew the whites had already started the threats and intimidations. I was the first Negro from my hometown who had openly demonstrated, worked with the NAACP, or anything. When Negroes threatened to do anything in Centreville, they were either shot like Samuel O'Quinn or run out of town like Reverend Dupree.

"I didn't answer Mama's letter. Even if I had written one, she wouldn't have received it before she saw the news on TV or heard it on the radio. I waited to hear from her again. And I waited to hear in the news that someone in Centreville had been murdered. If so, I knew it would be a member of my family."

—Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968)

### Stolen Election

The last weeks of the project were spent in voter education after the registration. We went road by road, and had nightly meetings with skits and demonstrations to teach everyone, most of them illiterate, how to vote, how to read the words "Redfearn" and "Dowdy" or where those names would appear on the ballot. In the end, Redfearn and Dowdy were badly beaten in the election—it was stolen outright. Ballot boxes were stuffed, ballots thrown away, voters intimidated, polls closed, the works. And this despite the fact that we'd had a lot of national publicity for this project. There were places where the election returns showed perhaps 370 votes for Sheriff Pattat and 71 votes for Redfearn when we knew that in this parish there were something like four hundred Negroes registered and a hundred registered whites.

• The press quoted the leader of our project after the disaster of the August election:

"We spent \$16,000 on this drive to register voters and we lost all because nobody up there in the Justice Department



Spartacist

would answer their phones. The Black Muslims are down here and are talking to local Negroes that the only way to win this thing is by bullets, not votes. They say shoot the sheriff and all the other whites. How can I persuade them otherwise when they see what is happening to their ballots?"

—Salisbury [Maryland] *Times*,  
12 August 1964

Fifteen minutes away from the Fayette County seat, over in Mississippi, there was another kind of test for voter registration. They were registering people into the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party down there. The MFDP meant to challenge the Mississippi delegation at the Democratic Convention on the grounds that the MFDP delegates had actually been elected according to Democratic Party rules. And that the MFDP delegation was committed to supporting President Johnson whereas the regular Mississippi delegates were mostly for Goldwater. The thinking was that if the Democrats could be made to fight for us then we could change things—a very dangerous illusion.

Nowadays the Democratic Party is viewed, if not always with open disillusionment, then at least with boredom. Last year's Democratic Convention was more like the Ice Capades than a political convention. And if something like the MFDP had turned up there, they would have been treated as though they were the Palestine Liberation Organization. But in those days, especially without historical vision, people saw the Democratic Party as a party of progress, a party in the Kennedy image.

To me and to lots of us down there,

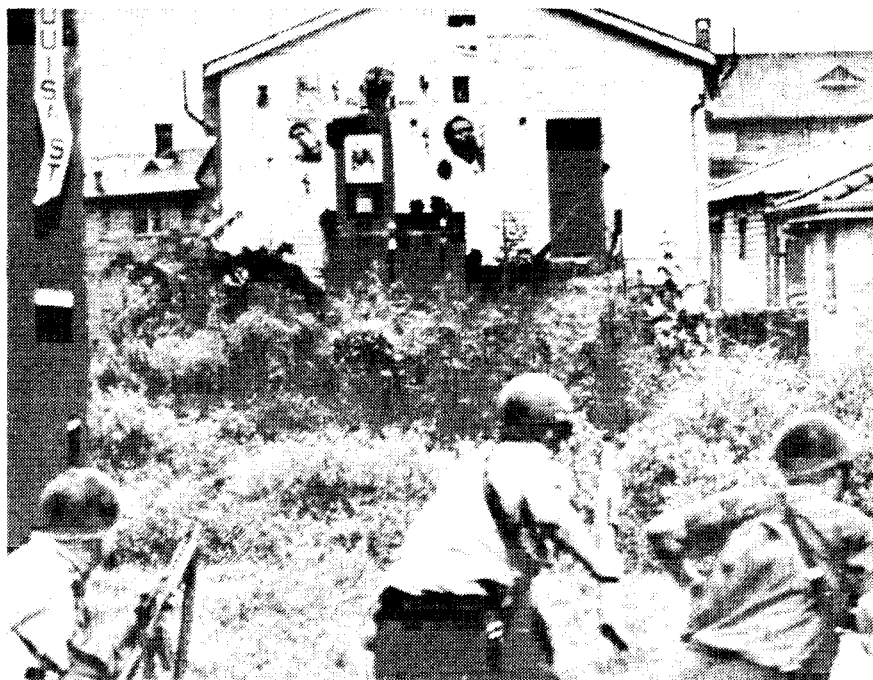
the idea that we could put pressure on the party of the Sheriff Pattats, who personified the word "Dixiecrat," to let our voices be heard—this was really obscene. And it was the Democratic Party which was fighting the Vietnam War. At the convention in Atlantic City that summer, the Democratic Party told the MFDP that they could go to hell with their 80,000 registered voters.

That the state exists to defend the established property system was proved over and over in the civil rights movement. In Fayette, there was deep polarization and violence around integration of the schools into the 1970s. In this round of the struggle, John McFerren was beaten and almost killed. Two other leaders of the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League were killed, shot—one was tortured.

Communists champion democratic rights like the right to vote. And we saw a powerful potential for turning a mass movement for voter registration into a movement for a freedom-labor party, independent of the Democrats. A movement that would not content itself with token legal reforms but would fight for revolutionary transformation of society. As a small organization, the Spartacists intervened in the South as well as the North, arguing for the right of self-defense, and also for union organizing of the Southern proletarian black and white, to link the social struggles in the rural South to proletarian power mobilized on a class-struggle program. These are the things we fought for at the time, to the extent we could. ■

Hypocrisy and Gloating After the Killing of Huey Newton

# Why Racist Rulers Targeted The Black Panther Party



AP Photos

**Black Panther Party's advocacy of black armed self-defense terrified ruling class. Huey Newton in 1970 (left). Police and FBI unleashed vendetta killing dozens, jailing hundreds: 1970 police raid on New Orleans Panther office (right) wounded seven.**

OAKLAND—The murder of Huey P. Newton, co-founder and Minister of Defense of the Black Panther Party, produced an outburst of racist gloating by the bourgeois media here as they covered up the bloody destruction of the Panthers at the hands of the cops and FBI. "Huey Newton's Fall—'Prime Minister to Bum'," headlined the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The *Oakland Tribune's* "even-handed" account labeled Newton alternatively "visionary" or "thug." The media played the theme that those who live by the gun die by the gun. Thus the *Tribune's* Andy Rooney gleefully proclaimed: "Huey Newton Was His Own Victim."

Three thousand miles from the Panthers' home base of Oakland, the *New York Times* adopted a more ambiguous posture, while peddling the same deadly lies. Dripping with ruling-class hypocrisy, a 23 August 1989 obituary kept

referring to "Dr. Newton," as if his signal achievement was to get a Ph.D. An editorial the next day on "The Black Panthers' Two Paths" refers to Newton as "one of a gallery of young 'revolutionaries'." They haughtily dismiss the young black militants who dared to stand up to the daily racist violence of the trigger-happy cops. And the racist rulers of this country trained their sights on that "gallery," as the FBI's bloody COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) gunned down 38 Panthers and imprisoned hundreds on trumped-up charges. It was this *state terrorism* that the whitewash *Times* delicately said "put the Panthers out of business."

