

# The South and the Black Radical Tradition: Then and Now

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“If the Communists don’t awaken the Negroes of the South, who will? Certainly not the race leaders whose schools and jobs depend on white philanthropy.”

Langston Hughes (in Robinson 1997:121)

## ABSTRACT

From the inception of the emerging American nation, the South is a central battleground in the struggles for freedom, justice, and equality. It is the location of the most intense repression, exploitation, and reaction directed toward Africans Americans, as well as Native Americans and working people generally. At the same time the South is the site of the most heroic resistance to these oppressive conditions of class domination, of white supremacy, and of sexist social relations in the public and private sectors. The institution of chattel slavery thrusts the Black radical tradition into the forefront of these early struggles. Today’s globalization in the electronic age and neoliberal policies – the attack on the New Deal and Civil Rights reforms of the past era – again place the Black radical tradition at the center of the struggles for freedom, justice, and equality.

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We present a historical materialist analysis of the Black radical tradition in the South, from slave resistance and rebellions in the 1500s through the Civil War to the economic and political justice struggles in the current period. Black women – often working class – are always at the core of the Black radical tradition and are frequently in its leadership. Black radicals in each period make revolutionary demands that challenge state policy and/or capitalist property relations. But history reveals that each victory, hard fought and won, merely reforms capitalism and is only temporary. We conclude that the Black radical tradition in America calls for the liberation (i.e., the full economic, political and social equality) of the black masses. Permanent victory means that the Black radical tradition is at the heart of a working class-based movement to bring an end to the global capitalist system and to the class, color, and gender oppression that is its cornerstone.

### **Overview: The South and The Black Radical Tradition**

From the inception of the emerging American nation, the South is a central battleground in the struggles for freedom, justice, and equality. It is the location of the most intense repression, exploitation, and reaction directed toward Africans Americans, as well as Native Americans and working people generally. At the same time the South is the site of the most heroic resistance to these oppressive conditions of class domination, of white supremacy, and of sexist social relations in the public and private sectors. The institution of chattel slavery thrusts the Black radical tradition into the forefront of these early struggles. Today's high tech – electronic – global economy and the attack on the New Deal and Civil Rights reforms again place the Black radical tradition at the center of the struggles for freedom, justice, and equality.

The Black radical tradition in the South changes as the conditions of economic, political and social life develop from the 1500s to the twenty-first century. It is embodied in the following struggles and periods: 1. slave resistance and rebellions from the 1500s through the Civil War; 2. legal and economic struggles to realize the goals of Reconstruction and to counter the postbellum reaction and defeat of Reconstruction; 3. economic and political struggles during Jim Crow; 4. liberation struggles of the modern Civil Rights era; and 5. economic and political justice struggles in the current period. Black women – often working class – are always at the core of the Black radical tradition and are frequently in its leadership.

The Black radical tradition in America calls for the liberation (i.e., the full economic, political and social equality) of the black masses –

whether slaves, servants or sharecroppers; factory, service or domestic workers; or today's increasingly underemployed and unemployed; men, women and children. Black radicals in each period make revolutionary demands that challenge state policy and/or capitalist property relations. But history reveals that each victory, hard fought and won, merely reforms capitalism and is only temporary. Class and color divisions create internal strains and contradictions that plague Black radicals in their relation to the dominant reform tradition. Subversion, diversion and betrayal come at the hands of Black elites as well as white patrons and allies of all classes who serve the interests of capital and the ruling class rather than the interests of the Black masses.

To achieve permanent victory remains the enduring challenge of the Black radical tradition. This raises the ever present question confronting Black radicals: "Can the American capitalist state, that has as its essential quality the literal dehumanization of Black Americans and the protection of capitalist property rights above all else, ever be reformed to insure full economic, political and social equality for the Black masses?" We think not. Rather, permanent victory must mean that the Black radical tradition is at the heart of a working class-based movement to bring an end to the capitalist system and to the class, color, and gender oppression that is its cornerstone.

### **The Struggle Against Slavery: 1500s – 1865**

The South is and has always been a key site of struggle between forces seeking to impose fascist rule and forces seeking the revolutionary reconstruction of society. The anti-slavery movement is the earliest expression of the Black radical tradition. Slave resistance – in the very first settlements in the Americas, on board slave ships, and on the plantations and in the towns of colonial America and of the early American nation – is a powerful, consistent and constant struggle. Slave rebellions and the rich record of marronage, the unity of fugitive African slaves and Native Americans in establishing communities of survival and struggle against European colonial oppression, are central to the experience of the first African slaves forcibly brought to continental North America and to the emerging Black radical tradition in the South (Robinson 1997).

In the early 1500s the Spaniards enslave hundreds of Africans throughout the Americas. Despite slave uprisings on Hispaniola and the coalition that develops between African slaves and Indigenous peoples, the Spaniards sail from Santo Domingo to the North with five hundred Spanish men and women and one hundred African slaves. In 1526 they settle the colony of San Miguel de Guadalupe near the mouth of the Pee Dee River in what is today eastern South Carolina. Within months the leader, Ayllon, dies;

the Spanish quarrel among themselves; the slaves rebel and flee among the Native Americans, who side with the slaves; and the remaining 150 Spaniards return to Santo Domingo (Aptheker 1969:163; Katz 1986:24-33). Katz (1986:25-26) notes the irony:

The Black Indians of Pee Dee River became the first colony on this continent to practice the belief that all people – newcomer and native – are created equal and are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . .

. . . This dark democracy lived in family groups before London companies sent out settlers with muskets, Bibles, and concepts of private property.

But it is the enslavement of African labor in the English colonies, especially in the southern plantation economy, that sets in motion the dynamics of American economic development inseparably tied to forced Black slave and, later, near-slave labor. African slave labor creates great wealth as the “New” World’s agricultural commodities are in demand in Europe’s expanding industrial market economy. The integration of the colonial economy into the developing world economy fuels the growing transatlantic slave trade and, with it, a fierce anti-slavery movement. This, in turn, requires a political, cultural and social system to hold in check the rebellions and insurrections of Black radicals, and gives rise to the fascist nature of the South. The Black resistance movement plays itself out within the context of contending power struggles in the western hemisphere as a new world order emerges.

By the 1660s and 1670s the Black slave population increases so much that the colonists find it necessary to pass elaborate and repressive slave codes to maintain control over this essential and restless commodity – Black slave labor. The slave codes, enacted between 1662 and 1749, not only regulate the legal status of children of slave and slave master and forbid slave insurrections, but also effectively separate Blacks and Native Americans from their European American working class allies (Robinson 1997:2-9).

Black resistance to slavery in the colonial period mounts along with the growth in the number of slaves. Numerous slave plots and insurrections begin in 1687 and extend to 1740, especially in Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia. The slave rebels kill many whites; the slaves are captured and killed, often through torture; yet the rebellions continue (Coffin 1970:11-15). Many Africans, subjected to the most inhumane conditions aboard the New England slave ships during the Middle Passage, become part of the Black radical tradition even before they set foot on American soil. African slaves carry out many slave-ship insurrections, including one in 1732 in which they kill Captain John Major of New Hampshire and his crew and capture the ship’s cargo (Coffin 1970:14-15). The Mendi mutiny on the *Amistad* in 1840-41 is the most well known.

Many more African slaves run away and find refuge and support among the Native Americans, who often join them in further rebellion against the colonists. These maroon communities, permanent self-sufficient settlements for living as well as staging slave raids, are an important expression of the Black radical tradition. At least fifty maroon communities exist from 1672 to 1864 in the mountains, forests, and swamps of “South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama” (Aptheker 1979:151-152). In 1691 the slave Mingoe leads a band of maroon rebels in Virginia, inspiring later maroon rebels who take his name (Aptheker 1979:152). In South Carolina Black maroons are active in the early 1700s harassing the colonists and aiding the Indians in the Yamasee War of 1715-16 (Holland Braund 1991:606). By 1765 in South Carolina the military is called out to put down a general slave revolt led by maroon rebels. The same thing happens in Georgia in 1771 and 1772 (Aptheker 1979:153).

The free Black town of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose (Mose), established near St. Augustine in Spanish Florida from 1738 to 1763, provides safety, a home, and a base of operations for fugitive slaves (Robinson 1997:12-15). New Orleans, in French and later Spanish Louisiana, is the point of disembarkation for the Bambara who bring their heroic resistance tradition to the task of organizing rebellions and revolts throughout the colony from 1709 to 1740. Many rebellious African slaves flee and join with the Natchez Indians of the region to carry out their insurgencies (Robinson 1997:17-19).

The vast accumulation of wealth in the plantation economy precisely because of the chattel slave labor system propels the American colonists into their own war of independence against England. With the impending American revolution and the preoccupation of the colonists with their war against Britain, the slaves and maroons escalate their slave revolts. By 1775 armed slaves are a threat to the colonists from Georgia to Maryland (Katz 1990:103).

Hundreds and thousands of slaves join in the rebellions and thousands more join the British troops, the enemy of their enemy, in the war against the American colonial system that shows no regard or legal rights for the life and humanity of the Black slave and only slight regard and rights for the free Black population. Within the American Revolution Blacks, both slave and free, join with Native Americans and sometimes white abolitionist allies to liberate as many as 100,000 slaves, about one-fifth of all Blacks in America in 1780 (Robinson 1997:23-24).

In order to secure their future wealth and consolidate their position in the global capitalist system, the slavocracy uses its power to transform the brutality and oppression of slave codes into the defining legal documents of

the newly independent American nation. The fundamental contradiction between the interests of the American ruling class – initially all white male property owners, including many slaveholders – for maximum profits and Black slaves for their freedom and humanity is embedded in the U.S. Constitution. Freedom and democracy, power and privilege are only for those like the “founding fathers,” i.e., property owners, men, and people of European descent. The poor of all colors, all Blacks, all Native Americans, and all women have no power, no freedom, no liberty, and no equality. Fifteen percent of the U.S. population is eligible for the franchise; and about half exercise that right. Slaves are not recognized as human beings, only as property. They are, however, counted as 3/5 of a person in determining congressional representation (DePauw 1973).

Southern slavery exposes the farce of American “democracy.” The national ideology of white supremacy and institutional racism are solidified in the struggles around slavery and its abolition. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, criminalizing anyone who aids a runaway slave, seals the garrison character of the new American nation state and anticipates the great reluctance of Lincoln and the North in the Civil War to vigorously pursue the abolition of slavery throughout the country.

