

Build The Cadre, Abolish The White Race

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I was happy to see the series of essays by NEFAC in response to the Bring the Ruckus (BTR) political statement. BTR was written, in part, to generate political discussion and I am glad NEFAC took the time to engage us. We would welcome and encourage continued discussion of these or other ideas publicly or privately.

I am not one of the authors of the statement, but I am in general agreement with the politics, analysis, and strategies it puts forth. On that basis I would like to respond to Wayne and Nicolas' articles. First, I would like to attempt to define the analytical and strategic positions that I feel BTR and NEFAC have principled differences on. Let me clarify one point: BTR is a class war document. NEFAC and BTR do not disagree on the revolutionary potential of the working class nor do we disagree that white workers are exploited and oppressed as workers or that white privilege offers relative benefits compared to non-white workers. In fact a central feature of BTR is precisely to highlight the contradictory role whiteness plays in working-class consciousness.

We have significant disagreement on important questions of theory, strategy, and organization. We disagree on the significance of white privilege and the role whiteness plays as a contradictory and counter-revolutionary force within white working-class consciousness. We believe whiteness to be of central strategic importance, not "so-called" privileges, as Wayne characterized it. We disagree on the role of revolutionary organizations and the relationship between conscious revolutionaries and mass movements. We have reached our conclusions based upon our experiences as activists and through careful study of past struggles. We recognize that other groups and individuals whose opinions and analysis we respect will reach different conclusions.

Open, honest, and critical debate within and between organizations and individuals is crucial for the development of revolutionary politics. There are substantive differences between the politics of BTR, the politics of NEFAC, the Alliance for Freedom and Direct Democracy (AFADD) and other anarchist organizations. A critical debate between ideas and strategies is crucial, but in order to be effective, we need to base that dialogue on what each other's ideas actually are instead of distorting them into straw men to be easily knocked down. While it might be rhetorically useful, this does little to advance a substantive and useful exchange. So first we should clear away all of the straw...

Wayne's World

Wayne's characterization of our politics as a two-stage process is a cartoon reduction of the Ruckus document and the politics of white abolitionism. So much so that I wondered if it were simply a rhetorical and sectarian attack rather than a genuine attempt to critically engage our ideas. Nowhere in the BTR document is there a claim to first abolish the white race, establish class unity, and then move on to the fight a class war. Rather BTR argues that in the United States, a crisis in capitalism and the state must be precipitated by a crisis in whiteness. While we do not expect that the white race will be abolished before struggles to smash the state and capitalism can effectively begin, it is essential that enough white workers be won over to the struggle against institutionalized white privilege so that the state can no longer rely on skin color as an effective predictor of who is a friend and who is an enemy of this society. This is not a two-stage process by any means. We propose a strategy to engender a revolutionary crisis in the existing system by attacking the institutions of white supremacy. Wayne's rhetorical characterization of this as a supposed strategy is a backhanded dismissal of our ideas and discourages folks from actually

considering them. After all, if it is “supposedly” a strategy and not an actual strategy, why bother engaging it at all? BTR does present a strategy; NEFAC simply disagrees with that strategy. An honest assessment of our ideas would acknowledge that fact.

The Real World

Wayne insinuates the BTR analysis is not rooted in “real life”-again inviting a dismissal of our ideas. BTR analysis is rooted in our analysis of past struggles and our participation in current ones. Take the examples of the Civil Rights movements and the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. In both instances, social struggles grounded in attacks against institutions of white supremacy precipitated broader social struggles. In the case of Reconstruction it brought the United States to the brink of social revolution. We believe that challenging white supremacy today can lead to another revolutionary crisis, opening the way to struggle not just against white supremacy, but all forms of oppression. One may disagree with our analysis, but to dismiss it out right as not being grounded in “real life” is disingenuous and gets us nowhere. Nor do the attempts to paint us with the brush of Stalinism. Wayne states, “Those who invented this theory (Noel Ignatiev and the Sojourner Truth Organization) were Maoists at the time...” This is wrong on both counts. My Mao-dar may not be as fully developed as Wayne’s, but as I recall, STO was avowedly not a Maoist organization. However the point is moot; the claim that STO “invented” these ideas is plainly incorrect as anyone who has read the writings of WEB Du Bois, James Baldwin and other Black theorists upon whom these ideas are based could tell you. There are more productive lines of discussion that could be engaged, instead of pointlessly redbaiting an organization that has been defunct for fifteen years.

