

**George Breitman**

## **How A Minority Can Change Society**

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THE year 1963 was the most eventful in the history of the American Negro struggle. As it ended, people all over the country were stopping to assess what had happened, to think over what was done and what was not done, what was accomplished and not accomplished. Clifton DeBerry, the Socialist Workers party candidate for President this year, had an opportunity at the end of 1963 to make a coast-to-coast tour of most big northern cities and to learn something about the current thinking of Negro militants. He told me one of the things he had observed was the difficulty in getting across the idea about how much the Negro people can do even though they are in a minority, about how much they can do on their own, alone and unaided if necessary. He noticed this difficulty in speaking with Negro trade unionists, but not only them. He felt a lot more attention has to be paid to ways of explaining, in a logical, convincing manner, how much a minority is capable of accomplishing. He felt that misunderstanding on this point is one of the reasons why the idea of an all-black political party has not yet caught on with more Negroes.

Why is it so hard for many Negroes, even militant Negroes, to grasp the full potential of determined minority action? I would say there are three reasons:

First, the teaching, the influence, the propaganda of the whole capitalist system from cradle to grave are aimed at brainwashing the people; at convincing them, among other things, that minorities can plead and beg, but cannot do anything significant, cannot accomplish any big changes, until they have the consent of the majority. Above all is this idea burned into the minds and souls of Negroes, whose history is distorted or denied, and who are made to feel not only that they are a minority, but an insignificant minority, who have never amounted to much by

themselves and who, without the stern supervision or benign direction of the great white fathers, would hardly know how to flush a toilet. In other words, for Negroes to comprehend how much a minority can do they must buck everything drilled into them from the beginning of childhood; they virtually have to make a revolution in their thinking.

There is a certain irony in these things taught by the capitalists because the capitalists are a minority themselves — in fact, a much smaller minority than the Negro people. Yet this capitalist minority controls the whole country, lock, stock and barrel — its wealth, its means of production, its political structure — and therefore is a living refutation of what it tells us about the limits on what a minority can accomplish.

The second reason why it is hard to see the truth about what a minority can do is that the present Negro leadership, almost in its entirety, is enslaved by the ideas promulgated by the capitalist class, repeats and spreads those ideas, and does everything in its power to discourage the mass of the Negro people from taking steps genuinely independent of the white majority.

A third reason is that the radical movement, virtually the whole radical movement with the exception of the Socialist Workers party, although it approaches questions from a different standpoint than that of the ruling capitalist class, has failed to comprehend the essence of this question, and instead of promoting and encouraging both theoretically and practically an understanding of the dynamics and potential of minority action, in some ways even discourages it. An example is their attitude toward the Freedom Now Party. I do not know of a single organization in this country claiming to be Marxist or socialist or communist that supports the Freedom Now Party, except the Socialist Workers Party. The Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Progressive Labor Movement — all are either flatly opposed to, or feel very uneasy, about the development of an all-black political party independent of the power structure and of the two major parties. And if you trace back the causes, you will find them to be most unMarxist, unsocialist and uncommunist failures to grasp the revolutionary implications of the independent struggles of the Negro minority.

I WANT now to examine some typical arguments by the present Negro leaders against such independent action. When the Freedom Now Party was organized in Michigan a few months ago, the press was very much concerned about it. And every “big name” Negro who came to Detroit for several weeks thereafter was immediately buttonholed by the press and invited to make some statement on, or rather against, the Freedom Now Party.

One of these was Rev. Martin Luther King, who obliged with the following statement:

“I am opposed to anything or any party that teaches separation of the races because I am for integration. If the party is designed to get more Negroes interested in politics, fine; otherwise I can see no good that can come from an all-black party. One-tenth of the population will never be able to dominate nine-tenths.”

In this statement I think Rev. King is guilty of counterposing “separation of the races” and “integration” in a completely false and unwarranted way. The Freedom Now Party does not

“teach the separation of the races.” It recognizes that this is a society where the races are separated in fact, and attempts to utilize the separation that has been imposed by capitalism in order to change society and do away with the discrimination made possible by this imposed separation. King is well aware of this. He is a preacher, the head of a church which happens to be all-black. He does not reject or oppose this church because it is all-black. He knows that there is nothing racist about this church being all-black. It is the result of living in a racist society. And he works through this all-black church and tries to build it, at the same time that he advocates integration and seeks to utilize this all-black organization to promote integration.