At one time Huey Newton personified militant advocacy of armed black self-defense. The *Times* editorial states he was "eventually" let go for the killing of an Oakland cop in 1968 after a defense

campaign which attracted tens of thousands of black and white radicals to "Free Huey" rallies. Newton was acquitted for this murder rap after three trials and after spending two years in jail. The *Times* editors never mention how the cops put several bullets in his stomach, and had to be held at bay in an emergency room of a hospital to prevent them from killing him on the spot.

And naturally they say nothing about how the feds fabricated evidence and perjured testimony in order to "exhaust and demoralize" the Panthers, as a memo of the FBI's San Diego field office put it, "even if actual prosecution is not successful as far as convictions are concerned." An instruction from Hoover's HQ advised FBI agents that since the "purpose...is to disrupt...it is immaterial whether facts exist to substantiate the charge." From May 1967 to December

1969, the Panthers were hit with 768 arrests and almost \$5 million in bail bonds (see Brian Glick, *War at Home* [1989]).

To his dying day the Oakland cops hounded the former Panther leader. "I rode with him, and police still followed him," recounted a friend of Newton's. "We were both almost 50 years old, but everywhere we'd go, there would be police behind us" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 August 1989). When Newton was murdered on 22 August 1989 by a 25-year-old drug dealer, you can bet that they were whooping it up at the Oakland station houses and elsewhere.

The *Times* claims that "with black berets atop wide afros, black leather jackets, shotguns and rifles," the Panther militants "looked like white America's worst nightmare come to life." Perhaps it was a shock at the time for many whites and blacks that a black organization had sprung up that made Martin Luther King look like Mother Teresa. But which part of "white America" experienced the Panthers as its "worst nightmare" to the point of killing them in their beds while they slept, shooting up their headquarters and unleashing the FBI murder machine to exterminate them? It was the rich capitalists and their political representatives in the halls of Congress, in the Pentagon, the CIA and FBI, who mobilized their repressive state apparatus to kill Panthers.

But it's not only the racist rulers who fear and hate militant black struggle against racist attacks. Commenting in the 23 August 1989 *Oakland Tribune* on the demise of the Panthers, "progressive" black columnist Brenda Payton pontificates that "there was a tragic flaw at the heart of the organization. It sprung out of a fundamental arrogance that would prove fatal." The Panthers, according to Payton, should have learned "the experiences of the black labor organizers of the '30s, black communists and the Southern community activists who laid the ground work for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr." But while King and the social-democratic and CP labor organizers subordinated blacks' demands to the Democrats, the Panthers' militancy and efforts at independence from the racist bourgeois parties won the admiration of many who had fought during the civil rights movement to bury Jim Crow in the South.

### Rise and Fall of the Panthers

The Black Panther Party represented the best of a generation of radical black militants who courageously stood up to the racist ruling class and its kill-crazy



Doug Harris

**SNCC-organized Lowndes County (Alabama) Black Panther Party in 1966 stood for independence from the Democrats and for self-defense against racist terror.**

cops. They sought to strip away the deeply felt sense of powerlessness of the oppressed black masses, particularly in relation to the impunity of the cops in gunning down blacks on the streets of Oakland, and throughout America. Their original name was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

The Panthers were a direct response to the failure of the liberal, pro-Democratic civil rights movement embodied in M.L. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference to make any serious dent into the bedrock of black oppression when that movement went north in the mid-'60s. As early as Birmingham in 1963, masses of blacks had begun to junk King's "turn the other cheek" philosophy in battles against Bull Connor's cops and police dogs. Beginning with the series of ghetto explosions in the North against police brutality, dilapidated housing, inferior segregated schools and medical care (Harlem '64, Watts '65, Newark and Detroit '67), the most militant blacks embraced the call for "black power," seeking to find a way out of the racist hell of American capitalism.

Many of these militants were inspired by Malcolm X. Although he was not a Marxist basing himself upon working-class struggle, Malcolm advocated armed black self-defense against racist attacks, and opposed the deceitful, treacherous and venal Democratic and Republican politicians. When Malcolm X was assassinated in 1964, the bourgeoisie and their mercenary press like the *Times* gave a big hurrah.

The Panthers—heirs of Malcolm X—first gained national attention in 1967 when they showed up armed at the California state capitol in Sacramento. They came to protest the Mulford bill,

which was referred to in the local press at the time as the anti-Panther bill. Before that it was legal in California to carry a loaded weapon in public as long as it wasn't concealed. The Mulford bill (named after a politician who resided in Piedmont, a wealthy white enclave in the Oakland Hills) was drafted to disarm the Panthers who had begun carrying guns and also law books to stay the hand of the racist cops. For daring to assert their democratic right to bear arms, the racist state arrested, beat, jailed scores, underscoring that it is the bourgeoisie which holds state power and asserts its "right" to monopolize the means of violence.

The *Times* says that the Nixon crowd took the Panthers' "fighting words" as the reason to wipe them out, while in the next breath implying that the black radicals provoked armed "confrontations" with the police. The white ruling class and its murderous thugs in blue implemented a savage campaign to destroy what then FBI director J. Edgar Hoover called the "greatest threat to the internal security of the U.S." A predawn raid by the Chicago police and FBI killed Illinois Panther leader Fred Hampton (who was asleep in his bed) and 17-year-old Mark Clark. A few days later a police SWAT team launched a three-hour, predawn barrage against the L.A. Panther headquarters, aiming to kill Geronimo Pratt in his bed. The racist American bourgeoisie fears armed black self-defense because it challenges the state's monopoly on the means of violence, raising the spectre of a general unraveling of entrenched bourgeois power.

Despite the genuine radicalism and personal courage of many militants, the Panthers never found the only road leading to the destruction of the racist bour-

geois order. As self-declared "revolutionary nationalists," the Panthers shared with the predominantly white, student-centered New Left a rejection of the centrality and strategic social power of the integrated labor movement in the struggle against brutal racial oppression and imperialist war as well as capitalist exploitation. Instead they proclaimed the lumpenproletariat, especially streetwise ghetto youth, as the vanguard of the American revolution. As we wrote shortly after the Panthers underwent a violent and fatal split in 1971:

"To avoid the Marxist contention that the organized working class is the key revolutionary element, the Panthers came up with the theory that black lumpens are the revolutionary vanguard, and that all employed workers, black and white, have been bought off by the ruling class."

We warned that "a political movement which isolates itself in a social milieu hostile to normal workaday society must become irresponsible, individualistic, and ultimately cynical and contemptuous of the mass of working people" ("End of the Black Power Era," *WV* No. 4, January 1972). In the end, the Panthers were destroyed not only by police terror from without but a murderous internal factionalism inflamed by COINTELPRO provocations.

A key role in the rightward degeneration and demise of the Black Panthers was played by the cynical operators of the Communist Party, especially its legal apparatus. Beginning in 1969, the Stalinists influenced the Panther leadership in launching a "united front against fascism," an attempt at political collaboration with the liberal establishment against the Republican right. A few years later Newton & Co. were talking about the relevance of the black church and black capitalism. In 1973 Bobby Seale ran for mayor as a Democrat, and in 1976 Newton joined the NAACP. Even today Oakland black Democratic mayor Lionel Wilson can praise the "good side" of the Panthers for the work they did in garnering crucial votes in his first election campaign.