The Role of Revolutionary Organizations

In addition to our disagreements on analysis and strategy, NEFAC and BTR disagree on the role of revolutionary organizations and their relationship to mass movements. A cadre is a revolutionary formation of individuals who come together around a set of common politics to develop revolutionary strategy and theory based upon study, debate, and a consistent analysis of political practice. A cadre is defined not by this process, but by the commitment of its members to building revolutionary struggles and waging class war. As Nicolas points out, “cadre” presupposes that there are “non-cadre”. I would also add that revolutionaries presuppose that there are non-revolutionaries. There are significant differences between cadre and non-cadre just as there are significant differences between revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries. Though I would stress that this difference does not imply a hierarchy, if we are to successfully confront the challenges revolutionaries face in participating in mass movements composed largely of non-revolutionaries with reformist goals, we must acknowledge this and understand the contradictions it poses for the revolutionary process. Nicolas states that NEFAC participates in social struggles as “members of the class not as outside agitators.” Surely, this is not entirely true; NEFAC members are both “members of the class” and “outside agitators.” It is incumbent upon revolutionaries to confront this contradiction, not pretend that it doesn’t exist.

It is true that we argue for our politics within broader organizations that we participate in. However, I could not disagree more with Nicolas’s claim that this amounts to undermining the

capacity of mass movements to develop their own politics. There is a difference between groups and individuals who make principled arguments for their own politics and ideas within organizations and movements and those who seek to undemocratically dominate those movements and organizations. NEFAC seemingly sees no distinction between the two. What would be the point of developing a strategy if we refused to argue for it in broader movements? Indeed, what would be the point of having an organization or even politics at all? How does NEFAC relate to broader movements and organizations if it does not argue for its particular positions, strategies and politics? Nicolas argues that our desire to develop our own politics and strategies is evidence that we are not interested in broader movements developing their own autonomous politics and strategies. Are we to presume from this that NEFAC doesn't develop its own politics and strategies?

Every organization I have worked with-anarchist or not, cadre or not, revolutionary or not-has developed a set of politics, and then argued for their positions in the context of broader organizations and movements. Not only does this NOT undermine the capacity of movements to develop autonomous politics, it is a central part of the process by which they will develop them. Not only is this not indicative of a belief that ordinary workers are "too dumb to develop politics," it embraces the idea that workers are smart enough to distinguish bad ideas from good ones. We do not believe that we have "oh-so perfect ideas" nor do we believe we possess any kind of truth or correct ideas about struggle. We do believe that we have useful ideas, however flawed they might be. As a cadre organization, we seek to develop an internal, democratic, collective process by which we can develop, test and apply these flawed but useful ideas through study and debate, and to disseminate those ideas in broader movements so that they may in turn be tested and developed through struggle and debated amongst other ideas and tendencies. Through this process, we hope to develop ideas that are less flawed and more useful.

The Problems of Knowing; The Importance of Acting

At play here is more than a critique of a cadre organization but a deeper problem of anarchist epistemology. Anarchists have rightly critiqued the notion embraced by many Marxist-Leninists that there are 'scientific principles' of revolutionary struggle and through their application one can arrive at 'correct' forms of struggle and absolute Truths. (The best articulation of this is Ron Tabor's A Look at Leninism.) The authoritarian implications of this are obvious and should be rejected by anyone interested in promoting democratic principles. The mistake made by many anarchists is to apply this critique of the Marxist-Leninist theory of knowledge so broadly that advocating any political position or strategy is tainted with authoritarianism. Though NEFAC as an organization thankfully does not argue this, the temptation to implicitly embrace this position can be seen in Nicolas' argument against cadre organizations. He argues against the notion of a cadre group internally debating politics and strategies and then fighting to enact them in mass-oriented organizations because doing so implicitly prevents mass movements from developing autonomous politics. This view does more than undermine our capacity to act; it provides us with an excuse not to. It is all too easy to blame this or that "authoritarian" tendency for the failures of anarchist struggles, especially when we continually ignore our responsibility to fight for our politics and take leadership in broader movements and struggles. Such a position on organization relegates anarchism to the role of perpetual gadfly that offers no more than passing