Now why can't an all-black party do the same thing that an all-black church does, that is, take advantage of the separation created by this racist society in order to weld together the black victims of racism so that they can work to end racism altogether? Why not? Why is it permissible in King's eyes for Negroes to pray together, but not permissible for them to join together in political action in the way they find most effective for ending their oppression? Shouldn't King, if he is logical and consistent, propose that Negroes give up their all-black churches too because they are not integrated? Posed this way, King could reply, “But we have an all-black church because it's the only kind available to us.” And the answer of the Freedom Now Party could be, “Yes, and an all-black political party is the only kind available to us that we think has any chance of solving our problems.” So King is confusing rather than clarifying the real relation between “separation” and “integration,” which are not necessarily opposites at all, since the formation of all-black organizations and institutions may actually be a means of achieving the goal of “integration” instead of being in contradiction to that goal.

King's other remark was even more revealing: “One-tenth of the population will never be able to dominate nine-tenths.” Maybe not, although I've already pointed out that the capitalists, a minority of less than one per cent, dominate the other 99 per cent of us. Anyhow, that's not the issue posed by the Freedom Now Party. It is not the Freedom Now Party's goal for the Negro one-tenth to dominate the white nine-tenths. Just the opposite — its goal is to keep the white nine-tenths from dominating and oppressing the black one-tenth. *How* to do this — that's the real difference between King and the Freedom Now Party. Must the minority adapt itself in its methods and tempo to the prejudiced majority, just because it is a majority, and not do certain things because the majority will not like it? Or, can the minority end the domination of the majority by acting with complete independence from the majority ideologically, organizationally, politically — and *only* by acting independently? King prefers not to discuss this real difference. That's why he misrepresents his opponents' position with irrelevant talk about the inability of one-tenth to dominate nine-tenths.

### **Randolph's Position**

Another noted figure who came to Detroit at the time was A. Philip Randolph, Vice-President of the AFL-CIO and President of the Negro American Labor Council. He too dutifully came forward with a statement against the Freedom Now Party, from which I'll read just the first two sentences:

“Racial isolation in any form cannot register any influence on American political events. It is completely foreign to the political thoughts and actions of America.”

It could be pointed out that what Randolph calls “racial isolation,” in the form of all-white organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council, has registered plenty of influence on American politics. But I think it may be more useful to stress that in his eagerness to damn the Freedom Now Party, Randolph here is really damning himself. By “racial isolation” he means all-black organization for the purpose of ending the isolation foisted on Negroes by a racist society. Randolph is so blinded factionally that he has forgotten his own role, the thing for which he will probably be best remembered; for it so happens that next to Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad, Randolph is the American Negro leader who did the most in this century for what he now calls “racial isolation,” that is, all-black organization.

The first March on Washington Movement, which Randolph organized in 1941, was all-black, and Randolph was foremost in insisting that it be all-black. Even though it did not materialize in a march, because Randolph yielded to Roosevelt and called it off at the last minute, that first call for a March on Washington in 1941 nevertheless accomplished more than the interracial march that took place last August, because it forced Roosevelt to issue the first FEPC order, which is more than the 1963 march accomplished. Instead of “isolating” the Negro struggle, I think it can be said that that all-black organization, small and imperfect though it was, did more to influence American life than any interracial movement has done since.

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HOW do you influence the course of events anyway? Is it done by strict adherence to the procedures and forms approved by the forces in power, or by following the rules they lay down? All experience, American as well as “foreign,” testifies to the contrary. As long as you abide by their rules, either in the way you organize or the way you fight, they know they have little to fear from you and pay you little attention. The only valid test for all-black organization is this: does it at this time and under these circumstances help or hinder in mobilizing the masses for uncompromising struggle? It doesn't matter if whites, liberal or conservative, don't like it and call it all kinds of names. What counts is what the black masses think about it. If they think it is good, if it enables them more effectively to organize for struggle, then it can have a shattering impact on present-day American society and politics. Influence can be wielded in more ways than one, and that which helps the masses to organize is most “influential” in the long run.

I will cite only one more example of the kind of reasoning employed by Negro opponents of independent minority action. Also attacking the Freedom Now Party was Alex Fuller, Vice-President of the Detroit AFL-CIO Council. He said:

“We can continue to make gains only by working with people of good will. It is a serious mistake when minority groups, now on the threshold of making tremendous gains for Negroes ... separate themselves from others who are working for the same objectives ... We cannot afford to separate or isolate ourselves ... We stand on the side of all democratic-thinking people who believe and advocate first-class citizenship for everyone. We cannot do it alone.”