In the late '60s-early '70s, the Panthers were so sacrosanct in radical circles that any criticism of them was met with shrill accusations of racism. In the face of the widespread hero worship of Newton, Eldridge Cleaver and other leaders, the Spartacist League polemicized against the Panthers' notion of lumpen vanguardism and argued that black nationalism, even in its most radical form, was a utopian dead end. We also denounced their physical gangsterism against other leftists and challenged their rightward plunge into the Democratic Party. At the same

time, we staunchly defended Panther militants against state repression, then and now.

### Free Geronimo Pratt and Other Former Panthers!

The 24 August 1989 *Times* editorial praises those former Panthers who have "metamorphosed into members of the black middle class and the establishment," such as Bobby Seale and Bobby Rush, who is a Chicago alderman. This is the correct path according to the Sulzbergers and today's misleaders of labor and blacks. They lament that "Huey Newton could never quite make the turn" from the "prison of the streets." Then he could have been added to the "gallery" of yesterday's black radicals who came in off the streets to join hands with the white ruling class and their apologists. In exchange for personal perks, they now line up blacks to "work within the system," by relying on the racist capitalist state and the Democratic Party of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of the internment of Japanese Americans, the party of Vietnam, of Bull Connor, Boss Daley and Ed Koch.

Meanwhile, their former comrades like Geronimo Pratt, Dhoruba Moore, Ed Poindexter and David Rice, like Mumia Abu-Jamal who is on death row, have rotted in prison for years. It is no mere coincidence that those ex-radicals who have made their peace with racist capitalism have hardly uttered a word in defense of their former comrades, especially in regard to Geronimo Pratt, the foremost class-war prisoner in the U.S. today.

Pratt was in the Cleaver "urban guerrillaist" wing in the '71 split as opposed to Newton's pro-Democratic wing. At the time Newton bought the vicious COINTELPRO-engineered lie that Pratt was out to kill him and take over the Panther leadership. He refused to testify at Pratt's frame-up trial for murder and withheld the Panthers' substantial financial and legal resources from the defense effort. Finally, about a year ago Newton admitted that if he had supported Pratt in 1972, the former L.A. Panther leader "wouldn't be in prison today." Nonetheless, the liberal/reformist luminaries who attended Newton's funeral, making speeches and slapping hands, could shout "Free Huey" as he lay in his casket, saying nothing about the remaining Panthers tortured by long imprisonment in the various prison hellholes in the U.S.

### Smash Racial Oppression!

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense represented the high-water mark

of black radicalism in recent American history. Despite the Panthers' macho image, a large number of young, radicalized black women were active in the organization, although they played little role in the leadership due to the party's pervasive male chauvinism. Tragically, a whole generation representing thousands of young black militants was isolated in the ghettos, cut off from the only road to black liberation: the road of integrated working-class struggle led by a multiracial Leninist-Trotskyist party.

Many blacks reacted to Newton's death with a sense of sorrow and admiration for what the Panthers stood for. Millions yearn today for a nationwide radical black organization militantly championing black freedom. Black sociologist C. Eric Lincoln observed sadly: "It's hard to discover what you might call a movement today. The sense of movement is certainly not as pronounced as it was 20 years ago or even 10 years ago. The movement has become ...moribund" (*San Francisco Examiner*, 27 August 1989).

Ultimately, Newton and the Panthers failed because black liberation is impossible without smashing the racist capitalist system. Today more than ever, in the face of the genocidal policies of the ruling class, race- and class-conscious black workers and youth must reject the pro-capitalist illusions and schemes of misleaders who counsel support to the Democrats, suicidal race confrontation and the despairing politics of separatism. It is a sign of the absence of any credible black leadership that admitted FBI informers like Al Sharpton, demagogues like Farrakhan and Sonny Carson, or black overseers like Jesse Jackson are presented as "leaders" of black people—they are *obstacles* to liberation.

To wage and win the fight for black freedom, the key is leadership—a *revolutionary party* willing to mobilize black, Hispanic and white workers in defense of doubly oppressed minorities and for the common class interests of all workers. The potential for powerful anti-racist class struggle has been shown in exemplary actions initiated by our small socialist organization to stop KKK provocations, bringing out thousands including black unionists and youth in America's major cities. To carry these self-defense struggles forward to lasting victory, we need a multiracial workers party, fighting to break the power of the racist system forever and achieve the integration of all races in an egalitarian, socialist society. ■

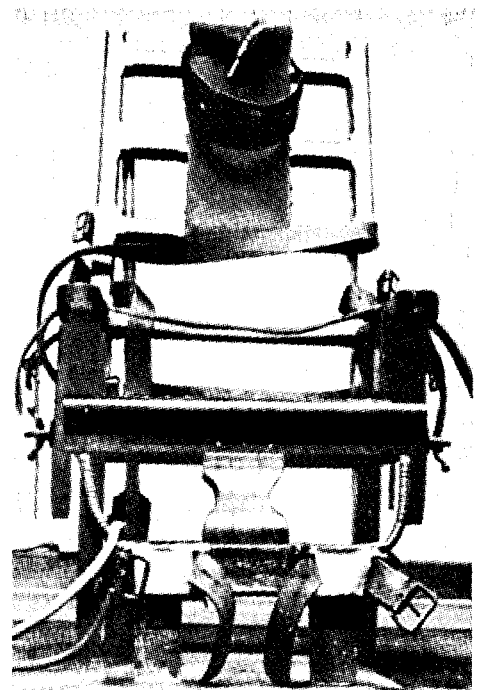
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# Racist Death Penalty Hysteria

## Stop "Legal" Lynching!



Workers Vanguard



Laffont/Gamma

**Militant contingent at Chicago protest against death penalty, 8 April 1989, fights to save Mumia Abu-Jamal, black political prisoner on death row in Pennsylvania.**

As part of its campaign to save Mumia Abu-Jamal, the Partisan Defense Committee held a forum in New York City 29 April 1989 on the theme "Stop Racist Legal Lynching—Abolish the Death Penalty!" We reprint below the edited speech given there by Charles Brover, co-chairman of the PDC. Brover began his remarks quoting a scene in Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain's powerful indictment of a racist society.

Huck is lying again. This time to Aunt Sally about a boat accident.

"We blowed out a cylinder-head," he said.

"Good gracious!" replies Aunt Sally. "Anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky," says Aunt Sally, "because sometimes people do get hurt."

Mark Twain had arguably the best, most sensitive and accurate ear of anyone who listened and recorded authentic American speech and gesture. He imitated, described, and through characters like Huck and Jim undermined the vocabulary of racial politics in America. The popular language heard by Twain was an everyday expression of the antebellum South. Black slaves were not persons, but property. It is in that tradition of racial politics that the death penalty in America takes place.

Today the code is somewhat different. But it is often as clear as the face of Willie Horton.

In this country it all begins with slavery. Slave codes officially made killing a slave a public offense, but in fact it was very rare that a white person was ever convicted, or tried, for killing a

black slave. And the state criminal codes reflected this. Every Southern state, writes Kenneth Stampp in *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), defined a substantial number of felonies carrying capital punishment for slaves and lesser punishments for whites. And it was the spirit and sometimes the letter of the law of the slave codes that the KKK restored when it put the torch to Reconstruction after the Civil War.

