

Fighting and Defeating Racism

Workers' Solidarity Federation

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Anarcho-Syndicalists fight all domination and exploitation. The fight against racism is a central part of our program. We believe that all human beings are fundamentally equal and alike. We do not think that racism is a natural or inevitable part of society. Instead, racism is rooted in the class system, capitalism and the State.

The roots of racism

Racism developed alongside capitalism and the modern State since these emerged 500 years ago. It justified the conquest, slaughter and enslavement of indigenous people in the Americas, Asia and Africa. Later racism was used to divide and rule the working class majority, and to super-exploit and repress sections of the working-class. Racist arguments said colonialism, slavery and Black worker super-exploitation were a “civilising mission”. In truth, racism gave huge profits and power to the imperialist capitalist ruling-classes of Europe and Japan. These profits, and those extracted out of the European workers and peasants, were what capitalism was built on.

Racism in South Africa developed from colonial conquest, genocide against Khoisan people, and slavery in the Cape. The discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1870s strengthened racism. Why? The mine bosses and capitalist farmers needed ultra-cheap labour to make profits. So the State forced Africans into wage labour through taxes and land dispossession. It also imported Indian semi-slaves for the sugar farms. Repressive systems such as the compounds, and a lack of political and union rights were used to keep African, Indian and Coloured labour cheap and controlled.

Many Africans were migrant labourers based in the homelands. This allowed the ruling class to keep their wages down (they did not have to pay a family wage) and to slow the development of volatile urban working-class ghettos (they were not allowed to settle in the cities). White workers and poor whites were deliberately divided from their Black comrades through massive racial privileges such as high wages, political and union rights, and social services. These privileges meant that most (but not all) of these workers were willing to defend racial capitalism.

Collapse of apartheid and the road to freedom

This system of racial capitalism worked well for the bosses up until the 1970s. It made huge profits and kept the masses down. But the system entered a crisis in the 1970s. The local market was restricted to Whites and was thus too small for further capitalist growth. Also, massive skills shortages developed. Only Whites got a decent education and were allowed to do skilled work. More important, the Black workers and poor (joined by some middle- and upper-class elements) rose in revolt: the 1973 Durban strikes, the Soweto rising of 1976, the emergence of a mass trade union and civic movement in the 1980s, the revolutionary uprisings of 1983–6, the mass protests of the late 1980s.

This crisis forced the racist ruling class to the negotiating table in 1990. The 1994 elections were a massive victory. For the first time in 350 years Black people are not ruled by a racist dictatorship. We have the right to vote, to free speech, to trade unions, to equal social services. We must defend these rights with mass action if necessary.

Capitalism and racism: one enemy, one fight

However, elections do not bring full freedom. The State always serves the ruling class, and parliamentary politics corrupts just about any politician. Even if politicians in the African National Congress (ANC) wished to destroy capitalism they would not be able to do so using the State. They cannot introduce any programmes (such as worker control of factories, and free or even adequate housing for the Black working class) which go against the interests of the ruling class. But the ANC's programmes are, in any case, pro-capitalist: land reform through the market, house building with bank loans, privatisation, sending police against strikers, evicting squatters, enforcing the payment of rent and service charges, lowering tariff rates, creating a "friendly investor climate". The majority of the new political elite have joined the old racist ruling-class by virtue of their wealth, expanding business operations, and role in defending capitalism. So we should boycott elections and rely on mass struggle to win change. We should not rely on our so-called "comrades in government" to defeat racism.

We believe that the fight against racism is a fight against capitalism and the State. These structures have always been built on racism, and always create new forms of racism. Yesterday, it was Apartheid. Today it is the arrest and deportation of so-called "illegal immigrants" from Africa. The immigrants are blamed for crime and unemployment, both of which are really the bosses' fault. The immigrants must be defended!

Black workers and poor people still suffer the legacy of Apartheid: poverty, rotten schools, landlessness, unemployment etc. These problems cannot be solved by the market. They require massive wealth redistribution, and an economy planned from below by the working-class to meet people's needs, not profits. In other words they can only be resolved under stateless socialist (Anarcho-Syndicalist) system.

This means that racism and its legacy will not be fully removed from society without a class struggle and a worker-peasant revolution.

Can Black workers and Black bosses unite?

All Black people are victims of racism. But the Black middle and upper class elite is shielded from the worst effects of racism by their privileged status in capitalism. They can live in the suburbs, go to private schools and earn big salaries — we can't. We must fight racism wherever it exists. But we working and poor people must not build alliances with Black managers and capitalists, because they will always choose profits over socialism. In fact they benefit from the exploitation of Black workers in their companies and state corporations, and they therefore defend the capitalist system and the State that caused racism. In objective terms, they are the allies of the White capitalists and State managers.