critiques of existing movements and struggles rather than being an essential force in shaping a new and better world.

Reasserting Anarchist Internationalism

by Ryan Chiang McCarthy (NEFAC-Philadelphia)

The essential disagreements between NEFAC and supporters of the BRING THE RUCKUS (BTR) statement have been outlined in the previous issue of 'The Northeastern Anarchist'. Briefly, the main points of contention are BTR's call for white abolitionism as a priority for a US anarchist organization, a cadre style for said organization, and a "dual power" strategy.

Roy San Filippo's response has both helped to clarify the issues at hand and highlighted the contradictions of the BTR positions. BTR is a "class war document," and at the same time it prioritizes the destruction of white supremacy for a revolutionary strategy in the US. Responding to criticisms of BTR taking a "two-stage" approach (first, abolish the white race, then abolish capitalism), Roy argues that "In the United States, a crisis in capitalism and the state must be precipitated by a crisis in whiteness." This position, while it may be simplistic to label it "stageism" implies that within the class struggle the anarchist organization must prioritize raising anti-racist consciousness rather than anti-capitalist, class consciousness. If the BTR comrades would deny this, then they must explain what it means to prioritize "white abolitionism".

NEFAC does not deny that combating racism right now is a necessary aspect of the unification of the proletariat. Racism and other divisions exist to drive workers into thinking only of the limited interests of a particular, a classist group pitted against other groups in the same category. Aside from race, these divisions can arise around other issues such as gender or industry. For example, in the US, the recent west coast longshoremen dispute put port truckers, who are paid by the trip, temporarily out of work.

In the logic of wage-labor, the interests of truckers and longshoremen were opposed; the longshoremen were preventing truckers from feeding their families. Racism enters into similar situations, such as when bosses manipulate immigrant workers to force native workers to accept lower wages or lose their jobs. The conflict then is presented as one between immigrant and native workers — the former are "stealing" the jobs of the latter. The real case, of course, is that the bosses are manipulating workers so as to better exploit them all. Racism is therefore not an institution that stands for itself but rather a very useful tool in the hands of capital.

White supremacy is not an immutable institution. Nothing is sacred under capitalism, and peoples who are vermin one day may be respectable the next. Consider the oppressive conditions Irish immigrant workers were subjected to in constructing the US railroads from the east coast. To the capitalists, it was more cost-efficient for an Irish worker, paid in meager wages, to be killed in dangerous working conditions than for a black slave to suffer the same fate. Today however Irish are considered white, largely by virtue of their utility in enforcing white domination over black workers after the American Civil War.

Nor is white supremacy the only form of racism existing in the US. For example, though there is little distinction made between "Asian-Americans" in white supremacist eyes, there are distinct tensions between various Asian immigrant communities. Chinese and Japanese Americans,

who have long been established in the country, hold substantial privilege over southeast Asian immigrants, such as Cambodians and Vietnamese, who arrived more recently as refugees and many of whom live in extreme poverty. In Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Seattle, Cambodians are currently being deported under flimsy pretexts and have depended largely only on their own communities to offer them support. Many of the East-Asian dominated “Asian-American” groups, pretending to represent all Asian communities, have been more concerned with offensive t-shirts from Abercrombie and Fitch; the livelihoods of Cambodian workers being less important than deepening the East Asian niche in American society.

