

PROGRESSIVE LABOR PARTY



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Racism — Capitalism's Key Strategy to Maximize Profits and Divide Working Class Then and Now

Obama and others have recently endorsed a move to make "Juneteenth" a national holiday, one that's been celebrated in Texas since 1867. The holiday grew from the fact that slaves in Texas were not told they had been emancipated until 1865, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

This year Juneteenth will be celebrated in 36 states, with a variety of sponsors from Wells Fargo to the U.S. Army. This new holiday echoes the elevation of Lincoln by Obama, who was sworn into office on the Lincoln Bible, in an effort to declare his election victory the anti-racist culmination of a struggle to realize American "democracy" that began with the "great emancipator" and victor of the Civil War.

The push to make Juneteenth a national holiday serves to perpetuate two myths:

- First, that U.S. capitalism and "democracy" has a history of continuous progress to eliminate racism, and,
- Second, the U.S. government and U.S. presidents from Abraham Lincoln to Obama have been the true representatives of anti-racism in world history.

The goal of both of these myths is to convince the working class, especially black workers, to support U.S. imperialism. With the U.S. fighting multiple oil wars and in the midst of an economic depression, the ruling class has continued to explain its wars of empire as efforts to spread human rights and liberties around the world. As in earlier wars of empire, the U.S. ruling class hopes to hide the reality of racism behind the image of a false hero such as Lincoln or Obama.

But we in the working class need to understand that racism is a fundamental part of capitalism. The capitalists and their politicians are the promoters and beneficiaries of racism, reaping profits, preventing rebellions with divide-and-conquer tactics, and mobilizing soldiers to fight the capitalist battles by demonizing the enemy.

Communist revolution is the only way to end racism and smash the capitalist system that invented it and promotes it. To do this we need to understand the role of the capitalist class and the working class, to have a class-conscious understanding of the past and present practice, so we cannot be fooled into acting against our class interests.

Racism Born in The U.S.A

The first myth can be exploded by looking at the origins and reality of racism in the contemporary United States. Racism is the product of U.S. agrarian capitalism, codified in the laws of colonial Virginia, where European and African indentured laborers had a rich history of multiracial resistance to exploitation. In order to control their rebellious workforce, landowners began imposing differential punishments on black and white servants, enacted laws to criminalize black and white unity, and defined slave status as passing from mother to child.

By 1705, these laws defined slaves as real estate and decriminalized the killing of a slave by an owner. Black landowners were denied the right to employ white servants, and by 1722 were denied the right to vote. This was a decision justified by the governor of Virginia as necessary to "fix a perpetual Brand on Negroes" in order to secure the institution of slavery.

After independence, the U.S. Constitution protected slavery as a "domestic institution" of the member states. The fugitive slave clause and the fugitive slave acts of 1793 and 1850 required the federal government and all citizens to chase down and return runaway slaves, a law defied by the many white and black abolitionists who participated in the Underground Railroad.

Racism had been born as a material source of super-exploitation and as the key ideology of capitalism. It would spread around the world from

this point as each capitalist country defined some group — blacks, Latinos, immigrants, etc. — and developed new racial theories to justify super-exploitation and to divide and conquer the working class. Despite all the hype about a black president, racist super-exploitation is the name of the game around the world. All workers are exploited, paid only enough to reproduce themselves as a labor force, but black and Latino workers are exploited even more viciously.

The material reality of racism is manifest in unemployment figures. Official unemployment in the U.S. is 15 million people which doesn't include another 15 million who can't find a full-time job or have given up looking. In April 2010, the official unemployment rate was 8.8% for whites, 16.5% for blacks, and 12.6% for Latinos. This itself doesn't tell the whole truth, since the unemployment rate for black men in many cities like Detroit is nearly 50%. And racism is getting worse. In 1974 median black incomes were 73% of those of white families. In 2004, a typical black family had an income of 54% of a white family.

Poverty rates of black and Latino families also indicate an intensifying racism. Before the current depression, 75% of white families but only 48% of black families owned their own homes. And the crash of the subprime mortgage market has disproportionately hit black families who were the victims of racist bank schemes. (see box on Wells Fargo, this issue of CHALLENGE, p. 6)

Fifty-five years after *Brown v. Board of Education* schools are more segregated than ever. Urban schools with majority black and Latino students fail to graduate even half of their students. Charter schools, the solution offered by the Obama administration, are even more segregated than public schools. Police terror is used to enforce racism. As a result, there are now more black men in prison than in college.