Translated, what Alex Fuller means is this: Negroes can't get anywhere, Negroes can't get anything, unless they remain in the Democratic party; therefore they must wait until the Democrats are ready. But the truth is somewhat different. Negroes will never get first-class citizenship in a thousand years so long as their political power remains tucked away in the vest pocket of the Democratic party. If they have to depend on and wait for the Democrats or the Republicans, and similar "people of good will," their children and their children's children will never know the taste of freedom.

Nobody in his right mind wants to separate "from others who are working for the same objectives," but it is a lie to pretend that the Democratic party, any more than the Republican Party, has the "same objectives" as the Negro people. If that were the case the present massive Negro revolt would have no purpose or meaning. The objective of the major parties is to quiet the Negroes with a few token concessions, while the objective of the Negro people is freedom.

Surely there's a difference here, and it is just this big difference that separates Negroes from Fuller's "democratic-thinking people." Negroes want freedom now, and "democratic-thinking people" want them to have it later. The only way Negroes can prevent "separation" from the liberals on this issue is to give in to them and let them decide when and where and how much freedom Negroes shall have. That's what Alex Fuller and the other Negro leaders have done and what they want the Negro people to do or keep on doing. But the tendency favoring the Freedom Now party has decided that a hundred years of political dependence on these democratic-thinking people of good will is enough, because such dependence, far from bringing them to "the threshold of tremendous gains," will lead only to another hundred years of the same. They have made their declaration of political independence, and now they are striking out on their own, determined to use their political power for themselves first, last, and all the time.

### **Characteristics of Negro Minority**

Before proceeding to our examination from a Marxist point of view of how much and not how little a minority can do, I should make clear that I am not talking about just any minority, but about a minority with certain characteristics, certain features, and a certain history. And also, yes, I am talking about a minority of a certain size. Let me get the size question out of the way first.

Obviously, not every minority is big enough to do the things I am talking about. Size is important too. If there were only two or three million Negroes in this country, which is approaching a population of 200 million, they could not accomplish what a minority of 20 million can. But 20 million is a big force, big enough to tear things up, big enough and weighty enough to appreciably affect the course of events. After all, how many countries in the world, not only the new ones in Africa and Asia but also the old ones in Europe and the Americas, have a population of 20 million? Out of more than 100 countries, not more than 25 at the most, so that around three-quarters of the countries in the world are smaller in population than the Negro people of the United States.

Size and relative weight are not the only important factors to be considered. A minority of even 40 million cannot do much if satisfied with its conditions or indifferent and apathetic about them. As important as size, or more important, in deciding what a minority can do are social, economic, political, historical, and psychological factors.

What I am trying to say is that what a minority can do depends on whether or not it is oppressed and exploited because of some minority trait or feature, is separated out by society for special inferior status, is denied equal treatment, opportunity and rights; whether or not it is at the bottom of the social ladder so that when it rises it shakes the whole structure; whether or not it is a part of the most productive and potentially most powerful force in the modern world, the working class, and yet at the same time is denied the full benefits of membership in that class; whether or not the oppressive and exploitative society in which it exists is stable or in crisis, challenged on all sides and therefore no longer able to maintain the *status quo*; whether or not this minority believes that it can take advantage of the crisis of society; whether or not it is affected by and responds to the great tides of change and revolution sweeping the globe and has a sense of kinship and solidarity with the masses rising up and changing the rest of the world; whether or not its oppression tends to knit it together for common action and goals; whether or not it is compact and so situated geographically that it can act with maximum cohesive-ness and impact; whether or not it has learned to see through the brainwashing which the ruling class uses to keep this minority in subjugation; whether or not it has lost patience as well as respect for the majority; whether or not it sees any further reason to continue believing in promises or in gradualism; whether or not it has the capacity to free itself from the influence of conservative leaders who have always held it back and to replace them with more militant and revolutionary leaders; whether or not it realizes it never has made any gains except by fighting for them; whether or not it has the capacity to defend itself against terror and violence; whether or not it is developing a militant and radical consciousness, ideology, philosophy and methodology of its own that can motivate and spark sustained, audacious and independent struggle.

