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Which Side Are You On?

U.S. History in Perspective

"I spent 33 years and four months in active service as a member of our country's most agile military force--the Marine Corps. . .during that period I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street, and for the bankers.

"I was a racketeer for capitalism. . .I helped make Mexico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped to make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in 1915. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras 'right' for American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested."

--Major General Smedley D. Butler

This is a short account of the history of our people unvarnished by imperialism's ruling ideology. It should be read as a preface to further study.

U.S. HISTORY IN PERSPECTIVE

prepared by Noel Ignatin

The capitalist system of the U.S., and indeed of the entire western "civilized world", arose out of the extermination of the Indians and the enslavement of Africans. The 18th century witnessed the establishment of the colonies in the West Indies, on land looted from the aboriginal population. It was slavery which gave value to these colonies. It was the wealth produced in these colonies, as well as the slave trade necessary to supply them with human labor, which gave rise to modern commerce. It was this commerce which gave rise to modern industry and the exploitation of wage labor.

The chief economic role of the North American colonies was that of supplier of provisions to the great slave plantations of the West Indies. The flourishing growth of the colonies in their grisly role of concessionaire to the island "factories" gave rise to certain contradictions between the colonial population and the dominant class in Britain, the mercantile bourgeoisie. This class, utilizing the crown as its tool, began to take measures to restrict the growth of colonial trade and manufacture, and especially to cut off trade between the colonies and Britain's chief rival in the Caribbean, the French regime in Saint Domingue.



The death of Capt. Ferrer and his crew during the slave rebellion, led by Joseph Cinque aboard the Amistad, off the Cuban coast, 1839

The oppressive weight of these economic restrictions and the political measures taken to enforce them was felt, to one degree or another, by broad social strata in the colonies. The War of Independence was a truly liberating, truly revolutionary war. Nevertheless, its limitations, led as it was by the representatives of social strata whose interests rested ultimately on the exploitation of labor, were indicated in the order issued by General Washington forbidding the enlistment of "any stroller, Negro, or vagabond".

As soon as it became clear that independence was achieved, the propertied classes moved to put the brakes on the popular movement, and to centralize power in a coalition of wealthy commercial and agrarian interests. It was a time of economic depression, when poor, debt-ridden farmers were taking over the autonomous state governments and, in some cases, as under Daniel Shays in Massachusetts, breaking out in actual armed rebellion. Against such a background, the men of property met to hurry together and push through (over widespread popular opposition) the Constitution of 1787, which was the written expression of the compromise among the propertied and the exclusion of the propertyless.

THE IRREPRESSIBLE CONFLICT

The ruling classes of the new republic were eager to cut themselves in for a greater share of the bloodstained loot derived from West Indian slavery. Thus, Jefferson delayed in establishing normal diplomatic relations with Haiti, the only other independent republic in the western hemisphere, and was involved in maneuvers together with the French to restore slavery to that heroic island.

The founding fathers held differing views on the slavery question; generally speaking, it had not matured to the point where it demanded resolving. However, as cotton production surged upward and the slave system expanded west, there arose a struggle for control of the federal government between the industrial capitalists of the north and the agrarian capitalists of the south.

The purchase of Florida, the Seminole Wars (disguised slave raids), the Missouri Compromise, the annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, the filibustering expeditions in central America, the Fugitive Slave Law and the Dred Scott decision, and lastly, the de-facto reopening of the slave trade—these were the mileposts of the successive reduction of the federal government into the slave of the slave-holders.

Each one of these southern victories was matched by a corresponding growth of northern opposition, appearing under different parties and slogans—Liberty Party, Free Soil, Kansas Civil War, the Republican Party and Harper's Ferry, where John Brown made his raid.

Thus there emerged the "irrepressible conflict": on the one side southern capital, whose only means of expansion was the increase of the territory under slave cultivation; on the other side northern industrial capital, which came to regard slavery as an impediment to the growth of the internal market.