At the heart of Jim Crow was lynch law terror. In the latter part of the 19th and into the 20th century a black person was more likely to be the victim of a lynching bee than the court's decree. Black journalist Ida B. Wells worked on a campaign against lynch law terror. She wrote about the people who lynched Henry Smith. How his body was dragged to Paris, Texas. How people put him on

a trestle, put hot irons into his quivering flesh. The thing to understand is that her anti-lynching campaign was trying to get black people *into* court—never mind equal justice. There was no court proceeding for Henry Smith, there was no evidence. They just picked him up, dragged him off and lynched him.

But when blacks were able to be admitted into courts, the tradition continued: racist legal lynching. One thinks about Louisiana, in 1946, where they had a portable electric chair and they used to drag it around in a pickup truck. And they brought it to a place in St. Martinville, Louisiana and two white drunks get out of the pickup truck, they go in, they grab a 16-year-old kid named Willie Francis, they strap him into the chair, they turn on the juice from their portable generator. It doesn't work. Willie jerks in pain, the chair skitters across the floor. The drunks go back in, they say, aw, the chair doesn't work. Willie's flesh is smoking and they say, aw, we'll kill him with a rock.

### Racism and Capital Punishment

Well, we don't have the portable electric chair today. But legal lynching continues. The death penalty is still largely a Southern institution. Southern death chambers have accounted for the vast majority of executions since 1977, when they started killing people again. Florida and Texas account for half of those. Although never more than 12 percent of the population, black people accounted for more than two-thirds of all U.S. executions between 1930 and 1967. Of the 455 executions for rape, nearly all in the South, an overwhelming 405 were black men.

These were some of the facts that the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund brought to the Supreme Court in 1972 in the famous Furman case. Even the Supreme Court decided, this death penalty is "capricious," "freakish" in its application. They encouraged the states to write laws that would be less freakish, so that they could continue the death penalty. In 1976 the Supreme Court okayed a formula for what it called "guided discretion." Since then 37 states have reinstated the death penalty. And today some 2,100 prisoners wait on death row. What has changed? Nearly half of death row is black and Hispanic. Most of the blacks on death row were convicted of killing whites. Yet no white person has been executed for killing a black person, with one exception in 1944.

This was the clear pattern of racism that was at the heart of the McCleskey



**BRING BACK  
THE  
DEATH PENALTY.**

**BRING BACK  
OUR POLICE!**

**Real estate/casino king  
Donald Trump buys full-page  
ads pushing for cop terror  
and the death penalty.**

AP

case, brought to the Supreme Court in 1987, the most significant of the recent death penalty challenges. It not only raised the point of racial bias, it proved it. Warren McCleskey was a black man convicted of shooting a white cop in a furniture store in Georgia in '72. The lawyers for McCleskey used the material of a University of Iowa law professor named David Baldus who, along with

done and so forth, and concluded that convicted killers of whites are still 4.3 times more likely to get the death penalty than killers of blacks.

What's interesting about the response of the Supreme Court was that they didn't deny the figures. But there's another way to handle statistics, which is to say they don't matter. And that's what the Supreme Court did. Writing for the majority, Justice Powell said, "At most the Baldus study indicates a discrepancy that appears to correlate with race. Apparent discrepancies in sentencing are an inevitable part of our criminal justice system." Clearly, what he thought was at stake in this case was that McCleskey's claim taken to its logical conclusion "throws into serious question the principles that underlie our entire criminal justice system. If we accepted McCleskey's claim that racial bias has impermissibly tainted the capital sentencing decision, we would soon be faced with similar claims as to other types of penalty."

Racism is shot through the entire system. What the Supreme Court was saying was that it didn't matter. Didn't matter that had McCleskey shot someone black instead of white he probably wouldn't be on death row. The court said, this is the way things work in America, what's the big deal?

And truly, we ought not to be surprised. Black life is held cheap in the USA. It is discounted when cops pull out their guns on kids in the streets. Cheap when it comes to forcing black mothers and kids to starve in the name of workfare. Worthless when it comes to diseases that presently wrack the inner cities and threaten to become a selective plague with AIDS. And those minds the TV



Workers Vanguard

**Charles Brover, PDC co-chairman.**

some first-rate statisticians, showed that there was overwhelming racial bias in the death sentence.

The raw figures showed that when the murder victim was white, the defendant was eleven times more likely to be sentenced to death than if the victim were black. The Baldus study controlled some 230 variables. They took out the condition of the crime, past record, what was



ads say are terrible to waste, they're being ground down in schools that prepare them for an economic and social wasteland.

### Death Penalty Abolitionists

Mark Twain heard it all. Anybody poor? "Naw, no'm, just some inner city kids." Anybody drop out? "Naw, just some black kids." Anybody get AIDS? "No, not any more, just some drug-using minorities." It's what Mumia Abu-Jamal was thinking about in an article he wrote recently. He says that when the Pennsylvania Supreme Court affirmed his conviction, he felt "stunned," and then he reconsidered. He writes, "I've often studied America's long history of legal lynchings of Africans. I remember a front page of the *Black Panther* newspaper, bearing the quote, 'A black man has no rights that a white man is bound to respect,' attributed to U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney, of the infamous *Dred Scott* case, where America's highest court held neither Africans, nor their 'free' descendants, are entitled to the rights of the Constitution."

It took a bloody civil war before black people were recognized in law as persons. It took 200,000 black Union soldiers in armed revolutionary struggle. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution stated that right for the first time. But Twain may have heard better. We can rely on his ear; he heard the language of the courts, the press, the government, the Ku Klux Klan. Post-Reconstruction America was to bring back the *Dred Scott* "standard" from the graves of Fort Wagner and Fort Pillow, where black men gave their lives for a promise of freedom unfulfilled.

We on this platform are death penalty abolitionists. It's one of those apparent accidents of language that we are identified with those abolitionists of the 19th century. The demand for the abolition of the death penalty today is part of the tradition of struggle for black equality in America.

I want to make it clear that although racial politics define the character of the death penalty in America, the PDC would oppose it in any case on principle. As internationalists, we oppose it everywhere it exists. In Iran. In the Soviet Union—where the permanent introduction of the death penalty in 1923, as opposed to executions in civil war conditions, accompanied the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet workers state.

We do not accord to the state the right to say who will live and who will die. It



Library of Congress

**Dred Scott: Supreme Court ruled in 1857 that blacks "had no rights which a white man was bound to respect." Placard issued by Boston abolitionists in 1851 warned blacks against slave-catchers.**

is not only the arbitrary character of the application of the death penalty, but the penalty itself. Even the Supreme Court has said death is different. One of the most obvious differences is that it's final. This penalty has already produced the deadly irony that in one case there was an appeal to the Supreme Court. They had enough votes to sustain the appeal, but not to stay the execution. So you had the interesting proposition in which the appeal was alive, but they killed the defendant.

A couple of recent examples have startled even some of the death penalty advocates. The Randall Adams case, about which a strong documentary film called *The Thin Blue Line* was made. Adams was thrown in jail for a murder of a policeman. In the sentencing hearing they used a psychiatrist. He testified all over Texas and would always say the same thing: This person has to have the death penalty, because if you don't give him the death penalty, he will go out and kill again. This psychiatrist earned the name "Doctor Death."

