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Interview with Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin

The Need for Black Autonomy

Anarchist Communist Federation

1997

Lorenzo Kom'Boa Ervin was a former Black Panther who fled to Cuba in 1969 after an FBI shoot to kill order was issued on him. Later arrested and imprisoned he was released in 1983 after serving 15 years for hijacking the plane he escaped from the USA in. Whilst inside he continued the struggle, acting as a jailhouse lawyer and prison unionist and developing his political philosophy. Author of *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, Lorenzo spoke to *Organise!* during his speaking tour of Britain in May. For reasons of space, this interview has been edited. A full transcript can be obtained by writing to Newcastle ACF(See inside back page for address).

Organise!: On this tour you have stated that the working class has changed and is changing, and consequently, our approach as revolutionaries must change to take account of this. Can you explain what you mean?

Lorenzo: The working class in the United States, in the United Kingdom and in most parts of the western world, with the influx

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of other peoples of colour into these countries in considerable numbers, make up considerable minorities and are a considerable part of the labour force. But you can't pretend that this is a period like sixty or seventy years ago with an industrial base and where most of the workers were white, which was true then. Things have changed now over the last twenty or so years, but yet some so-called revolutionary movements persist and keep posturing and saying that the work force is white and that other people should just follow along with their bags in tow behind these white workers, which in fact represents the aristocracy of labour in the sense that they have certainly more resources and certainly a better quality of life than a lot of other labourers of colour have. So from that standpoint, it would be fair to say that the nature of the workforce has changed; there are more women, more blacks and Asians, in the US and the UK, so we can't keep building movements based on old dead ideology of the white industrial worker and "the worker" as vanguard.

Organise!: So what do you see as the role of the revolutionary movement?

Lorenzo: Well I think the role of the revolutionary movement is still in workplace organising, but I also think, in community organisation. In fact in my mind, the role of community organising is primary, in that the cities, where so many of these workers are concentrated, has become the new battleground in terms of destabilising the government. We don't have massive workplaces anymore, for the most part, which is not to say that they don't exist at all. So what we're talking about is building neighbourhood and community alliances, for instance workers in the community, other people in the community and with peoples of colour, which for me is all important. you have to breakdown racism in the society...racism is not just sentimental, by that I mean it isn't just some idea or deliberate policy. So whatever analysis we make has got to take into account the importance of combatting racism NOT as some kind of

thing that we do for altruistic purposes, but because we'll never be able to defeat capitalism in and of itself without dealing with the fact that it uses divisions in the working class.

Organise!: Some revolutionaries would argue that although they base the struggle around the workplace, they also look to organise in the community as well. What would you say to that?

Lorenzo: Well, the syndicalists first of all say that the workplace is the primary place of struggle, and to me they make an out-moded analysis of what even constitutes the working class, in that in their mind there's the idea that somehow the unions are progressive, and what's more the unions are some kind of force that can be revolutionised. Clearly these unions are something that's based IN capitalism. They cannot be a progressive force in the next period. They will have to be destroyed. They are no more than instruments for defensive struggles for workers to get better wages and that sort of thing. They are not in any way, shape or form a revolutionary vehicle themselves, and in this period they don't even constitute anything progressive. They, in fact, are selling workers out routinely and they are not going to be reformed. In my estimation, they're not going to be revolutionised, and in any case they can't be.

Organise!: There's some misunderstanding about why you advocate the formation of autonomous Black community groupings. Can you explain this and how you see these struggles uniting?

Lorenzo: I have been attacked because people think I'm advocating some kind of separatism. Let me just point this out: *Black Autonomy* (the journal which Lorenzo founded ed. note) has no such philosophy of xenophobia. It's not against white people and there is no philosophy about a so-called black state or any other state. It has no conception that there cannot be class unity. In fact we work with a number of white formations of anarchists and so forth. But the reality is, to create class unity, you've got to have

a period of time, especially when there's racism there's mistrust which has gone on for years and years. You've got to BUILD this class unity. It's not going to fall out of the sky...you can't make people come together in bogus alliances. There has to be a principled way of doing it and the principled way of doing it is when people struggle around issues of common concern. Now there are issues that affect the black community which don't affect white workers as a whole, who don't understand them and may even be in opposition to them. We have to create those movements that are autonomous in the communities, whether anti-racist, anti-nazi or whatever it is. In my estimation there is nothing threatening in that at all for white people, I don't understand what that's supposed to be. They've attempted to characterise all black movements, even anarchist movements as somehow harmful to working class unity. We feel that one of the preconditions for working class unity is that there be autonomous struggles of historical groups that have been oppressed. There is no doubt in our minds that there are forms of special oppression of groups such as Blacks. Whites are not subjected to this "last hired, first fired" thing and that whole history of racism in the workforce itself. And to pretend that none of this took place, or none of this has any importance in the construction of a revolutionary ideology to me is the worst kind of betrayal and sell out, and it is dogma.

The purpose of coming to the UK was to raise some of these questions with radicals in our scene, and finding new ideas, and finding out who has new ideas and who is non-dogmatic, who is trying to see a way forward. This period has changed and fundamentally altered so many things that we took for granted. It has to force us to reassess what is the working class, what is work, in the face of millions of workers being out of work permanently, in the face of workers being brought here who have no means of employment. There's immigrants and refugees who are being brought here who cannot get a job. What is work to them? How do they feel that they should belong in the British trade unions? There's workers

who aren't organised and unions who only care about 'their' privileged workers. How do we deal with that? Do we pretend that these things don't matter?