We workers create all social wealth. Only we can build a free society because only we do not exploit. Only a class-struggle can defeat the state, capitalism and oppression. And a class struggle means workers unity for workers power. The struggle in South Africa will centre on the African working-class. But other workers should be welcome to join — they will also benefit from Anarchism. With the removal of Apartheid privileges, it is possible that large sections of the White working class could join Black workers in struggle as reliable allies. We have already

seen signs of this with the 1995 affiliation to COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) of the predominately White SASBO union (South African Society for Bank Officials).

It should be clear where we disagree with the various nationalist political parties such as the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). Although we recognise that these groups were progressive in the anti-apartheid struggle, they are wrong on some key issues.

First, these groups think that change must come through taking control of the State, either through elections or armed struggle. But the State is part of the problem, not the solution. Second, they link that all Black people share the same basic interests and must unite into a nation. However, the Black workers and the poor have no common interests with the Black bosses and rulers. They are in a struggle with each other. The gap grows wider every day: the richest 20% of African households increased their real incomes by over 40% between 1975 and 1991, whilst the incomes of the poorest 40% of African households decreased by nearly 40% over the same period. The wealthiest 10% of African households have incomes over 60 times those of the poorest 10%, compared to ratios of roughly 30 times amongst Whites, Coloureds and Indians (SA figures, ca. 1996).

Do White workers benefit from racism?

Nationalists on the left, and racists on the right, often argue that White workers benefit from racism, and that it is therefore in their interests to defend discrimination.

In examining this issue, we must be careful to distinguish between different circumstances. In South Africa, which was a colony of White settlement, the small White working class received massive and real gains from Apartheid-capitalism. This was a deliberate tactic by the bosses to win support for capitalism. It was made possible by the economic boom that lasted until the 1970s. Today the bosses' system is less profitable, and they have been forced to abandon Apartheid — as a result they are no longer interested in winning the support of White workers. This means that White workers can no longer rely on racism, but will have to join with other workers or go under. The strength of racist ideas however means that this will be a slow process and it is possible that many White workers may never become progressive. Unity will only be possible on an anti-racist platform that addresses the interests of the Black majority of the working class.

In countries like Britain, Europe and the United States the White working class forms the majority of the population. Although White workers in these countries may receive some short-term benefits from racism, such as slightly lower levels of unemployment and preferential access to the better jobs, these benefits are limited. White workers still make up the majority of the unemployed, the poor, and the workers in low-grade jobs. More importantly, racism has serious negative long-term consequences which outweigh these short-term gains. Racism divides and weakens working-class struggles. The result is a worse life for all workers. In other words, racism is not in the real interests of the White workers of Europe and America. It is no accident that the USA, a country in which bosses have developed the tactic of "divide the races and rule", has the weakest traditions of workers solidarity and union organising, and the worst welfare system of any Western country. Therefore, we fight for workers unity on an anti-racist basis as a necessary and immediate step towards the revolution in these countries. White workers are not inherently

racist, and have joined Blacks in riots against racism in places like Los Angeles (1992) and Brixton, London (1995).

Workers solidarity and unity is in the direct interest of the Black minorities in these countries. These minorities are, at the end of the day, too small and isolated to beat capitalism and racism on their own. They need allies.

It is thus in the interests of all Western workers — White and Black — that these specially oppressed sections are drawn into the unions, and that the unions take up the fight against racism. It is essential that the support of the working class as a whole is won to anti-racist struggles. An injury to one is still an injury to all.

Immediate demands

However, although we believe in the need for revolution, the Workers Solidarity Federation does raise a number of immediate demands around these issues. We fight for land redistribution to the Black workers and the poor. We call for the upgrading of historically Black schools and an improved teacher-pupil ratio. We are for free education and democratic teaching methods in all sectors of education. We support the struggle to correct the inherited racial imbalances in tertiary education. We struggle to transform the universities and technikons into institutions run by the workers, students and staff which serve the needs of the working class, not the ruling class. We support affirmative action in White-dominated trades and professions. We are opposed to unequal wages between Black and White workers, and between skilled and unskilled workers. We are for improved training for Black workers. There should be a large-scale programme of house building, road building and electrification which also deals with the issue of unemployment. All attacks on immigrants, and attempts to divide immigrant from South African workers must be opposed.

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