Scholars estimate that by 1800 between 10 and 15 million Black Africans have been forcibly enslaved in the Americas since the beginning of the slave trade – about one-third of those actually taken from Africa. In *toto*, roughly 50 million African men, women, and children are lost to the continent in the modern slave trade (Zinn 1995:29). With the rapidly expanding economy and chronic labor shortages, American capitalists intensify their reliance on slave labor in the years leading up to the Civil War. Slaves in the plantation economy produce a thousand tons of cotton a year in 1790; by 1860 they produce a million tons (Zinn 1995:167). The number of slaves is half a million in 1790, just over 2 million in 1830, and 4 million in 1860 (Robinson 1997:50-51; Zinn 1995:167). On the eve of the Civil War, over 60 percent of all U.S. capital is invested in slaves (Keller 1983:58-59). By the time of the Civil War, the South is 15 percent richer than the North, including 4 billion dollars in the form of slaves (Peery 1992:4,15; Katz-Fishman and Scott 1994:570-71).

As the nineteenth century dawns, the Black radical tradition in the South and aspects of the anti-slavery movement it is leading take on an insurrectionary quality designed not just to help slaves escape, but to end slavery as an economic and political system. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and the great slave revolt it embodies provide inspiration and troops for the growing slave rebellions in America. The earliest revolt encouraged by the Haitian Revolution is the extensive Point Coupee Slave Conspiracy in 1795 in Spanish colonial Louisiana. It fails, betrayed by the Tunica

Indian spies. Twenty-five slaves are arrested and killed; another twenty-three are tried, hung and decapitated (Robinson 1997:31-32). But Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822, and Nat Turner in 1831 carry on the Black radical tradition.

In spring 1800 in the Richmond, Virginia area the bondsman Gabriel Prosser organizes a general slave uprising including slave artisans, field hands, resident aliens, and non-Black workers. Prosser envisions this insurrection as the realization of the liberation of workers from their oppression and of slaves from their masters. Again the rebels are betrayed. Prosser is among the twenty-six captured and hung; and nine are sent to Louisiana. But the plot is so vast that trials are suspended. Sancho, a survivor of the failed uprising and a Black ferry operator, resumes the conspiracy in 1802 and takes it to North Carolina. That plot is also discovered. Ten conspirators are hung in Virginia and fifteen in North Carolina (Robinson 1997:33-34).

In Louisiana in 1811 another major slave revolt, involving about 500 insurgents including many mulattos, begins in St. John parish and sets fire to four or five plantation houses on the way to New Orleans. The U.S. militia responds, killing about sixty-six rebels; and another sixteen are executed (Robinson 1997:34-35). Slave rebels are active in South Carolina throughout the early 1800s. In 1822 Denmark Vesey, a former slave and carpenter, leads a conspiracy in the Charleston area drawing on skilled slaves, free Black artisans, and servants. The conspirators are arrested and 131 are tried. Thirty-five are hanged, thirty-three are banished; and sixty-one are acquitted, but nine of these are also banished (Robinson 1997:36).

Perhaps no insurrectionary slave leader matches Nat Turner in terms of power and vision. Turner, a self-proclaimed prophet, mobilizes sixty to eighty slaves and free Blacks to join in the uprising on August 22, 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia. For two days they rampage the area plantations, killing fifty-five adults and children of the planter class. Before their ammunition runs out, they instill panic and terror throughout the slaveholding South. The Virginia militia, federal troops, and the Navy are mobilized and, along with the mobs, massacre several hundred Blacks and terrorize hundreds more. Turner eludes capture for two months; but surrenders after his coconspirators are put on trial and Lucy Barrow, a Black woman, is hanged. Virginia tries and hangs Nat on November 5, 1831 along with about eighteen of the rebel leaders (Robinson 1997:37-38; Zinn 1995:170).

Reaction and state repression deepen. State legislatures renew their bans on teaching slaves to read and write, on allowing them to have books, to preach, and even to pray. In the 1850s the United States passes the Fugitive Slave Act and the Supreme Court hands down the

Dred Scott decision that slaves are property and not persons, so they have no legal rights. Black radicals in the South, in addition to leading slave revolts, continue to participate in maroon communities, including the powerful Seminole Nation with its famed Black Indians, and organize the Underground Railroad as part of the daily reality of fugitive slaves.

Aptheker (1979:157-164) documents numerous vibrant maroon communities in the swamps and forests in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi from 1818 to 1860. These communities not only offer refuge to runaway African and Black slaves among the Native Americans, but also inspiration and material support for nearby slave revolts. The Black Indians of the Seminole Nation in Spanish Florida are an essential expression of the Black radical tradition and the most renowned maroon community in North America. They are a threat to developing U.S. capitalism in their expression of unity between the Native and African Americans of the hemisphere.

“Seminole” in native Creek language means “run away.” Negro Fort on the Apalachicola River is a haven for slave fugitives in Florida, and on nearby American plantations, especially in Georgia. They establish extensive farming settlements and send out raiding parties freeing thousands of slaves. In 1816 Georgia planters urge President Andrew Jackson to attack the fort to destroy it and return the slaves and other property to their owners. The American expedition destroys the fort and most inhabitants; but the Blacks escape and flee among the Seminole on the Suwannee River. The Seminole chiefs protect the Black fugitives who reestablish their farming settlements and serve as warriors and advisers. The First Seminole War thus begins in 1816, but is suspended without a treaty (Robinson 1997:40-41; Katz 1986).