Erroll Morris heard about Doctor Death, thought he'd make a film about him. So he goes down to Texas, finds out that Doctor Death did interview, for ten minutes, Randall Adams, and testified to the court that Adams showed no remorse, he should be killed. The problem is, it was hard for Randall Adams to show remorse—because he didn't do it. And that's what this filmmaker discovered. He made the film, exposed the fact that the killer was someone else, and Randall Adams, after 12 years, some of it on

**CAUTION!!**

**COLORED PEOPLE**  
**OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,**

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the

**Watchmen and Police Officers**  
**of Boston,**

For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as

**KIDNAPPERS**  
AND

**Slave Catchers,**

And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the Welfare of the Fugitives among you, *Keep* them in every possible manner, as so many **HOUNDS** on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

**Keep a Sharp Look Out for**  
**KIDNAPPERS, and have**  
**TOP EYE open.**

**APRIL 24, 1851.**

death row, was released.

Just this week, they had to release a guy in Florida. James Richardson, a Florida agricultural worker, black, was in for 21 years for killing his children. First he lost seven children, then they put him in jail for 21 years. Sound familiar? Turns out, of course, he didn't do it. Someone else did it and confessed. So they let him out.

It's only accidental that these guys weren't killed. "Legal technicalities" kept them alive. In one case the sentence was commuted, in another case a federal court reversed an earlier decision. The most substantial study, by Bedau and Radelet, says that of the 343 cases of innocent people assigned to death row, 23 have been executed this century. I just saw an Amnesty International leaflet that puts it at 85. The point is, we don't know how many.

### Torture and the Death Penalty

But we are also against the death penalty for the guilty, because it is a cruel and unusual punishment. The death penalty is part of a tradition of torture. From the middle of the 12th century, torture remained a part of social and legal life until the end of the 18th century. By 1874 Victor Hugo was able to say, with both authority and good cause, torture had ceased to exist. Torture had become a focus for legal and moral arguments against the old order. But these arguments reflected the bourgeois social and economic revolution.

In the language of Michel Foucault's fascinating book, *Discipline and Punish*,

*the Birth of the Prison* (1979), the system of torture punished the body whereas the purpose of the new system was to gain social control. The creation of great warehouses and investments in commodities and machines on a greater scale than ever before in history demanded an armed repression of wider potential criminality. So you have the need for the ubiquitous police, a constant surveillance. And of course the key institution—the prison.

The criminal was to be removed from society instead of made a feature attraction in the theater of cruelty. So we have the spectacle of modern contemporary executioners looking for a painless way to kill. They surround the victim with doctors, warders, chaplains, social workers, until the last minute. For a while they touted lethal injection, until they spent 45 minutes stabbing some guy, looking for a vein. With electrocutions the organs sear, the flesh burns, the eyes pop out. Modern death penalty advocates shudder at the prospect of making executions public: Oh no, kill them, but don't hurt them, and don't let the public see.

The modern death penalty thus combines residual elements of an older tradition of torture and personal vengeance with a campaign to increase coercion through official terror.

Now having said all that about the death penalty, the problem is, we abolitionists then look at polls in the newspaper. And it tells us that 85 percent of the American public's for it. It's hard to get 85 percent of the American public to be for anything. What's happening is that the population is responding to a wild rise in violent crime, rooted in the violent conditions of life. They don't feel safe, and they're not safe. They hide behind Fox locks and barred windows while a brutal criminality seems to rule their neighborhoods and housing projects. A young black male today faces a greater chance to die violently on the streets than a U.S. soldier did in the rice paddies of Vietnam.

Things have changed in the public debate on the death penalty. We used to win some of these debates saying that the death penalty doesn't deter. We used to point out that that evidence is very weak: Canada abolished the death penalty and their murder rate went down; Florida and Texas instituted the death penalty, the murder rate goes up. A number of psychologists have even advanced the theory that the death penalty actually encourages a particular psychopathic behavior in which a person seeks his own death and

absolution in a kind of state-sponsored suicide.

But the question of deterrence is no longer at the heart of the public debate over the death penalty, as anyone knows who has had this debate recently at work or school. People say, "So what?—they've got to be killed, at least it will deter one killer." Arguments about the probability of making fatal errors are met with: "At least we'll get some of them." We used to be very successful by pointing out that the death penalty would only further brutalize society. Would you want to cut off the hand of a thief? Castrate a rapist? And when our opponents seemed to be eye-for-an-eye retributionists, we would ask, would you want the state to beat up the man convicted of assault? But now many people hear the rhetorical questions and give it thoughtful consideration: "Cut off his hand? Well, maybe."

### Police, Prisons, Death Chambers

We need to understand that this response is more than an expression of a brutalized society, but includes some legitimate fear and outrage over truly terrible crimes. The problem is, the population on the one hand is desperate to stop crime, and we have a state and a media which is directing it in ways that are most dangerous.

Take the recent incident in Central Park. You have a rape—you don't have to pull any punches on the horrible character of that crime, or on the socio-pathology of it, in order to see the racist

handling of it, what it's being used for. There were 3,412 rapes last year. But this one fit a particular pattern they like. The people involved in this were portrayed as "wolf packs," animals outside the human community. The Howard Beach lynch mob, which went out, actually ran someone out on the street and got him killed, they were called "Howard Beach residents."

What happens when you have this kind of crime is that the state says, "Give us more power. We need more police." That's what the politicians say, that's what the media wants. But with more police and more crime, they get a problem with what these days is called the "ecology of crime and punishment." More cops go out and make more arrests, but the system can't handle them all. Processing is a mess, prisons are overloaded. The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with the exception of South Africa. Educators point out that, as it is, we spend more on prisons than we do on schools.

Having criminalized what the lowest strata of society does, the New York City criminal system is overloaded with drug arrests. Judges say there's no more room in prison for all the drug users and other criminals. Some judges are calling for an early release program. The judges don't even have room for themselves. They sit on top of file cabinets and in corridors, trying to get a little higher than the defendant to maintain the theatricality of the courtroom. Ed Koch wants prison barges. He wants to re-create the Ship

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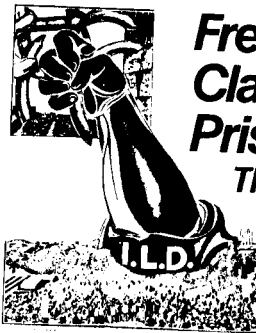
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### Partisan Defense Committee

### CLASS-STRUGGLE DEFENSE NOTES

NUMBER 12 \$1.00

November 1980



**Free All  
Class-War  
Prisoners—  
Their Fight is  
Our Fight!**

International Labor Defense graphic (1927) shows the power of the organized labor masses tearing down the prison bars

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of Fools for prisoners, perhaps plying the Hudson and East Rivers, trying to dock.

While there's no evidence that legal sanctions have any deterrent effect on crime, there's plenty of evidence that social and economic inequality has the most profound effect on crime—poverty in the midst of great wealth and the consequent unraveling of the social fabric. Anatole France is credited with the definition of the majesty of the law as the equal right of both the rich and the poor to sleep under bridges and beg for bread. One could add in the negative, in that spirit, it is to equally deny the right to steal that bread. Engels, writing on the condition of the working class in England, asks, "What inducement has the proletariat not to steal? It is all very pretty and very agreeable to the ear of the bourgeois to hear the 'sacredness of property' asserted; but for him who has none, the sacredness of property dies out of itself."