The war opened with the south fighting to take slavery out of the union and the north fighting to keep it in, while restricting its growth. The southern poor whites, while bitterly hating the large slaveholders, generally regarded the expansion of the slave system as their only hope of escaping from poverty by someday owning slaves. The northern white workers and western farmers generally favored the exclusion of slavery (and free Negroes) from the territories, and also feared emancipation of the slaves, whom they saw thrown in competition with them.

As the war progressed and a number of developments brought the northern bourgeoisie to the realization that slavery was, in fact, the central issue of the war and that the north had no hope of victory as long as slavery stood unchallenged, Lincoln's policy shifted from constitutional to revolutionary. The decisive role in the northern victory was played by the black people themselves who, after 1863, furnished the entire increase in northern military strength, and who, in carrying out their general strike in the south, wrenched their labor from the grip of the slave power and placed it at the disposal of emancipation.

Faced with the danger of the restoration of the slave power after the War, northern capital was forced into an alliance with the forces of the abolition-democracy, led by Stevens and Sumner. This alliance was expressed in the 14th and 15th amendments and the federal occupation of the south—the period of Reconstruction.

This period is the most maligned and distorted in American history; yet it was the period of greatest social advance. Former slaves and poor whites sat with the representatives of northern industrialists in southern legislatures; they passed laws—public education and health, equitable taxation, standards of labor—which served the interests of the common people.

REDEFINITION OF BLACK LABOR

To the northern capitalists, the essence of Reconstruction was the redefining of black labor as neither free nor slave. As far as they were concerned, this redefinition was basically accomplished with the 13th amendment and the breaking down of the Black Codes. Any measures beyond that were forced on them by southern recalcitrance. For the demands of the black people for land, education, health, and democracy, the industrial bourgeoisie cared not a fig, as nearly a century of their undivided rule has shown. Thus, in 1877, federal troops were withdrawn from the south, legally elected state governments were violently overthrown, and the freedmen were left to the tender mercies of white-supremacist mobs.

The attitude of northern labor toward these events was generally one of disinterest. Immersed in what they regarded as their own struggles, northern laborers, as a whole, were never able, in the words of DuBois, "to see in black slavery and reconstruction the kernel and meaning of the labor movement in the United States." The great historic significance of Nat Turner, John Brown, and Frederick Douglass is that they represented the direct intervention of the popular masses in the labor question at its crucial point; the great historic tragedy of these heroes is the failure of the rest of the down-trodden, especially among white Americans, to rally around their banner.

For this shortsightedness, labor paid dearly and is paying yet. The federal troops which were withdrawn from the South in 1877 were hurled against the railroad strikers in Pittsburgh the same year. And thus stood industrial capital, proud and swollen, in full control of the state, its opponents lying bleeding under the combined attacks of Klan rope and federal bayonet.

The next decades brought the most rapid growth of modern industry, as the industrial bourgeoisie, unfettered, cast out railroads to span the continents, dredged canals to join the waters, and erected smokestacks to blacken the skies.

The labor movement developed further two contradictory tendencies which had been present within it from its birth: on the one hand, sharp struggles against capital; and on the other hand, the tendency of white laborers to enter into tacit agreements with capital to preserve white supremacy and their own position as favored slaves. Thus, the same period which witnessed the historical general strike of 1877, the organization of the Knights of Labor, the strikes in the Pennsylvania coal fields (which led to the legal murder of the Molly Maguires—labor organizers), the eight-hour-day movement (out of which grew the Haymarket Riot and the hanging of Albert Parsons and four others) also saw white labor shamelessly collaborating with capital to exclude blacks from the railroads, Southern textile mills, many mining areas, and trades generally. In 1886, Jay Gould, robber baron par excellence, could boast with some justification that he could "hire one half of the working class to shoot down the other half".