The Second Seminole War (1835-42) is fought over the U.S. government’s attempt to enforce the 1830 Indian Removal Act, giving President Jackson the legal tool to relocate all Native Americans to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi. Most of the Seminoles oppose removal, choosing instead to fight. The Black Seminoles are the most determined in their opposition; and warriors such as Abraham distinguish themselves in battle. The Florida swamps provide the perfect locale for the guerrilla warfare carried on by thousands of Seminoles; and the neighboring plantations provide hundreds of Black warriors for the fight. The Seminole are a formidable foe for the U.S. army and are defeated in the early 1840s only after years of war that cost the United States 40 million dollars and 1,500 troops (Robinson 1997:41-43). Many, though not all, members of the Seminole Nation join with members of the five southern Native Nations in the forced march out of the southeast to Oklahoma, recorded as the Trail of Tears (Katz 1986:53-69).

Black radicals, most fugitive slaves or ex-slaves, are also at the core of the radical wing of the abolition movement. Their courage, their organization, and their persistence are essential to the celebrated slave conspiracy, the Underground Railroad. From 1830 to the Civil War the Railroad transports an estimated 66,000 slaves to freedom. Harriet Tubman, born into slavery in Maryland in 1820 (or 1821), escapes to freedom and frees her family. She becomes a major figure in the Black liberation struggle and is the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. Tubman conducts nineteen “trains” from South to North and brings over 300 slaves to freedom. Carrying a pistol, she tells the runaways: “You’ll be free or die” (Zinn 1995:171). Josiah Henson, himself a fugitive slave from Kentucky, is also a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Like Tubman, he directs the fugitives from their point of escape to refuge in Canada (Robinson 1997:30).

Tubman is involved in another key insurrectionary episode in the Black radical tradition in the South – the raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia) led by John Brown, a radical white abolitionist, in 1859. The purpose of the raid is to secure the arms needed for a massive slave insurrection. Tubman helps recruit Black rebels for the raid and plans to participate; but she is ill. Five Black radicals are part of the strike force of twenty-two men. Three are free Blacks, and two – Dangerfield Newby and Shields Green – are fugitive slaves hoping to free their families as part of the insurrection. The raid ends in failure. Of the five Blacks, two are killed in the raid, including Newby. Two are executed by the authorities, including Green; and one escapes. John Brown is executed by the Virginia authorities, with federal government approval on December 2, 1859 (Robinson 1997: 60-65; Zinn 1995:181-82).

The urban context in the antebellum South is another rich location of Black radicalism. Black slave labor (men and women) hired out in the growing urban centers in a variety of industries – tobacco production, mining, manufacturing, ironworks, construction, etc. – sows the seeds of working-class activism and working-class leadership in the fight against slavery, as well as for radical Reconstruction and against Jim Crow in the postbellum years (Trotter 1994; Schnittman 1994; Davis 1994; Honey 1994; Kelley 1990). One of the largest concentrations of urban industrial slaves is in the Richmond, Virginia tobacco industry, which employs 3,400 Black men and 34 Black women – most of whom are slaves. These slave workers attack their overseers, set fires, engage in other acts of sabotage, steal goods – many of which they resell for cash – and lead the fight for self-determination of their living conditions. Richmond tobacco slave Jordan Hatcher beats to death his overseer William Jackson, setting an example for other slaves to provoke their overseers whom they then

attack. Urban industrial slaves also use much of the cash they acquire from wages, bonuses, and trafficking in stolen goods to support their own communities and churches and to gain access to otherwise unavailable goods and services (e.g., theaters, horse races, cookshops, brothels, and gambling houses) (Schnittman 1994:84-85).

The Black radical tradition in the South – the increasing slave insurrections on plantations and in urban centers and the growing resistance from Black fugitive slaves and Native Americans in maroon communities – in no small measure pushes the nation toward the Civil War. Harriet Tubman lends her skill, courage and militancy to the Union effort in the Civil War, guiding Union Army companies over what is for her familiar terrain. She organizes intelligence networks of slaves in enemy territory, leads scouting raids, and is the only woman to lead U.S. army troops into battle (Robinson 1997:31). Almost 200,000 self-liberated slaves and free Blacks join the Union ranks to bring the issue of slavery to the fore in the war (Robinson 1997:60).

The original intent of Lincoln and the Unionists in the North is to save the Union, not to free the slaves. Lincoln initially proposes eliminating slavery gradually, with its final abolition in 1940. However, with the war going badly for the Union, the northern section of the ruling class concludes that slavery has to be abolished if the war is to be won (Peery 1992; Zinn 1995). When Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, it frees slaves only in rebel hands and allows Black troops to serve only in certain capacities. The proclamation is silent about slaves behind Union lines and in the Border States, and does not even free slaves on some plantations, as in the Mississippi Valley, where slaveowners take an oath of “loyalty” to the national government (Meier and Rudwick 1993:159).

### **The Struggle for Reconstruction & Against Reaction: 1865 – 1870s**

Black radicals, thinking they had finally brought an end to the atrocities of modern chattel slavery American style, prepare to take their place in the new economic, political and social order of the postbellum South. However, the economic reality of the day prevents the full and permanent integration of Blacks into southern society. No sooner is victory declared than reaction erupts. As the Civil War is ending and the northern section of the ruling class is vacillating about what to do with the freedmen and women, the southern states of the former Confederacy are definitive. In 1865 and 1866 they pass the extremely repressive Black Codes, laws attempting to return Blacks to a virtual state of servitude and to insure an abundant supply of super-cheap labor for the agricultural work that

still needs to be done. The defeated planter class also promotes and funds extra-legal reactionary and terrorist vigilante organizations. The most well known is the Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee as a “social club” by six ex-Confederate officers – all educated men and some holding positions of prestige in the community.

The ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, which only generally outlaws discrimination by the states and guarantees full constitutional rights to all U.S. born and naturalized persons, is not enough. It has to be bolstered with the Supplementary Civil Rights Bill specifically protecting Blacks from forced segregation in transportation, schools, and public accommodations. This bill does not pass until 1875 – only after deletion of the section calling for mixed schools. Blacks test the law in cities in both the North and the South, and find many evasions and outright violations. Less than ten years later in 1883, at the dawn of the Jim Crow era, the Supreme Court finds the law unconstitutional (Meier and Rudwick 1993:183-84).

Richmond’s former industrial slaves are militant in their pursuit of economic survival and radical Reconstruction. When the tobacco manufactures cut workers wages in half, the Black tobacco workers demand restoration; and when that fails they intensify their efforts through their benevolent societies and organize trade unions. Richmond’s Black tobacco workers affiliate with the National Laboring Club and the Tobacco Laborers’ Association, which sends delegates to the National Labor Union and Industrial Congress in the early 1870s. When the Knights of Labor opens up to Black workers in 1885, Black tobacco workers eagerly join and fill leadership roles (Schnittman 1994:72).

In August 1867, when the Republican State Convention opens in Richmond, Black tobacco workers refuse to work so they can attend. They force the tobacco factories to close while they advocate for an “ultra” radical Reconstruction agenda. Later in 1867 and 1868, with the Virginia Constitutional Convention in session to debate critical issues, Black tobacco workers again leave their jobs and again the factories cease production (Schnittman 1994:72).

Blacks throughout the South – armed with the Reconstruction Act of 1867, the Fifteenth Amendment, and new state constitutions – make discernible gains in the political arena. Elections under the watchful eye of federal troops bring to office a significant number of Blacks – ex-slaves and antebellum free Blacks – in local, state, and federal positions. Among their ranks are two U.S. Senators (both from Mississippi), twenty U.S. Congressmen, five lieutenant governors – including P.B.S. Pinchback who served as Louisiana’s acting governor for more than a month, as

well as several secretaries of state, state treasurers, and superintendents of education (Zinn 1980:195; Meier and Rudwick 1993:185-86).

Systems of free, integrated public education are instituted in several southern states under the terms of the Reconstruction state governments. In addition, the Freedmen's Bureau and the churches establish a network of schools for all levels and types of education – from primary to professional. Under Reconstruction governments the Black and white masses also gain some measure of tax relief, credit, freedom of movement, and employment in a variety of trades.

Throughout Reconstruction southern whites – led by the ex-planter class and their secret vigilante societies such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Camellia, the White Legion, and the White Brotherhood – resist and rebel against the Reconstruction governments and the federal occupation. By 1876 three factors converge in the decision of the ruling class to end the occupation and, with it, Reconstruction. Increasingly ex-slaves and poor white farmers demand radical land redistribution; federal power has been effectively transferred from the southern planters to the northern industrialists and bankers; and the low level of agricultural technology requires large numbers of agricultural laborers to farm the land in the revamped “plantation” system of sharecropping (Katz-Fishman and Scott 1994:572).

In 1877 the Hayes-Tilden Compromise becomes history. The federal government withdraws its troops from the South marking the beginning of the end of the Reconstruction era. The race riots of the Reconstruction years – beginning in 1865 and peaking in 1874-76 – led by white Democrats to “redeem” the South from radical Republican control anticipate the even greater violence of the post-Reconstruction era (Meier and Rudwick 1993:189).

Once again the Black radical tradition must confront the fact that, to the ruling capitalist class, Black labor is little more than an instrument for creating wealth out of the land and factories. The most intense political and ideological repression are necessary to keep the Black masses in their place to do this work and to keep Black and white working people divided. The virtual reenslavement of Black workers as sharecroppers and industrial workers, to a lesser extent, expresses the essence of the relationship between Black labor and capital. That is, only so long as capital can extract superprofits from Black labor – as slave, sharecropper, unskilled and semiskilled worker – is there a relationship at all. The purpose of politics is to maintain the inferior or subordinated status of Black labor; and the purpose of white supremacist ideology is to ensure consensus on the point of Blacks' subordinated status. Black radicals are thrust into a defensive

posture in their struggle against reaction from the ex-planter class and from the state itself, even in the Reconstruction era.

### **The Struggle Against Jim Crow: 1870s – 1940s**

During Reconstruction the ex-planter class – dethroned but not unarmed – terrorizes both Blacks and their southern white allies. When Reconstruction ends with the withdrawal of federal troops, it unleashes a horrific reign of terror. This fascist era of Jim Crow – of lynchings and burnings, of vigilante violence, of Dixiecrats, of sheriffs and goons with guns and hoses, of rapes and mayhem, of legal apartheid southern style – is still recent history and fresh in our memories.

From 1882 to 1900, 2,833 people are lynched – 1,726 Blacks and 1,107 of their whites allies (Ploski et al. 1971). The Tuskegee Institute's Department of Records and Research reports a total of 4,743 lynchings over the period from 1882 to 1968, with the greatest number between 1892 and 1902 (Low and Clift 1981:541-42). Lynchings, as well as other forms of terror and violence, serve to teach both Blacks and whites an important lesson, i.e., not to fight the powerful fascist government of the post-Reconstruction era. With Jim Crow state constitutions rapidly replacing Reconstruction constitutions, by the early 1890s a new legal structure supplements the direct violence of lynching as a means of social control.