There are 2,100 on death row tonight. There are calls to make more and more crimes into capital crimes. Think about "drug-related" murder, how many people that's going to send to death row. Even at the present rate, there would have to be an execution every day for about ten years. And there is every indication that the road into death row is being widened. More blood, more mistakes. Enter Supreme Court Justice Rehnquist, "Judge Death." His solution? Cut the appeals, hex *habeas corpus*, let's get on with it. There's tremendous pressure on defense lawyers, who are increasingly characterized as legal polluters, clogging up the criminal justice machinery with the gunk of the rights of the accused and prisoners. On the street, it means that cops have even quicker trigger fingers. No point in arresting them, they say, for "revolving door justice."

The danger here is the assumption, developed by the state, fostered by major institutions, that there is a layer of the population which is worthless and parasitical. There is no point in deterrence because they cannot be educated and corrected in any case. They are permanently outlaws. That is what is behind the apparent contradiction that Americans demand more prisons but refuse to spend any money on them. Death is the twisted logic of this cycle of crime and punishment, the official ritual of this impulse to genocide. We can almost hear the chanting of the Spanish Falangists, "Long live death!" It is always expressed most openly by the fascists. At the time of the last execution in California, in 1967, American Nazi Party führer

**New Jersey's Hudson County jail hellhole. The "land of the free" has close to a million prisoners—except for South Africa, the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world.**

Workers Vanguard



George Lincoln Rockwell paraded in front of San Quentin with a placard which read simply: "Gas—The Only Cure for Black Crime."

### **Save Mumia Abu-Jamal!**

Before I leave you, I've got to say something about the Partisan Defense Committee. We're a defense organization with a difference. We're for the class struggle. And we have an emphasis on both words. We understand that what happens in the courtroom is not all there is. And these days we're calling ourselves a legal and social defense organization and working on civilian aid to people in Jalalabad. We worked for the British miners when they were on strike. We see defense work in the larger context of social struggle. Unlike Amnesty International, we consciously take a side in that struggle. Unlike the ACLU, instead of defending Nazis and KKK terrorists, you're going to find us on the streets protesting fascist provocations.

Tonight we are here as part of a campaign to save the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal. In legal defense work there are often cases which focus the larger struggles. We believe that Mumia Abu-Jamal is a case which illuminates the politics of racism and the death penalty. At his hearing it was perfectly clear that he was sentenced because he was a Black Panther, because he was part of the best of a generation and COINTELPRO missed shooting him in his bed. I urge you to

read the latest issue of *Class-Struggle Defense Notes*. And I think that when you do, and you hear his voice, you will know why the state wants to silence that voice with electric current. The fight to save Mumia is the fight to abolish the death penalty.

Finally, let's remember the anti-slavery abolitionists in this context, and the greatest of them: Frederick Douglass. A voice that helped wake up a nation and galvanize a movement. Here was a system that said a slave could not be a man. And then there was Frederick Douglass. How could anyone have owned Frederick Douglass? How could he be bought and sold like a cow, or a horse? Listen to Mumia's voice. It is Mumia's humanity we hear in his voice, see in his resistance to the prison authorities, read in his autobiographical notes and anti-fascist statements.

Mumia's fight is ours. It is part of that larger struggle for an economic and social order that will develop a new anthropology, in which man at last becomes a creator and subject of society. Then surely those new men and women will look back at this archaic punishment system during the death agony of capitalism with something of the same horror with which we look back at the torture systems of the Middle Ages.

In defense of all of our rights, we ask you to join with us, to help in the name of justice for our class, our future, our humanity. ■



## Black Political Prisoner on Death Row

# Join the Fight to Save Mumia Abu-Jamal!

On 14 October 1989, 200 people participated in a united-front rally in Philadelphia demanding "Abolish the Death Penalty! Save Mumia Abu-Jamal!" Co-sponsored by the Partisan Defense Committee and State Representative David Richardson and held in facilities provided by the Temple Pan-African Studies Community Education Project, the rally was addressed by spokesmen of different political viewpoints, including Mumia's wife Wadiya, Harold Jamison of the New York Amsterdam News, representatives of organized labor, death penalty abolitionists, and activists of the black and Puerto Rican communities.

We print below excerpts from the remarks by Charles Brover, PDC co-chairman.

As we meet here this afternoon, we can almost hear the anguished cry of desperate death row hunger strikers from the lower depths of Huntingdon prison. They have stopped eating. How else can they protest? The prison has shackled their bodies and tortured their spirits. How can they fight against the humiliating treatment, the assault on their human dignity? The death in life? What gesture can articulate their particular horror? Mumia is there, a death row prisoner now on hunger strike, but always a journalist of political passion. He listens, he reports, speaks, and of course, he writes: "An inmate said: 'I'm tired of being treated like a dead man. I live. I breathe. I feel. I'm still a man'."

Like the prisoners massacred at Attica who began their famous demands with the preamble, "We are men—we are not beasts," the death row prisoners at Huntingdon assert their living human beings even if it means starving. And it is Mumia who finds the words, helps to shape the purpose of the cries of rage, the demands for human dignity and social justice. It is Mumia—death row

political prisoner—the Mumia so many of you know—who is still, even on death row, the voice of the voiceless.

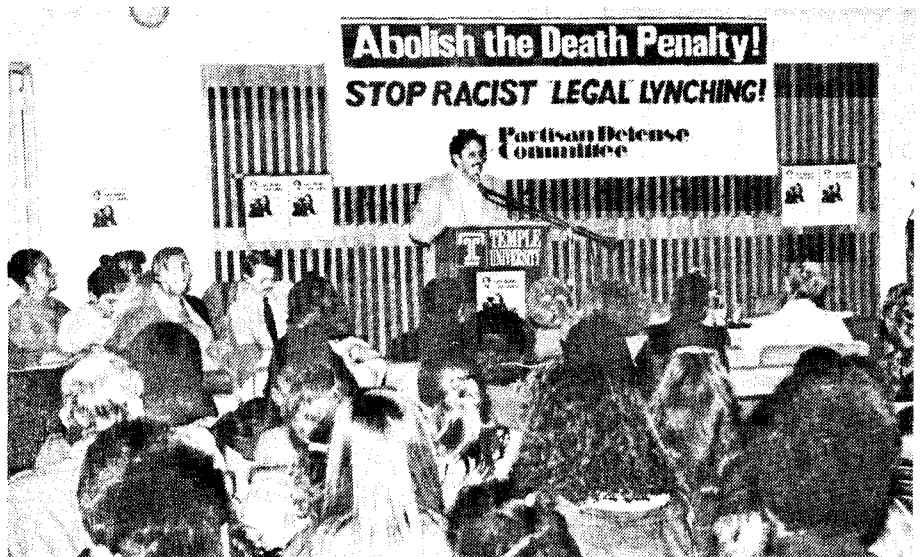
That these prisoners must say they are alive and human, that they must insist on it with their lives, gets us to the core of the death penalty in America. But to get to it now, we must go back to slavery, to the Middle Passage and before. For there is tradition in this country for marking a people as non-human. The slave master killed his black property with legal impunity. After the Civil War, the KKK and the state put the torch to Reconstruction and restored the lethal spirit of slavery with Jim Crow lynch law.