THE ISSUE IS POVERTY

A generation after the Civil War, a new movement arose among poor Southern farmers which challenged the rule of the railroads and Northern bankers who were looting the South. The movement's most prominent and colorful spokesman was Tom Watson of Georgia. Taking as its rallying cry his words that "The issue is poverty, not color," the Farmer's Alliance and People's Party brought black and white poor together and, in the election of 1892, carried four states. Once again, however, racial solidarity and the lure of white-skin privileges proved too strong. The Southern

During HAYMARKET, Chicago workers striking for 8-hour day return fire of cops, May 3, 1886



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THE "AMERICAN CENTURY"

Relations between the U.S. ruling classes and the darker people of the world had never been other than exploitative, even during the progressive period of developing capitalism. The original wealth of the bourgeoisie, on which was based further accumulation, had been derived from land stolen from Indians and labor extracted from Africans. The sabotage of the first Pan-American Congress in 1810, the Monroe Doctrine, the wars with Mexico—these and other incidents testified to the predatory nature of U.S. capitalism from its earliest days. The end of the 19th century brought a change in the character of this piracy. Competition among small manufacturers gave rise to monopolies, by the process of elimination of the weak; and the monopolists, having rebuilt the whole country in their image, driven by the need to make maximum profits, now began to look outward for places to which they could export capital and peoples whom they could enslave.

The first places to feel the weight of Yankee expansionism were Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Panama and China soon followed, to be followed in turn by others. The darker peoples of the world must give way to white supremacy.

The old slaver had evolved into the "civilized" extortioner of super-profits. No longer did he put a price on Indian scalps, the better to rob them of the land. He just shut the remnants of the Indian tribes into concentration camps that he euphemistically called "reservations". No longer did he subject the Africans to the torture of the "middle passage" aboard a slave ship. He just tortured the Africans right at home, in their own continent. He boasted that he was against the slavery of man, and introduced the slavery of nations. He swore that no longer would he profit from the slave trade, and introduced the drug traffic as an integral part of commodity circulation and exchange.

Populists, capitulating to pressure from Western elements in the party, represented by William Jennings Bryan, abandoned the black poor and rejoined the Democratic Party. In a few years the Populist movement degenerated into the worst type of race-baiting and demagoguery.

The last third of the Nineteenth Century witnessed two developments of prime importance. The first of these was the rise of U.S. imperialism; the second was the birth of the Afro-American Nation.

U.S.: TWO NATIONS, NOT ONE

At the same time that the U.S. ruling class was confidently expanding outward, internal developments were giving rise to a new phenomenon destined to be the Achilles' heel of U.S. imperialism. The black ex-slaves, kidnapped from a hundred diverse African peoples, and excluded from direct integration into the American nation during the period of its greatest vitality, began to develop in a new direction. Thus, by the end of the 19th century, there existed within the borders of the U.S. not one nation, but two: a dominant white nation, and a subjugated black nation, groaning under the heavy burden of colonial oppression.

The expansion of industry after the Civil War and the simultaneous escalation of the federal policy of genocide toward the Indians created both the need and the possibility for a rapid increase in population. This increase came primarily from European immigration, which reached a peak in the decade before World War I.

The new arrivals were "welcomed" with bitter exploitation in sweatshop, hearth, and mine. They responded with a labor movement which reached new heights of militancy and political awareness. Most notable in this period were the strikes of the Western Federation of Miners, affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies), under the leadership of Big Bill Haywood; the 1912 strike of workers of thirty nationalities at Lawrence, Massachusetts, in which women played a prominent role; and the building of the Socialist Party, which in 1912 gave Eugene Debs, a former railroad worker, almost a million votes for president.

Yet once again, that movement was kept "within the family" by the general inability of revolutionary elements within it to recognize the essence of the labor question in the degradation of 10 million landless black toilers in the South and the exclusion of blacks from the minimal rights of citizenship which were being won for the immigrant white workers. The Socialist Party, including its left wing, was never able to go beyond general appeals to black and white labor to join together in the fight against capital.



LIBERATION MOVEMENT GROWS

One good development during this period was the increased participation of working women in struggle. On March 8, 1908, thousands of mainly immigrant women demonstrated in New York City for the right to vote and an end to child labor and sweatshop conditions.