In short, I am talking about characteristics that fit the American Negro people or which they are in the process of acquiring at an extremely rapid rate. Of the many things such a minority can do, I shall now list some, not necessarily in the order of their importance:

### **What a Minority Can Do**

1. It can force serious concessions from the ruling class. Anyone who expects the capitalist class to grant full and genuine equality to the Negro people is going to be sadly disappointed, because equality is simply not compatible with, or possible under, a social system of the type that we have in the United States today. But that is no reason for Negroes to stop trying to get whatever they can squeeze out of the ruling class until the time comes when it can be deposed. Militant struggle can force the present ruling class to lift some of the existing racial restrictions and barriers in the form of more rights more jobs, better jobs, better schools, better housing, less police brutality, and a greater measure of formal equality before the law. Negroes will not settle for such partial gains and concessions, but they would be fools not to fight for them and take them and utilize them to press for other and more fundamental changes.

2. A minority, properly oriented and led, can go much farther than it has thus far gone to make the present system unworkable and intolerable. Bayard Rustin calls this “social dislocation” (and warns against its “limitations”). Rev. Albert Cleage, chairman of the Freedom Now Party in Michigan, calls it “a strategy of chaos” (and urges its application be expanded). Others give it the name of “mass civil disobedience.” Whatever you call it, it has barely been utilized in America up to now. It consists of making the system so inconvenient and expensive that white people will be forced to ask themselves whether continued discrimination is worthwhile and whether in their own interest they should not help to do away with it altogether.

It means lying down, interposing your bodies on the airport runways, on the expressways, at the plant gate, at the school entrance, at the bank, at the points of production, and the points of distribution, and the points of transportation, and throwing a monkey wrench into the wheels of the system, attempting to paralyze it, to bring it to a stop. It means saying:

“If we Negroes can’t have decent and equal schools, then let’s not have any schools. If we can’t have jobs and job equality, then let no one be able to work. If we can’t vote, then let no one be able to vote. If we can’t belong to the unions as equals, then we don’t care what happens to the unions.”

It means carrying the principle of the sit-down strike, which stops production, much farther and into entirely new areas of social life.

I say that this has hardly been exercised as a full-scale weapon of the Negro minority, but I have no doubt that it will be. Already some members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, headed by Diane Nash Bevel, have proposed such action and have had it rejected by moderate leaders like Rev. King, who talks about civil disobedience but is mortally afraid of really unleashing it without restriction on a mass scale. The sit-ins, the lie-ins, the wade-ins, etc., were just a small, faint, preliminary version of what is still to come in a giant size and to the accomplishment of deep social convulsions and conflicts. To avoid misunderstanding, let me say that what I am talking about here is not pacifism but an all out struggle, which will be the equivalent of a general strike when it reaches full flower. And a general strike usually tends to pose questions about who shall have power in the land.

3. A minority can, merely by carrying through its fight for democratic rights without compromise, help to educate and radicalize the American people, especially the youth in whose hands the future lies. In fact, it is already doing so. You in this audience of young socialists and young radicals know better than anyone else how profoundly your thinking about the whole world has been influenced by the Negro struggle; how their fight for equality enabled you to see through the official myths about “democracy” and “the free world,” to understand the brute reality of the capitalist power structure, to reach new conclusions about capitalism and socialism. Not only the Cuban revolution, not only the danger of atomic war, but something much closer to home, the Negro revolt, has helped to educate or re-educate you, to shed the blinders of liberalism, and to persuade you to dedicate your lives to the fight for a better world. In this respect you are not so much unique as early, because the deepening struggle of the Negro minority will have similarly healthy effects on other young people and on some of the not

completely hopeless older people as well.

4. A minority not only can educate other forces but can set them into motion too. It can stimulate them to fight for their own needs and interests through the power of example as well as the power of pressure. You heard one illustration of the power of example this morning — the report about the rent strike which began among Negroes in Harlem and is now spreading to some white sections of the population in other parts of New York City. Another small but striking example occurred in Detroit last summer. A militant Negro demonstration in front of police headquarters, to protest the police shooting of a young Negro woman in the back, came to the very brink of a physical clash. That was a Saturday, and it was followed two days later, on Monday, by another demonstration at another police station, near which cops had shot a young white man in the back. This second demonstration, involving mainly young whites, *raised the same slogans as the first* and culminated in a pitched battle with the cops after the youths had thrown rocks and bottles at them. Not long ago I noticed a small newspaper item about some airline strike pickets who had been picketing up and down outside the Newark terminal for a long time, with little public attention paid to their grievances. One day they suddenly decided to go inside the terminal and demonstrate there, which was prohibited by an injunction. Quickly arrested, they were asked what had got into them. Their explanation was that they had seen that Negroes were able to get action by sit-ins and by going places where they weren't supposed to, so they thought it was a good idea to do the same.