By 1977, when they brought back the death penalty, the Supreme Court was again ready to proclaim that black life was worthless. That those folks on death row, or those kids on dope alley, aren't

really alive anyway. That's why we call the death penalty "legal lynching." It is the state doing the murderous work of Jim Crow.

And the lynch rope always comes out faster for the fighter, the one with an attitude, the one whom Richard Wright called Bigger. The lynching is a social act meant to intimidate and brutalize a whole people. Look at Mumia—because Mumia is the death penalty in America. Would he be on death row if he were not black? Not a Black Panther? Not a MOVE supporter? Not a powerful voice for the oppressed?

We of the Partisan Defense Committee oppose the barbaric death penalty on principle everywhere it exists. Not only is it irrevocable for the many innocents killed, but the death penalty harnesses the ancient tradition of arbitrary personal



October 14 Philadelphia rally brought organizers from black, labor, civil liberties and student groups in common fight to "Abolish the Death Penalty! Save Mumia Abu-Jamal!"

cruelty and torture to the ruthless machinery of the modern capitalist state.

So if the death penalty has symbolic value, this is its value: the state decides who lives and dies. The state decides which lives are expendable. And that means that mainly black lives are expendable. For decades, ghettos were the home of reserve labor forces, useful for depressing wages. But decaying capitalism has destroyed the basis for jobs; black youth are looking at 50 percent joblessness and up. The inner city has been declared, in the words of a recent *U.S. News & World Report* cover story, "Dead Zones." Hear that language and remember the prisoner on death row at Huntingdon crying out: "I am not dead. I live. I breathe. I feel." And we begin to understand what is at stake in the struggle against the death penalty in racist America. In the death penalty we have the impulse to genocide.

The death penalty is the signal element in the drive for increased state repression, part of a wider social and political pattern. If the death penalty is the ultimate symbol of increased state repression, the so-called "war on drugs" is most publicized. It means more cops, more arrests, more prisons, more police terror, more death—officially in legal death chambers, and semi-officially on the streets. The "drug czar" wants the death penalty for drug-related murder. But the criminalization of drug use means that already half the prisoners are convicted of drug-related crimes.

And Judge Death, the head of the Supreme Court, Rehnquist, wants to get rid of *habeas corpus*, to get it going sooner. He's embarrassed even the federal judiciary. Halls of government and editorial pages are already ringing with calls for concentration camps, military takeovers of ghettos and an all-sided barrage against democratic rights, the rights of labor, a renewed appetite for censorship and regimentation, attacks on the right of privacy in everything from drug-testing to abortion.

The selling of the death penalty and increased repression as an answer to crime is a dangerous lie. The U.S. has close to a million prisoners, with the world's highest incarceration rate (next to South Africa). And the incarceration rate does not and *cannot* reduce the rate of crime, which continues to explode, particularly in the inner city.

The systematic oppression—the joblessness, the hopelessness—which is at the root of the crime and punishment cycle *cannot* be solved this side of a social revolution. And because they have no solution to the problems that particularly beset those people now called the

**5 November 1988  
Labor/Black  
Mobilization in  
Philadelphia  
stopped  
KKK/skinheads.**



"underclass," this state can *only* repress—and that they do with a vengeance. The only response of the state to the cycle of crime and violence bred of poverty comes out of the barrel of a gun. It is a little like the St. Croix disaster writ large. If people need food, send in the cops; if they need medical attention, send in the army; if they need homes, jobs, education, opportunities and hope, then drive them off welfare and open up the prisons; and if they protest, fire up the electric chair.

This campaign for death and repression depends upon convincing people that there is no other way out, that their options are closed within the capitalist system which produced the problems. So people have been led to believe that they must choose between the violent hoodlums who terrorize their housing projects and the cop squads which turn those same projects into minimum security prisons. These no-win options are supported by *both* major capitalist parties.

That is why both Republicans and Democrats call for more cops and prisons, more military intervention against drug use. That is why all those Democratic mayors—black or white—cannot do otherwise than to be foot soldiers in capitalism's class war against the oppressed. And that is as true for a mad bomber like Wilson Goode as it is for others who might like to do better.

The way out—the way to victory—is the way of the class struggle. The powerful, integrated labor movement in action for its own interests and the interests of all working people and oppressed. It means a reinvigorated workers movement including a black and red leadership which can fight to win, all the way to a workers government.

The PDC is partisan on the side of the

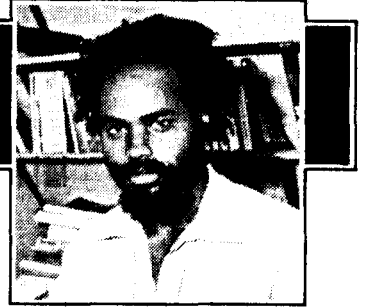
working class internationally, whether we're out collecting funds for the defenders of Jalalabad, striking miners in Britain or class-war prisoners at home. We defend those who have been victimized in capitalism's relentless class war: Geronimo Pratt, set up by COINTELPRO state terror; South African anti-apartheid fighters; Salvadoran trade unionists. The PDC sends a small monthly stipend to a number of class-war prisoners.

This meeting is another example of what is needed. You know that all of us on the platform are called death penalty abolitionists. I think we can all be proud of that name. "Abolitionist" is a name resonant with meaning. Some of the early abolitionists thought anti-slavery was a moral matter; others thought it was political; still others imagined it was merely military; some thought it was hopeless. I think that the former slave and great revolutionary Frederick Douglass saw further and deeper than the rest—for he saw it would take a social revolution to crush the slave system and he organized to make it happen.

But all of the abolitionists did important work. They had their political fights and differences, but they fought to get rid of slavery. I'm glad we have so many speakers here this afternoon. We need to carry out this campaign together. As we wrote in our April issue of *Class-Struggle Defense Notes*, devoted to Mumia's defense:

"Our campaign seeks to bring the force of labor, minorities, death penalty abolitionists, human rights organizations into the struggle to save his life. 'Save Mumia Abu-Jamal!' Let it ring out in union meetings. 'Free Mumia!' Let's hear it at international conferences, college campuses, churches. 'Mumia Must Not Die!'... Let his name resound in the working-class movement mobilized to fight for all class-war prisoners." ■

## From Death Row, This Is Mumia Abu-Jamal



# Winter of Discontent

Winter's tight claws grip the eastern and central U.S., a season of terror for far too many of the nation's estimated three million homeless. The so-called "City of Brotherly Love," Philadelphia, has given sharp notice that the city's growing homeless are not to be counted among the "brothers" worthy of "love."

America's 5th largest city, headed by lame-duck mayor W. Wilson Goode, started the frosty season by slashing its homeless budget by an estimated \$15 million—in a time when the number of homeless is steadily growing.

Philadelphia became the first major American city to substantially cut into homeless programs.

Does the fact that Philadelphia's mayor is Black mitigate this social crime against the helpless homeless?

Not to those struggling to brave winter's frosty breath by sleeping in cardboard boxes, in city subways, or in parks, who are over 80 percent African-American.