This police terror extends to the U.S. border. During the Bush presidency the number of immigrant deportations tripled and has been increasing ever since. But in only his first term, Obama's Department of Homeland Security has deported more immigrants than during the eight Bush years. As liberal misleaders denounce Arizona's racist immigration laws, they praise Obama's fascist Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR). It would require all undocumented workers to "voluntarily" turn themselves in and be issued national ID cards, allowing the bosses to more easily exploit this already vulnerable group of workers.

Furthermore, Obama is sending 1,200 National Guard troops to police the U.S.-Mexico border and will soon be deploying Predator drone planes to swarm the Southwest border. By terrorizing migrant workers, the bosses can pay them even lower wages or none at all, acting like an anchor on workers' wages in general.

Racism Hurts ALL Workers

Racism drags down the wages of all workers, and this is clearest in the former slave states where wages for black, white and Latino workers continue to be the lowest in the nation. For example, in the last few months of 2009, Boeing announced that it would open a plant in South Carolina (SC) to assemble its newest airliners. Boeing already uses non-union parts subcontractors in California, and Boeing workers in North Carolina recently voted to leave the International Association of Machinists (IAM). South Carolina hopes to lure even more Boeing production by offering low wages, no unions, and more importantly a low level of labor militancy. According to the Economist (1/09/2010), in 2008, SC employers lost no days of production to strikes.

Ultimately, domestic exploitation will only take capitalism so far. The bosses understand that the top-dog capitalists will be determined on the

global stage, through inter-imperialist war. In the past two decades, anti-Arab racism has been a key component of the bosses' war strategy from Iraq to Afghanistan, from Pakistan to Yemen. Promoting anti-Arab stereotypes on TV shows like *24* or in films like *True Lies* and *300*, and seizing on stories like the recent Times Square bomb incident, the bosses use their media to reinforce a dehumanizing image of Arabs. This enables them to kill and maim millions throughout the Middle East with little to no protest. U.S. soldiers are fueled by the anti-Arab racism promoted by military officers and carry out racist laws passed on the floor of Congress that target Arabs and other immigrant groups specifically and workers in general.

Presidents from Lincoln to Obama understand the necessity of racism in order to maximize profits and to prevent workers from uniting against capitalism. At the same time they understand that workers must be convinced to rally around the nation's flag for capitalist and imperialist war. History becomes an important weapon in how the bosses convince workers to fight for capitalism instead of in their own class interests.

"Juneteenth" Hides Truth of Lincoln's Racist Union "Victory"

So how do they convince us to put up with this? Part of the story is to convince us that the politicians and the government are the key forces for change, and that other workers are the enemy or powerless. Here Juneteenth and similar holidays play a role by hiding the true history of the end of slavery: that it came as a result of the struggles of black and white workers, not through the actions of the racist Abraham Lincoln.

When the Civil War began, Lincoln's goal was to maintain the Union for the capitalist class, not to abolish slavery or to eliminate racism. Lincoln was an open racist who declared, "I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about the social and political equality of the white and black races." (foot note 1) As the Civil War began in 1861, Lincoln advocated "colonizing" blacks in Africa and Central America; supported a constitutional amendment protecting slavery where it already existed; refused to enlist blacks into the army; and ordered continued enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act which required all citizens to return runaway slaves to their masters.

But as more and more enslaved black workers fled to Union lines, many Union soldiers refused to return them to their owners, and some generals attempted to abolish slavery in the occupied slave territories. Over Lincoln's objections, Congress passed laws that confiscated slaves (property) of Confederate owners and used them as Union soldiers, but still in bondage. In September 1862, Lincoln adopted partial emancipation as a diplomatic and military tactic. In the Emancipation Proclamation, he requested that Congress appropriate funds for the deportation of freed slaves and announced that slaves in any states that continued to rebel would be freed on January 1, 1863.

This proclamation by itself freed no one. Slaves in Maryland, Delaware, Missouri or Kentucky, slave states that were loyal to the union, were not covered. Slavery was not abolished there until the ratification of the 13th amendment in December 1865, six months after "Juneteenth." The proclamation could be enforced in the eleven rebellious Confederate states (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Florida) only if and when the Union Army arrived.

The real Liberators of Slaves

The real fight against slavery came from hundreds of slave revolts that had destabilized the system from the inside. The most famous of these

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are:

- The Haitian rebellions that eliminated slavery and drove the French from the island in 1804
- The rebellion led by Nat Turner in Virginia in 1831.
- The 1859 John Brown and Harriet Tubman attack on the Marine armory at Harper's Ferry, a military effort by black and white abolitionists, which forced millions to realize that pacifism would not end slavery.

During the Civil War, 180,000 slaves took up arms and joined the fight against their masters whenever the Union army neared. And in the Mississippi Valley, two-thirds of the Union army was black, half of whom were former slaves. Others took over abandoned plantations, and divided the land among themselves.