These are all small-scale illustrations, but bigger and better ones are in the offing. The rulers of this country are well aware of the stimulation-and-contagion effects of militant Negro struggle. That is one reason why they want to stop it before it goes too far and explains the hasty turnabout that induced the previously indifferent Kennedy administration to suddenly introduce civil rights legislation last year.

5. A determined minority can also divide the majority, can actually split it up at decisive moments and junctures. This, of course, is one of the best ways of reducing the disadvantages of being a numerical minority, because it drastically changes the odds against the minority. The Socialist Workers party's 1963 convention resolution [1] showed how this process has operated historically. If our analysis and theory are correct, this isn't a matter of history only, but of the present and the future. Let me refer briefly to the Civil War as an example of the process which can split the majority.

THE Civil War was not just a conflict between abstract and impersonal forces, between Northern capitalism and Southern slavery; it was a struggle between classes and living people. No one played a greater role in stimulating and progressively resolving that conflict than the slaves and ex-slaves. Again and again in the three decades before the Civil War the rulers of the North and the South decided to avoid a final showdown by compromising over the slave question. Great hopes were raised and brilliant reputations were made overnight by these eminently "reasonable" negotiations and agreements reached over the bargaining table in Congress and then enacted into law. But the slaves were not consulted about these great compromises. They would not have



consented to them anyway, because they left the condition of the slave unchanged, that is, intolerable. So the slaves continued their own independent efforts to become free, just as if these great compromise agreements had never existed.

They continued, just as before, or more so, to run away by the thousands and tens of thousands, to commit sabotage and arson, and to engage in various forms of civil disobedience, self-defense and insurrection. These independent actions of the slaves helped to prevent the compromises from working and to stimulate the birth and growth of abolitionism among whites, who threw their weight onto the scales against further compromise. Thus the slaves reopened and widened the gap between the South and the North every time the great compromise statesmen tried to close it.

By acting in every way they could to defend and liberate themselves, the slaves drove a wedge between the slaveholders and those who wanted to compromise with the slaveholders. By acting in self-interest, and alone when they had to, the slaves divided the whites politically and morally and deepened the divisions to the breaking point. That, above everything else, is what made the struggle irrepressible, constantly widened the breach and deepened the division among the whites, and led inexorably to civil warfare. And then, at the crucial moment, after the outbreak of the war the rulers on both sides had tried so hard to avert, the Negroes pressured the northern government into accepting a revolutionary emancipation policy and completed the process by providing what the reluctant Lincoln later admitted was the military balance of power in the war itself. All this happened without a conscious plan, you might say instinctively. Imagine what will happen when the Negro militants absorb this lesson from history and then consciously work out a strategy to fully utilize this process that is set in motion by the elemental desire of the masses to be free!

We can expect, we can be certain, that the deepening of the Negro struggle for equality will have similarly divisive effects on the white majority in our own time. The majority is not homogeneous anyway; it is strained and torn and in conflict over a thousand questions of policy and class interest. A skillful leadership of the Negro minority will know how to pick the right place to drive new wedges, to deepen already existing and potential differences among the whites, to sharpen their conflicts, to set them fighting each other, and, in the process, as the SWP 1963 convention resolution also says, to find mutually beneficial alliances with those classes and forces whose interests are closer to those of the Negroes against those forces that are most hostile to the Negroes.

Under certain conditions, therefore, a minority, just by fighting for its own rights, can divide the majority into two or more minorities locked in combat with each other. This in turn can result in bringing to power a different kind of majority, not based on color, in which the original minority can take a leading part.

Those who confine themselves to scratching the surface can see only the limitations of being a minority, which leads to lamentation, pessimism, and self-induced paralysis or subservience. But when we examine the situation in all of its complex and contradictory reality, probing it deeper and from all sides; when we study majority-minority relations in motion as well as when they are standing still; when we perceive that the majority has problems too, and weaknesses, and many

points at which it is vulnerable and susceptible to successful attack, and that these majority problems and weaknesses are becoming more acute than ever before, then we find, not just limitations for the minority, but also infinitely varied and promising openings and opportunities for transforming, transcending, and overcoming limitations.