This period also witnessed the birth of the modern black liberation movement, under the leadership of W. E. B. DuBois, Monroe Trotter, and others. The Niagara movement, which was later taken over by liberal whites and transformed into the NAACP, marked the first major challenge to the doctrine of black submission preached by Booker T. Washington.

Rivalry among the different imperialist robbers of the west over who would have the lion's share of the colonial plunder led to the outbreak of world war. The U.S. entered in 1917, to save its partners, Britain and France, from defeat. The U.S. and its allies emerged victorious, but something new was added; the solid chain of world capitalism was broken by the Russian Revolution.

LABOR STRUGGLES BLOODY

Following the war and the bloody labor struggles in steel, meat-packing, and mining, which were met by military suppression and wholesale deportation of foreign-born workers, and following the rapid rise and decline of the Garvey movement among black people, U.S. capitalism entered on a period of partial and temporary stabilization. The economy boomed during the twenties (except for such troublesome areas as farming and mining), as production skyrocketed under the impetus of the introduction of new machinery and methods.

And then, in 1929, the bubble burst. The drive for maximum profits, the same force which had created the boom, brought the economy to a virtual stand-still, as 17 million were thrown out of work. The working people, recovering from the illusion of permanent prosperity, responded to the misery by launching a series of great demonstrations and battles for unemployment compensation, equal rights for black people, and resistance to fascism, which reached their peak in the organization of 5 million workers in basic industry into the CIO.

For the first time, black workers, who were by now present in northern industry in large numbers in the unskilled categories, were organized into unions. Yet the basic pattern of inequality remained untouched.

An important role in these events was played by the Communist Party, which had been born in 1919 out of the revolutionary wing of the old Socialist Party.

As the liberal sectors of monopoly, represented by FDR, granted certain reforms and began to take measures to end the depression, illusions of peace between capital and labor once again gained strength among the workers. These illusions were expressed first of all in the reluctance of the CIO to pit itself against monopoly capital in the stronghold of reaction, the South. Thus were the seeds planted for the post-war emergence of the white labor bureaucracy as an arm of the state to control the workers.

Like the first war, the second world war was brought on by imperialism's drive for expansion. But this time there was a new element: the struggles of the colonized and oppressed people for liberation on a higher plane than ever before.

The dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan put the world on notice that the U.S., unscarred by the war which ruined Europe, intended to step into the shoes of Germany, Italy, and Japan, take over the colonies of its British, French, and Dutch allies, wipe out socialism, and make itself the sole master of the human race.

THE EAST WIND PREVAILS OVER THE WEST WIND

Hardly had the monopoly bourgeoisie embarked on this ambitious plan when they were met with three great blows. The first of these was the victory of the Chinese Revolution, followed by the Korean War, in which, for the first time in history, U.S. imperialism was defeated—and by a formerly subjugated, non-white people.

The second great blow to U.S. imperialism was the Cuban Revolution.

The third and perhaps most shocking blow was the great upsurge in the freedom struggle of the Afro-American people, which can be traced to the day in 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, when Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the bus to a white man. This great movement of U.S. imperialism's first slaves, while it is intimately linked with the African, Asian, and Latin American anti-colonial struggles, carries extra weight for this country; a half-century of economic development, while failing to liquidate the black concentration in the South, has made the black worker a vital and direct part of the labor force wherever wealth is created. It is impossible to over-estimate the significance of this fact. The black liberation movement, aside from bringing the flames of anti-colonial revolution into the living room of the imperialist bourgeoisie, has thrust up before the bench of every laboring man and woman the sharpest formulation of the age-old question of the emancipation of labor—which side are you on?

SUGGESTED FOR FURTHER READING:

The following books, which should be read critically as part of an independent study program, provide a good follow-up to this pamphlet and basis for further study.

- Eric Williams: Capitalism and Slavery
- W. E. B. DuBois: Black Reconstruction
- C. Vann Woodward: Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel
- Charles H. Wesley: Negro Labor in the U.S.
- Bill Haywood: Autobiography
- Harry Magdoff: The Age of Imperialism.
- Boyer and Morais: Labor's Untold Story

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