Within the Black radical tradition Ida B. Wells (later Wells-Barnett), a native of Mississippi, emerges in the 1890s and early 1900s as the most militant and eloquent propagandist in the antilynching movement. She exposes the myth of Black men raping white women, concluding that the barbarism of lynching is motivated by commercial needs and the effort to disenfranchise Black men. Wells travels to England where she successfully mobilizes the British press and reformers on behalf of the antilynching cause (Robinson 1997:107-09).

Upon her return to America, Wells enlists the Black middle-class and especially Black women's benevolence societies and self-help clubs in the antilynching crusade. Because of her radical antilynching writing and organizing Wells is forced out of Memphis, Tennessee in 1892, leaving behind the *Free Speech* press she co-owned and edited. By the time the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is formed in 1909 to take up the antilynching cause, Wells-Barnett – though in large measure the inspiration and a driving force in the organizational effort – is excluded from the new organization because of her unwavering radical militancy (Robinson 1997:108-09).

Coupled with the barbarism of lynching, the reemerged Black Codes, and the rapidly changing legal structure of state and federal governments,

the new economic system of sharecropping represents slavery in a new and sanitized form. The Black radical tradition expresses itself from the 1890s to the 1940s within the Populist movement, in farm worker and labor organizing, in teaching and mobilizing for political and civil rights, and in an indigenous Communist movement in the South.

With the ascendancy of railroad and industrial capital into powerful monopolies and the stranglehold of Wall Street financiers over the economy, many folks – small farmers, tenant farmers, and farm workers both white and Black – find themselves face-to-face with a common enemy. Within the southern Populist movement Blacks tend to be farm workers while whites are both farm owners and farm workers. In addition to the inherent conflict between farm owners – of even relatively small farms – and farm workers, Blacks and whites are never equal partners in the coalition. In the Farmers Alliance movement, even the Colored Alliance is led by a white man, R.M. Humphrey (Gaither 1977:6-16; Zinn 1995:276-286). Thus, there are problems from the start; and by the time the movement ends in the early 1900s, it embraces the reactionary and racist tendencies in the soil that nurtured it.

As Jim Crow laws sweep the South the Populist movement and the Populist Party emerge out of the activities of the Northern and Southern Farmers' Alliances and the allied Colored Farmers Alliance formed in Texas in 1886 (Meier and Rudwick 1993:196). The Populist movement representing small farm interests – as opposed to industrial and bank interests – spreads throughout the country. By 1892 organizers for the movement have spoken in forty-three states and reached two million farm families (Zinn 1980:280).

Estimates of membership in the Colored Alliance vary between 800,000 and 1,300,000 nationally and between 825,000 and 689,000 in the eleven states of the old Confederacy (Gaither 1977:12-13). According to Gaither (1977:12-13):

The figure of 1,000,000 . . . in all probability represented the peak strength of the National Colored Alliance . . . reached during the early months of 1890. . . The bulk of the order was concentrated in the South Atlantic and Gulf states, with the remainder scattered in Delaware, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, and some few clubs in Nebraska. All states in the South eventually possessed orders but in varying degrees of strength. . .

Black farmers assume leadership positions in the Colored Alliance at the state level, often using this experience as a springboard into interracial politics and the Populist movement. Black radical agrarians E.S. Richardson, superintendent for Georgia, and Virginian leaders Harry C. Green and George A. Gwaltney all move from the Colored Alliance

to interracial politics. Virginian alliance organizer and lecturer William Warwick goes into the People's Party briefly (Robinson 1997:103-04).

By the end of 1891, the Colored Farmers Alliance visibly deteriorates in size and effectiveness, and eventually collapses (Gaither 1977:13). From the outset contradictions are present – whites are primarily small farmers while Blacks are, in the main, farm workers. In some states the Colored Alliance works in concert with the Southern Farmers Alliance and in other states the Southern Farmers Alliance is thoroughly white supremacist.

The end is precipitated by a clash over race and class interests. In the early 1890s the Colored Alliances, representing farm workers, call for a nationwide strike for higher wages for cotton pickers. The interests of the white farm owners in the Farmers Alliances are at odds with the strike call. This appears to have created a serious split between the Black and white farm alliance groups in the Populist movement – marking the disappearance of the Colored Alliances and the dissolution of the radical interracial coalition within the Populist movement. The weight of southern history, of white supremacy, and of the repressive legal institutions of the late 1800s is too tremendous to overcome.

Black radicals are also part of a small but important effort at interracial labor organizing. Against all odds – the reality of white supremacy among white workers and much union leadership especially in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Jim Crow *de jure* segregation and its imposition by corporation and state alike, and the collaborationist posture of many Black elites – a contingent of radical Black men and women workers forges a unity with their white working-class brothers and sisters, often of radical working-class and later communist persuasion. Their Black radical working-class activism is most notable in Birmingham, southern West Virginia, and Memphis in the late 1800s and in the early decades of the twentieth century, though they are also a part of the strike waves of the 1870s and 90s.

In the Great Upheaval of 1877, as general strikes spread to the South, Black workers are in the leadership in Texas and Kentucky. When Texas and Pacific Railroad workers strike against a 10 percent pay cut, Black longshoremen in Galveston strike for – and win – equal pay with their white coworkers. Later, in Louisville Black workers bring a halt to sewer construction in a strike for \$1.50 a day wages (Brecher 1997:31-2). Again in 1892, when another strike wave hits New Orleans, the militant interracial Triple Alliance – consisting of Teamsters, Scalemen, and Packers and Black and white unskilled and skilled workers – wins wage and hour demands, but loses its demand for a closed shop and has forty-five of its leaders indicted for violations of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act (Brecher 1997:82-4).