6. The Negro minority is also in a position to upset the whole political structure of this country — just by “going it alone” in politics, just by the decisions Negroes make about how to use their own votes and their own minority political strength. Our 1963 convention resolution explored this question too, before the present Freedom Now party was started, but it bears restatement because it is such an effective refutation of black liberals who contend the Negro is politically impotent and “destined to fail” if he acts on his own in politics.

Negroes can form their own party. Negroes can run their own candidates against the Democrats and Republicans. Negroes, because they are already a majority in many districts, thanks to the segregated housing system that jams them tightly together in the big city ghettos, can, right now or any time they form their own party, elect dozens of black candidates to Congress from these districts and hundreds of state and local representatives. In this way they can get representatives in public office who will be responsible and accountable to the Negro community instead of to the corrupt major party machines. And since this bloc of black representatives will not be small, it will enable them to hold and wield a certain legislative balance of power and to compel bigger concessions from the power structure than the tokens and crumbs they are now thrown; all of this, you notice, without any drastic change yet in political relations — just by taking advantage of the political and electoral conditions created by segregation, by refusing to vote Democratic or Republican, by voting black. This would mark a real advance at least in the number and quality of Negro representatives in office, but that would be only a part of the result of independent political action.

By forming their own party, Negroes can paralyze the Democratic party and rock the whole political structure to its foundations. Without Negro votes, the bell will toll the doom of the Democratic party. Without Negro votes, the Democratic coalition with the labor movement will be undermined and destroyed. Without Negro votes for that coalition, the unions will be forced to reconsider their political orientation, and this will encourage and strengthen the union forces who will eventually form an independent labor party. Without Negro votes, the present two-party system will pass from the scene and be replaced by something different, out of which Negroes may be able to acquire new and more reliable allies than up to now. And all of this can be accomplished by the simple device of forming a Negro party and running independent Negro candidates. Really, when you think about the potential, you can almost pity the ignorance of those Negro leaders who preach that Negroes are incapable of any political role other than tagging along behind the liberals.

7. The last on my partial list of things the Negro minority can do should be of special interest to another and smaller minority — socialists, white and Negro. I am convinced that if militant Negroes, not yet socialist, are not so concerned with this point now, they will be later, as their continuing political experience draws it to their attention. At any rate, my point is that the Negro

people, although a minority, can, with consistently revolutionary leadership, lead the American working class in the revolution that will abolish capitalism.

We have long held the view that while the Negro struggle is the struggle of an oppressed minority for democratic rights, for equality, it tends, because the masters of this country are both unwilling and unable to grant equality, to become part of the general movement of the exploited and oppressed to abolish capitalism and proceed toward socialism. In this tendency to pass over from democratic to socialist goals, to pass beyond the capitalist framework that now envelops it, the Negro struggle is similar to the colonial struggles, which also take off from democratic aims, such as independence and self-government, but find themselves unable to attain those democratic aims until they wrench the imperialist boot from off their neck. The Chinese call this process the “uninterrupted revolution,” and Leon Trotsky called it “the permanent revolution.” But that is not what I am discussing here. What I am talking about now is something else — the capacity of the Negro people to lead the working-class revolution to replace capitalism with socialism.

To grasp this idea we must rid our minds of the conception that any social revolution in general or any working-class revolution in particular has to be *led* by a majority. I will try to illustrate this by going back to the first victorious workers’ revolution, the Russian revolution of 1917. It was victorious because it had the *support* of a majority of the Russian people. But it was not led by any class, or by any vanguard of a class, that comprised the majority of the population. It was a revolution *supported by the majority*, and it could not have succeeded without that majority support, but it was *led by a party that represented a class that was a minority of the country*.

We call it, and it was, a working-class revolution. But out of 150 million people in Russia in 1917 the workers were a small minority. There were probably no more than 10 million workers, and that included agricultural workers, some of whom were workers only part of the time. Counting their families, they made up about 15 or 16 per cent of the total population. Yet this class, with a proper leadership in the form of Lenin’s Bolshevik party, was able to lead a revolution that abolished capitalism in Russia.

This is one of the things that befuddled and ruined the Mensheviks, the Social Democrats, and other white liberals of that day. As they understood Marx’s analysis of the conditions needed for social revolution, it could not take place and should not even be attempted until the country was industrialized to the point where the working class was a majority of the population, as in England then or in the United States today. And if it was attempted before the workers were a majority of the population, it was, according to these people, bound to fail. And they were so sure the Russian revolution was not according to either Hoyle or Marx that most of them pitched in and did their utmost to make it fail.