All of this worried capitalist politicians, including Lincoln, who in April 1865 was scheming to remove former black soldiers from the nation because he feared that these disciplined men would mount a "guerilla war" against their former owners.

Super-exploited Wage Slaves

Wage work is just another form of exploitation, of claiming control over the labor power of the working class. Over the course of the next decades, freedmen and women found themselves ensnared in a new form of bondage — sharecropping and debt peonage — that bound them to the land as super-exploited wage workers. Poor whites also fell into debt peonage. And fearing the potential unity of this exploited workforce, southern planters and northern industrialists imposed segregation, imprisoned black men for petty crimes (including being unemployed) and then used them as prison laborers to build roads and harvest crops. They also imposed poll taxes and other laws that disfranchised both blacks and poor whites.

Over time, manufacturers moved south — first textiles mills, tobacco processing and mining, then rubber, electronics, auto, and now aerospace, each seeking the lower wages that resulted from super-exploitation and the ability to divide and conquer the working class.

Thus, in the last few decades, auto companies have shut down plants in the North where workers earned about \$25 per hour to open new plants in the South where starting pay in the mainly subcontracted plants is about \$10 an hour. The racist super-exploitation that began with slavery and was followed by wage slavery forced onto newly freedmen and women under the banners of Lincoln's Union army continues in the South today.

Fighting Racism

There is a third story hidden within the myths of U.S. anti-racism: the story of multi-racial unity and fight-back, and the fact that racism has to be constantly reinvented to prevent the potential power of a unified working class. Many readers of CHALLENGE are familiar with the multi-racial unity of anti-racist fighters like John Brown and the black-white unity of the 1892 New Orleans general strike. This kind of action was a constant undercurrent.

For example, in Galveston, TX, in the 1840s-60s the common everyday experience of poor white dockworkers and enslaved black workers overshadowed their racial "differences." Despite the efforts of the city government to prevent fraternization of black and white workers, many rejected the bosses' racism and saw themselves as part of the same exploited class. In the aftermath of the Civil War, dock workers in Galveston, TX, Pascagoula, MS, and other southern port cities, like those of New Orleans, built united struggles. They were defeated through violence, as the capitalists fought to build new racist divisions to sustain their system.

Other examples suggest that rather than celebrating the bosses' Juneteenth holiday, workers should celebrate our own Juneteenth. On June 14th, 1919 nearly one hundred white lumber workers in Bogalusa, LA armed themselves to defend black workers from company threats against unionizing. In unity, armed white workers safely escorted the black workers from their homes to a union meeting. Several of these white workers were killed defending a black worker and union activist who was on the run from company thugs trying to kill him.²

These stories highlight the potential for multi-racial unity among workers once we realize our common class interest. They speak to the power workers possess once they reject racist lies in favor of working-class unity. We must take inspiration

from these examples of past unity but also recognize the limits of such reform struggle. These battles focused mainly on efforts to unionize workers across racial lines, but lacking a communist analysis, failed to attack the capitalist system that perpetuates and enforces racism.

The bosses keep racism alive in the 21st century, using holidays such as Juneteenth to keep workers divided, while hiding the story of working-class unity and fight-back. Anti-racist unity poses one of the greatest threats to the bosses. Both Lincoln and Obama and every president in between understood this fact. Fighting racism is a key task for communists and the working class today. We must seize upon the history of our predecessors and build a multi-racial fighting party, the PLP, to smash the racist system of capitalism once and for

all.

¹ Fuller version of the quotation: "'I am not nor ever been in favor of bringing about the social and political equality of the white and black races....there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And in as much as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and, inasmuch as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position be assigned to the white race.'" (1858) In his home state of Illinois, he supported laws denying blacks the vote and the right to testify in court against whites, and forbidding blacks from migrating into the state. Lincoln had voted for such laws in state office and saw them as necessary to prevent racial integration and intermarriage. Lincoln's political preference was for the federal government to purchase slaves from their owners and then deport them to colonies in Africa and Central America. (Colonization)

² Norwood, Stephen H. "Bogalusa Burning: The War Against Biracial Unionism in the Deep South, 1919," Journal of Southern History....

The Progressive Labor Party in the Fight Against Racism and Capitalism

On The Job: Anti-Racism In The Labor Movement

One particularly bold action was the 1973 wildcat strike that PLP and its Workers Action Movement (WAM) led at Chrysler's Mack Avenue stamping plant in Detroit. Two PLP members — one white, one black — led 200 mostly black workers in stopping the assembly lines over safety issues in the first sit-down strike in auto since the 1930s (which was also led by communists). PLP and WAM organized outside support, bringing food to the workers through plant gates. The action brought 8-column headlines to newspapers as far away as Los Angeles. The ruling class and their junior partners in the auto union leadership so feared that communists would take leadership of these basic industrial workers that they organized 1,000 union officials, including KKK members from UAW Local 22, to violently break the workers' strike!