In the immediate postbellum years Birmingham emerges as a mining and industrial center to exploit the rich iron ore, coal, and limestone deposits of central Alabama and the super-cheap Black and white labor in the region. Birmingham's young industrial working class embraces militant interracial unionism. In the 1870s Black radicals such as James T. Rapier of the Labor Union of Alabama, a National Labor Union affiliate, attempt to organize Black industrial and agricultural workers throughout Alabama (Kelley 1990:1-4). Black workers are the majority of the Greenback-Labor party Birmingham members before the party dissolves in the 1880s. The Knights of Labor effectively organizes militant Black and white miners and lumber workers in Alabama, leading several strikes between 1882 and 1885, but declines after 1886 due to national antilabor hysteria, the founding of the AFL, and the leadership's no-strike pledge.

Ex-Knights and radical agrarian migrants form the United Mine Workers of Alabama (UMW – not affiliated with the UMWA) to organize Black and white mine and mill workers until it is crushed in the 1894 coal miners' strike (Kelley 1990:4). In the late 1890s the UMWA sends organizers into Alabama's coal mines to rebuild the union, as the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCI) – which bought Pratt Coal and Coke Company – becomes the biggest iron and steel producer and opens its first steel mill in Birmingham. From 1881 to 1936 the radical interracial Alabama unions initiate 603 strikes – with 303 between 1881 and 1905 (Kelley 1990:5). By 1908 white workers are leaving the union and Black workers form the majority. The racial divide promoted by company and government prevails even among the Alabama Socialist Party and, with the Ku Klux Klan and nativist reaction on the rise, militant interracial unionism is greatly weakened (Kelley 1990:5-7).

By 1905 Jim Crow constitutions are in place in all the Southern states of the ex-Confederacy. Blacks and poor whites are disenfranchised – with the last Black elected official from the South leaving Congress in 1901. Thousands have been lynched. The Ku Klux Klan and other extra-legal white supremacist organizations are riding high. Dixiecrats hold power throughout the South, creating the new tyranny of “states' rights.” The federal government has totally deserted the cause of freedom and democracy (Katz-Fishman and Scott 1994:573). But the struggle continues.

Over the next half century southern Black radicals are the leading edge of the many struggles for economic and social justice – farm worker organizing, industrial union organizing, and civil rights organizing. In the 1930s and 1940s the Black radical tradition becomes intertwined with the Communist movement in the South. The Black radical tradition, the Communist movement, and union organizing are all dealt a major setback

with the intensification of anticommunist hysteria in the McCarthy period following World War II (Kelley 1990).

By 1910 Black West Virginian coal miners are 47 percent of all state coke workers (the most dangerous and difficult work). In the coal fields of southern West Virginia they are 65-80 percent of coke workers during World War I and the 1920s. Despite racism in the mines and the union, Black miners such as Frank Ingham, George Echols (born into slavery), P.B. Page, and J.H. Reed – all radical activists and leaders in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) – bring a militancy to their unique blend of class and racial consciousness.

Two thousand Black miners participate in the 1921 strike and “Armed March” on Logan and Mingo counties, known as the “Mingo War” (Trotter 1991:66-72). Because Ingham refuses to allow Black workers to be strikebreakers he is fired, loses his home, is jailed, beaten and brutalized, and barely survives with his life. When questioned, Ingham says: “They asked me what I had been in the hands of the mob for and I told them because I belonged to the Union” (Trotter 1991:73). Echols, a striker and local UMWA official, expresses a similar working-class solidarity: “I was raised a slave. My master and my mistress called me and I answered, and I know the time when I was slave, and I feel just like we feel now” (Trotter 1991:73). Reed, also jailed and mistreated, echoes: “The thing here is that a man here is the same as being in slavery” (Trotter 1991:74-5). Structural racism and class exploitation remain unchanged and radical Black workers continue to lead the fight against them.

By 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, Communists go into the Deep South. They establish the Communist Party USA (CP) headquarters for District 17 – including Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Florida – in Birmingham, the center of heavy industry in the South. Northern white Communists often bring to their Southern organizing the ideological baggage of the North. Many think Southern workers are backward; and they remain ignorant of the rich history of militant interracial unionism and agrarian radicalism indigenous to the South (Kelley 1990:13-4). But the depths of the depression, the superexploitation of Black workers in field and industry, the brutality of Jim Crow lynching and repression, and Communists’ embrace of social justice and racial equality are compelling. In the tradition of Black radicalism, Southern Blacks join the Communist movement in the South and become its leaders and the majority of its members.

The Alabama Communist Party and the communist-led neighborhood relief committees, Share Croppers’ Union, industrial union organizing, International Labor Defense (ILD) defense of the Scottsboro Boys and other political prisoners, and the anti-fascist Popular Front are all firmly

rooted in the history of Black Belt oppression and Black Belt radicalism. They are “built from scratch by people without a Euro-American left-wing tradition” (Kelley 1990:93). Alabama Black Communists are sharecroppers, housewives, youth, domestic workers, and unskilled and semiskilled industrial workers. They give meaning and legitimacy to communism through their daily lives, their song and religion, their rich history and culture of opposition, and their tactics of resistance, cunning, evasion, and deception. From the Communist movement they receive an alternative education, an understanding of the root causes of poverty and racism, a global context for their local struggles, an opportunity to travel nationally and internationally, and a sense of collective action and outside support. Alabama becomes a microcosm of the bloody battleground between Black-led radical movements and reactionary white supremacy and government repression in the twentieth century, and between the survival struggles of Black working people and the collaboration and betrayal perpetrated by elite and middle-class Blacks (Kelley 1990:92-5).