But they misunderstood Marx and Marxism, as fortunately Lenin, Trotsky, and others did not. A socialist revolution can be led by the working class even when the working class is a minority, provided that working-class minority can get an alliance with, and support from, other non-capitalist forces and classes in the country. In Russia this meant an alliance with the peasants, who constituted around seventy-five per cent of the country. The working-class minority was able to lead the Russian revolution and lead it to victory, not only because it took advantage of the crisis of the capitalist class in the war, not only because it had a qualified leadership, but also

because it worked out an effective alliance with the most oppressed sections of the peasants. This alliance was designed to meet the most pressing demands of the peasants, but it did not make any concessions to them about the need to throw the capitalists out of power; and it was based, first of all, on the needs and interests of the working class minority, because the workers were the backbone of the revolution, the most revolutionary force in the country, and represented the historic march of social progress.

Now why, in discussing the American revolution of the 1960's and 1970's, have I gone all the way back to 1917 and far-off Russia? I did so because I thought it would throw light on the distinction between the *making* of a revolution and the *leading* of a revolution, on the leading role that a minority can play, on how dogma can blind one to the leading role of a minority, and on how the successful leadership of a working-class revolution by a minority class depends partly on its ability to make alliances with other exploited classes and groups. I know I am not proving anything about America by this reference to Russia, but perhaps it can help us to look at the role of revolutionary minorities in a fresh way.

The working-class revolution has to be led by workers through their independent party, or parties, or councils. That's one of the things Marx taught us. But Marx never said anything about the revolution having to be led by white workers. He only said by workers — by the most revolutionary workers. The Negroes in this country are a racial minority, but that is only one of their aspects. It would be truly fatal to forget their other primary aspect, namely, that in their overwhelming majority they are proletarian in composition. In fact, Negroes are more proletarian than whites in this country. Negroes are an important section of the working class as well as a racial minority. Unless we are blind, we must see that they are at present and will probably remain the most radicalized section of the working class, the section of the working class that has the most to gain and nothing to lose from social revolution. If this is true, then why should it be so hard, when we are discussing what a radical minority of the working class can do, to conceive of the possibility that it may lead the rest of the working class and its allies in the revolution that will abolish capitalism?

As a matter of fact, that is just what Leon Trotsky, who did so much to rescue authentic Marxism for my generation and yours, was trying to teach us twenty-five years ago when we set out to reach a correct and revolutionary analysis of the Negro struggle. Things were different in 1933, before the CIO, and in 1939, long before the current radicalization of the Negro people. But let me read you some things Trotsky told us in the 1930's [\[2\]](#) and see if they do not apply with even greater validity and relevance to the changed conditions of the 1960's. My first quotation is from a discussion in Turkey between Trotsky and an American, thirty-one years ago, at the depth of the depression and before the CIO was formed. English was not Trotsky's native tongue, and his English was not too good, but his ideas were. He was talking, in 1933, about what would happen when a mass radicalization began in America, and he said:

“I believe that by the unheard-of political and theoretical backwardness and the unheard-of economic advance the awakening of the working class will proceed quite rapidly. The old ideological covering will burst, all questions will emerge at once and since the country is so economically mature the adaptation of the political and theoretical to the economic level will be achieved very rapidly. It is then possible that the Negroes will become the most advanced

section. We have already a similar example in Russia. The Russians were the European Negroes. It is very possible that the Negroes also through the self-determination will proceed to the proletarian dictatorship in a couple of gigantic strides, ahead of the great bloc of white workers. They will then furnish the vanguard. I am absolutely sure that they will in any case fight better than the white workers. That, however, can happen only if the communist party carries on an uncompromising merciless struggle not against the supposed national prepossessions of the Negroes but against the colossal prejudices of the white workers and gives it no concession whatever.”

That was 1933. Six years later, in 1939, Trotsky discussed the Negro struggle with another delegation from the United States, and, touching on the conditions that make workers conservative or radical, he said:

“If the workers’ aristocracy is the basis of opportunism, one of the sources of adaptation to capitalist society, then the most oppressed and discriminated against are the most dynamic milieu of the working class. We must say to the conscious elements of the Negroes that they are convoked by the historic development to become a vanguard of the working class. What serves as a brake on the higher strata? It is the privileges, the comforts that hinder them from becoming revolutionists. It does not exist for the Negroes. What can transform a certain stratum, make it more capable of courage and sacrifice? It is concentrated in the Negroes. If it happens that we in the SWP are not able to find a road to this stratum, then we are not worthy at all. The permanent revolution and all the rest would be only a lie.”