In other struggles from the 1970s to the 1990s the Party led sharp struggles that united construction workers in Wisconsin, hospital workers in Chicago and Philadelphia and aerospace workers in the Seattle area. In recent years, PLP has confronted capitalists' increasingly racist attacks on Latino and black workers. In Washington, D.C.'s transit system, the bosses have systematically attacked black workers through the steady increase in "wage progression" (i.e., lower wages for new workers for longer time periods) and these workers responded by electing a PLP'er union president.

Campuses: No Free Speech For Racists

The fight against racist practices and ideology was critical to building class consciousness among students and others infected with the long history of institutional racism and segregation. These included the "genetic difference" theory (blacks are "born with inferior intelligence" compared to whites, argued by William Shockley, Arthur Jensen, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray), and the "cultural difference" theory (blacks have "become used to freeloading and stealing," argued by Daniel P. Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, Edward Banfield). These racist scumbags were often supported by right-wing foundations like the Pioneer Fund and the Bradley Foundation.

The PLP fought hard against racist theories and theorists on campuses. We published pamphlets demolishing these theories, held forums, protests, and not only physically chased many racists off campuses but also disrupted leading racists from having a university forum, all under the slogan, "No Free Speech for Racists!"

Just as Defense Department representatives were kicked off campuses for being purveyors of genocide in imperialist wars, so, too, PLP led and inspired students and workers to attack these racist theoreticians on many campuses, driving home the reality that racist ideology had to be smashed as part of building class consciousness and revolutionary struggle.

Since racism is the principal tool of the capitalist class for maintaining its super-exploitation and its power, the fight against racism has to be a bedrock principle, upfront and clear, not a tactic or a recruiting gimmick. All workers suffer from the effects of racist attacks on black and immigrant workers, which lower wages and conditions for the whole working class and make them mistrustful of each other, inhibiting sharp struggle.

So all workers must unite against them.

In The Community: Police Brutality

In July 1964, NYPD cop Thomas Gilligan murdered 15-year-old James Powell, a black Harlem teenager. This vicious racist slaying ignited the fuel of longstanding racist oppression in that community. PLP's Harlem branch, which had been agitating in street rallies against police brutality and unemployment for months, immediately swung into action, distributing thousands of posters proclaiming, "Wanted for Murder, Gilligan the Cop." PLP's Harlem storefront was filled with local residents taking stacks of leaflets to distribute at the many demonstrations, rallies, and other events supporting the rebellion.

Thousands of CHALLENGES flooded Harlem. Rebels marched through the streets, defying the cops, holding high the paper's front page as their flag. Only PLP supported it and, because of that, was subjected to an injunction barring it from a 45-block north-south area from river to river — the first such ban in the city's history. Two PLP'ers were jailed because of the printing of that poster.

PLP supported such rebellions throughout that decade and into the early 1970s nationwide, in Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles and dozens of other cities.

PLP continues to fight against racist police brutality and in support of black rebellions wherever they occur in response to racist super-exploitation and police brutality.

In the same vein we organized a militant march on LAPD headquarters in the midst of the rebellion in Los Angeles that followed the acquittal of the racist cops who beat Rodney King. We travel to places where the fires of class hatred flare up. PLP organizers were warmly greeted by community insurgents in Cincinnati during a 1999 rebellion against police brutality; by angry residents in Toledo who rebelled in 2003 against police murders in their community; in New York City in 2006 around the fatal shooting of Sean Bell; and in the killings of black and Latino youth in Los Angeles.

The Party's work in tying racism to the horrific effects of Katrina on the workers of New Orleans was notable in the many trips members and friends made to the area in support of the workers.

In The Barracks:

PLP'ers refused to seek deferments for which they might be eligible and either joined the military or allowed themselves to be drafted to organize against racism and the war. This decision was, and remains, a thunderclap amid the timid squeaks of pacifism uttered by various groups on the "Left." In the GI movement, PLP fought vigorously against racism towards black soldiers and the Vietnamese workers and continues in such struggles today within the military as the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars rage on.

PLP GIs seek to bridge the gap between black and white GIs in resisting the military and its war. During Vietnam, black soldiers frequently took the lead in attacking the brass (such as during the soldiers' rebellion in Darmstadt, Germany and the sailors' rebellion on board the Kitty Hawk aircraft carrier) and through fragging attacks, using grenades to kill their own officers (such as the one allegedly carried out by GI Billy Dean Smith).