Divisions of labor are the substance of imperialism, which diverts the proletariat from class struggle by forcing it into national conflicts and relative hierarchies. Less dramatic divisions follow the same process on a smaller scale. So, if we are to advance the unification of the proletariat, we can’t merely focus on combating one particular division (white supremacy) within one country (US). The United States may be the leading world superpower at the moment, but this status is dependent on the cooperation of numerous lesser states, some with white supremacy within their borders, others with homogeneously non-white populations. NEFAC embraces internationalism as a basic principle of anarchism; we are a federation of anarchists from northeastern US and eastern Canada and we contend that an anarchist revolution must extend internationally or else it will be crushed.

It’s not enough to foster a “crisis in whiteness” in the “American working class” (a contradiction in terms) to precipitate this revolution; white abolitionism isn’t even an adequate strategy for fighting racism in conjunction with class struggle. It will be necessary, for instance, to overcome the dominance of anglophone Canadians over francophone Quebecois, which, as Nicolas Phebus indicated, is a more central issue than white supremacy in Quebec. The dominance of Han Chinese over Tibetans and ethnic minorities in China will have to be demolished, as well as the oppression by Ethiopians over the Oromo population. Above all, what’s needed is a crisis in all national identities, and a spread international class consciousness in the proletariat. To prioritize the destruction of white supremacy is to move decisively away from a class struggle perspective to an American one.

BTR’s position therefore pigeonholes it into a national program that may help explain the advocacy of a “cadre” organization. When the entire focus is on American workers and not the international proletariat, the lines become blurred between a class struggle and national-oriented movement that is not particularly class oriented. Roy defines the cadre as a “revolutionary formation of individuals who come together around a set of common politics to develop revolutionary strategy and theory... to building revolutionary struggles and waging class war.” Roy presents NEFAC’s position as stating that we should not openly advocate our politics within organizations of the wider working class, which is untrue. What is objectionable in the BTR program is this notion of “building revolutionary struggles” to constitute a “dual power” which suggests that the anarchists are saviors who start revolutions.

The assertion that the anarchist organization is a part of the class and not an outside agitator is based on the fact that anarchism is not a fancy idea coined by philosophers but the programmatic expression of the interests of the working class. Revolutionary struggles therefore cannot be built by a cadre but arise within the class war with the anarchist organization as the programmatic reference but not as the sole initiator.

The meaning of this is perhaps best illustrated in the question of the proletarian power that arises with the revolution. BTR concerns itself primarily with those struggles that have “the po-

tential to work toward the building of a dual power.” It then gives Copwatch as an example, so it seems clear enough that BTR aspires to build the “dual power” before the revolution by constructing associations that anticipate it. The problem with this strategy is that the revolutionary power, which we perhaps could better refer to as the Soviet, can’t be defined by any particular organizational form but by the act of the proletariat violently overturning the rule of the bourgeoisie and establishing its own power to the exclusion of all non-proletarian elements. As the Friends of Durruti declared, “the revolution needs organisms to oversee it, and repress, in an organized sense, hostile sectors... such sectors do not accept oblivion unless they are crushed... we must proceed with the utmost energy against those who are not identified with the working class.” The Soviet therefore is a stage of class consciousness and class war coinciding with the revolution, and therefore any organ that aims to anticipate it can only be an imitative formality. An institution such as Copwatch may help stem the excesses of police brutality, produce a sense of security within a community, and give this community some control over itself, but none of this is necessarily revolutionary. The real Soviet will arise largely from struggles that previously were not consciously striving to establish such a power, which learned by hard fights that the only way to end the misery of capitalist society is revolution.

Revolution, therefore, is not built by the anarchist organization but arises with the class struggle in which the anarchist organization operates as the theoretical pole. Because of this, we must work with the actual manifestations of class consciousness today and aim to push them towards revolutionary internationalism. The central point of this process must be considered the workplace, where the proletarian condition is defined, and then from there radiate struggles such as poverty and immigration which are intimately tied to the workplace. It is important to understand the working class not in an abstract sense of poor communities that will form popular assemblies but in the full sense of a propertyless class subjected to wage labor, which can in no way escape its misery except by the destruction of capitalism.

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