LET me repeat just three of those statements now: It is “possible that *the Negroes will become the most advanced section.*” It is possible that the Negroes “*will proceed to the proletarian dictatorship ... ahead of the great bloc of white workers.*” “*The Negroes are convoked by the historic development to become a vanguard of the working class.*” What Trotsky was trying to get us to understand twenty-five and thirty years ago, it is plain, was the possibility that the Negroes could lead the working-class revolution. Our party tried to understand this and to express it in the very first resolution on the Negro struggle it ever adopted, which made it the first party ever to put this idea forward. Let me read the first two sentences of that resolution, which is reprinted in full in **Documents on the Negro Struggle**, and which was adopted by the Socialist Workers party convention in 1939:

“The American Negroes, for centuries the most oppressed section of American society and the most discriminated against, are potentially the most revolutionary element of the population. They are designated by their whole historical past to be, under adequate leadership, the very vanguard of the proletarian revolution.”

So what I have been trying to say, in stating that the black minority can lead the white majority of the working class in the coming social revolution, is not really new, because the Socialist Workers party explicitly stated that concept in a formal convention resolution in 1939, before most of the people in this hall were born.

Then why does it seem new to many of us? Because, I am sorry to say, there can be a big gap between accepting or even repeating an idea in a general way as logically correct, and grasping in all of its concreteness a profound truth that flies in the face of all prevailing opinion and prejudice, absorbing it and making it a part of you, a central part of your thought and your action. There is also a considerable difference between accepting a general proposition that may turn out to be correct at some indefinite future time and accepting it as a possibility, or even a probability, that can have the most far-reaching consequences for you right now or in the near future.

Although in 1939 we accepted the idea that the Negro minority can lead the working-class revolution and readily adopted that as the official position of the Socialist Workers party, the truth is that it was only a surface acceptance and adoption. We were not yet ready, despite what we put in our resolution, to fully understand what Trotsky was trying to get us to see. And six or seven weeks after our 1939 convention adopted this resolution, J.R. Johnson, the chairman of our party's committee on Negro work at that time, who had been under Trotsky's influence the chief author of the resolution, wrote in our paper an article referring to the resolution. Johnson said that while the idea in the resolution was correct, and while "the place of the Negro is in the very front," nevertheless the formulation in the resolution was an "overstatement." Instead of saying that the Negroes are destined to be "the very vanguard," he wrote, it would have been more correct to say that they are destined to be "in the very vanguard." This was a real weakening of the idea Trotsky had tried to persuade us of. Although it left the Socialist Workers party with the most advanced position on the Negro struggle, it was a definite step backward.

But now, with Trotsky long dead, I think we are able to return to that original unweakened idea and see it in an entirely different light — not as an overstatement, but as a cold, hard, factually correct appraisal of a vital possibility that can crucially affect the future of all Americans. Because what Trotsky could not teach us completely we have now been able to learn from the actual development of the Negro struggle itself right before our own eyes these last two or three years. What we were not advanced enough in the 1930's to accept as theory, we are now able to apprehend as concrete current event. Because the fact is that the Negroes are already a vanguard. They are already out in front of most white workers. They are more radicalized than the white workers. They are more ready to fight and sacrifice and die in order to change this system.

And so today many of us, I am sure, will be able to grasp and act on the concept of Negroes as leaders of the workers' revolution not just as a possibility but as a probability. I shall not try, because that is a job for the whole movement, to work out or complete everything that flows from this concept, except to say that much does, and that all of it seems to me a cause for optimism. Nor shall I try here to discuss the kind of alliance I think the Negro vanguard of the working-class revolution will have to effect with the advanced section of the white workers if the revolution is to be led to success, except to say that I do not think it can be an alliance that will make concessions in principle to the white allies of the Negroes, any more than the revolutionary vanguard in Russia sacrificed any principles in their alliance with the peasants. Instead, I shall conclude, with much left hanging, by saying that if the ideas in this talk are correct, if the concepts about what a minority can do will be of practical and theoretical benefit in advancing the Negro struggle for freedom, then what they demonstrate is the validity and even the indispensability of Marxism to Negro revolutionists, whether or not they belong to the Socialist Workers Party.

## Footnotes

**1. Freedom Now: The New Stage in the Struggle for Negro Emancipation**, Pioneer Publishers, 25c.

**2. Documents of the Negro Struggle (1933-1950)**, Pioneer Publishers, 65c.

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