Mary Scullion, of a South Philadelphia homeless women's shelter, opined, "Goode clearly sides with the business community—he's serving their interests" (*Guardian*, 11 October 1989).

And there's the rub.

Goode's initial election was a time fat with hope, with African-Americans responding with joyous affirmations to Goode's victory speech query, "Will you help me? Will you help me?"

Two terms later, in the waning months of the Goode administration, the question echoed by Goode is now heard upon the chapped, chattering, chilled lips of homeless, reduced to beggary, dirty hands outstretched to all passersby, asking "Will you help me?" Goode's response? A cold, succinct "no."

Of the growing Black homeless horde, how many thousands pulled his election lever, when he strove to make history?

In Dixie's "seat of the Confederacy," one wonders how Blacks there will feel, years later, after L. Douglas Wilder's razor-thin squeak to victory (as governor-elect of Virginia)?

How too, will African-Americans feel in NYC, home of David Dinkins' thin squeeze to the mayoralty?

More importantly, how will Africans fare?

Black political gains make good, soothing headlines that assure us things are getting better.

It is easy to ignore the nameless, the poor, the people so easily relegated to the nebulous "underclass."

But they are *there*—in subways, under bridges, in parks, and in icy alleys, covered by cardboards—and too many of them, Black men, women and kids.

If Blacks are at the bottom of the pot, how will the election of "ideological moderate(s) committed to the maintenance of the status quo" change their deplorable condition?

Blacks elected to positions of power assume, as Scullion noted, the interests of big business, industry, the ruling class, not the ruled. What better example than Goode; than Governor Wilder, who embraced the racist Virginia death penalty, claiming it's now fair, to get elected? Bureau of Justice statistics show that, from 1930 to 1981, "Old Dominion" executed 92 men—17 whites; 75 (an astonishing 80 percent!) were Blacks—21 Blacks for rape! *This* is a fair, equitable system?

Notwithstanding political eruptions in Eastern Europe, capitalism, as practiced here in the West, is a reality of Darwinian cruelty.

The U.S. Census Bureau's conservative estimate of poverty, some 13.5 percent of Americans, means 31.5 million people are in dire need. A study by the Joint Economic Committee of Congress suggests a more honest figure, over 24 percent, is closer to the truth—nearly 55 million people in poverty. Black politicians who mimic white politicians represent no change, in an age aching for change—for new strategies—for fairness—for equity.

Politics, it has been said, is 90 percent symbol.

In this era of crisis, people need more than symbols—they need substance.

This system offers no solution, as it *is* the problem.

There is but *one* solution—revolution!

10 December 1989

**Mumia Abu-Jamal was well known in Philadelphia when he was framed up in the killing of a cop in December 1981. An articulate and passionate journalist, known as the "voice of the voiceless," he was also president of the Association of Black Journalists. The city's rulers and cops wanted this voice silenced.**

But even from Death Row, Mumia's voice is heard, championing the rights of black people and the poor who are thrown on the scrap heap of this vicious and profoundly racist capitalist system. In addition to *Workers Vanguard*, Mumia's columns have been published in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Atlanta Inquirer*, *Savannah Herald*, *New York Big Red News*, *San Francisco Sun Reporter* and *Metro Reporter*, and *Jackson Advocate*.

# Tribute to the May 13th Martyrs

## by Mumia Abu-Jamal

A police-constructed bomb floats down, from the whipping blades of a state cop helicopter, to erupt into a fireball, to explode into a firestorm of black death.

By dawn, smoldering rocks remain.

By daybreak, scattered skeletons sit amidst oceans of ashes.

May 13th, 1985 remembered—the state bombing of men, women and babies of the MOVE organization in Philadelphia.

Several years later, this day of infamy is marked by silence, not the silent moment of tribute, but the silence of stealth, the silence of the state, the silence of death.

Today, we break that silence, with a celebration of memory to the May 13th martyrs—good, strong rebels all who stood tall in resistance to the evils of this hypocritical system.

Radical 'Rad, bright-eyed, coffee-colored, whose rapid-fire rap could inspire, or agitate, depending on his intent;

Dimpled, freckled-face Tree, full of infectious laughter, whose giggle could trigger a landslide of fun;

Shy Rhon, who spoke softly, but with an underlying firmness that would bend steel;

Visionary Vinnie, whose deep voice could rise to a whistling cackle, in a matter of minutes;

Greybeard Ray, quiet, steady, dependable;

Little baby-boy Tomasso, who loved the simple, childish joy of running, the wind whipping thru his thick, straight, brown hair;

Naturalist Minister, Nick, committed, serious, soft-spoken Teacher;

They, and more, tried to escape the Oven of Osage, and were forced back, back, back into a certain fiery death, by police marksmen. A foul cloud still rises over Osage—the stench of a state set-up, and cover-up, at all levels of government.

The state's mission—to liquidate MOVE, using FBI-supplied high explosives; ATF-provided high-calibre weapons; and state police-manned & governor-approved air support, by helicopter.

MOVE's mission—to expose the naked injustice inherent in this system; to show the utter barbarity of this baby-killing, bloodthirsty system; and to bring attention to unjustly imprisoned MOVE men and women, some serving up to 100 years.

Both the system and MOVE can claim successes and losses.

The system showed it could plan, and execute premeditated mass murder of MOVE rebels; MOVE could point to this and other state atrocities to show its description of the deeply unjust nature of the system was quite true. Only in a MOVE case could U.S. and District Attorneys claim inability to define a crime as clear as this premeditated case of gov't terrorism.

### The Massacre of MOVE



13 May 1985

UPI

Just as this system of injustice could not avenge these crimes committed by the system, people cannot expect the system to portray them as the worthy martyrs they are. This, only the people can do.

For my part, I offer this poem; "May 13th Remembered":

*Red tongues of flame lick angry night skies;  
Politicians play blind and deaf to the cries—  
Skin blisters, hair ablaze,  
Smoking babies stumble, in a daze;  
Firemen watch, as flames go higher,  
Cops shoot, adding human fuel to the fire;  
"No One Must Escape!" they bellow in rage,  
Sending Africas back into burning Osage;  
And what did state/federal judges decide?  
"Mass murder is no crime, no one will be tried!"  
So the Bombing remains, without resolution,  
Clear to all—U.S. "justice" is an illusion.*

From Death Row, this is Mumia Abu-Jamal.

# Black History and the Class Struggle

A Spartacist Pamphlet 25c

## Black History and the Class Struggle



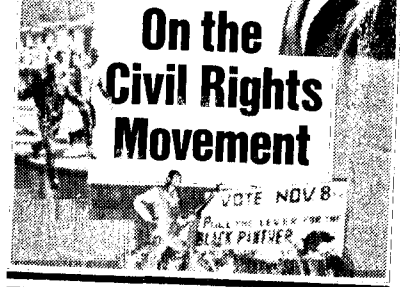
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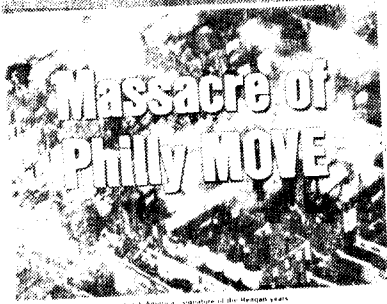
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