It is clear that radical Black sharecroppers and workers are drawn to the CP and its mass organizations by the demands put forth for racial equality along with economic and social justice within the context of interracial organizing. It is equally clear that the government will spare no efforts to prevent this interracial working-class unity. Birmingham police use the criminal anarchy law to arrest organizers, to raid Black workers’ homes, and to constantly harass Black and white radical workers and Party activists. Party leadership, acknowledging that police repression in the South is much more intense than elsewhere, organizes armed and unarmed defense committees as well as less confrontational tactics. Repression and harassment take their toll on Party organizing; but by August 1930 there are ninety Party organizers and over 500 workers in Party mass organizations, 80 to 90 percent of whom are Black (Kelley 1990:16-7).

In 1930, two decades before the McCarthy House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings, U.S. Congressman Hamilton Fish holds hearings in Birmingham to investigate “communist propaganda” which, it is hoped by government and civic elites, will bring an end to this radical “red menace” (Kelley 1990:17). Despite the anticommunist hysteria, the Party expands into metal shops and the Metal Workers Industrial League, into the cotton plantations and the Alabama Farmers’ Relief Fund – affiliated with the communist-led United Farmers’ League of North Dakota, and organizes neighborhood relief committees to demand relief from the devastation of depression unemployment and related miseries in opposition to the plans put forth by the Birmingham city commission, Red Cross, and Community Chest (Kelley 1990:17-21).

The CP concentrates in the early years in relief organizing for the poor and unemployed and organizing among sharecroppers and farm workers. Struggles over land reform and the working conditions of farm workers, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers are at the center of the southern Black radical tradition throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The thread of Black agrarian radicalism from the anti-slavery and populist eras finds new expression in these organizing efforts.

Black – and a few white – working-class women become leaders in the neighborhood Relief Councils and join the CP through this work. Helen Long, a mother and furniture store domestic worker, embraces the CP's opposition to the Red Cross. Young Black school teacher and Tallapoosa sharecropper's daughter Estelle Milner joins the Party through her organizing of the poor – rural sharecroppers and urban workers – and fights for public health care reform along with Cornelia Foreman, Alice Mosley, and Addie Adkins, an elderly bookkeeper (Kelley 1990:21-2).

The communist-led Croppers' and Farm Workers' Union (CFWU) and Alabama Sharecroppers' Union (SCU) bring into the movement stellar Black radical organizers such as Al Murphy, Hosea Hudson, and Angelo Herndon. They also bring in lesser known, but no less courageous, Black radical organizers Estelle Milner, Tommy and Ralph Gray – grandsons of Reconstruction Alabama state legislator Alfred Gray, Ralph Gray's daughter Eula Gray, Ned Cobb, Lemon Johnson, and eventually in the Montgomery area Charles and Capitola Tasker, John Beans, a veteran Black trade union organizer, and many others (Kelley 1990:39-50). Radical Black women are an essential part of this movement. They work in the fields, bear and raise children, often must take in additional domestic work for meager wages to make ends meet; and some even head households if their husbands and sons migrate to urban areas for work. Black women become radicalized and join the SCU as both mothers and workers (Kelley 1990:36,46-7).

The SCU embodies the southern Black radical tradition of underground resistance and cunning as well as armed self-defense. For SCU members it is not a contradiction “to act humble,” to hold local union meetings as Bible meetings, and to be armed. Lemon Johnson, SCU secretary of the Hope Hull, AL local, recalls the SCU is distinguished from other organizations by its tradition of armed self-defense. He says “the only thing going to stop them from killing you, you got to go shooting” (Kelley 1990:45).

The SCU's call for abolishing “all debts owed by poor farmers and tenants” and ending interest charged on necessities – e.g., food, clothes, seed – swells the SCU ranks and brings increased anticommunism and repression. A shoot-out near Reeltown in 1932 eclipses the earlier Camp

Hill episode in terms of deaths, injuries, jailings, and the trial of SCU members. But the popularity of the SCU grows and its membership is almost 2,000 by June 1933. The CP grows as well (Kelley 1990:50-2). New policies under the Roosevelt administration's Agricultural Adjustment Act promote the restructuring – mechanization – of the country's cotton industry that results in massive tenant and sharecropper evictions and landlord abuses. These policies breathe new life in the SCU. Black radical women organize the "Committee of Action" to march on the Civil Works Administration office in Camp Hill in February 1934 and win some relief. SCU membership swells to 6,000 by March 1934 (Kelley 1990:53-5).

The September 1934 SCU strike for \$1 wages per hundred pounds of cotton brings the union its first victory since its beginning in 1931 (Kelley 1990:55). But the strike for higher wages and better working conditions against the Bell Plantation in Lowndes County in September 1935 ends in failure, violence against the 25 strike leaders and their flight from the county to save their lives, death, and the end of the union (Couto 1991:179). The SCU, immensely popular and 8,000 members strong, falls victim to the incredibly violent state and vigilante repression of radical Black and interracial organizing in the South and to the massive "New Deal-induced evictions" of tenant farm workers and sharecroppers following the reorganization of southern agriculture after the harsh winter of 1934-35 (Kelley 1990:56).

Black radicals are an integral part of another militant interracial farm workers organizations in the 1930s – the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in Arkansas (Couto 1991). In July 1934, twenty-seven Black and white men gather in Poinsett County, Arkansas to found the STFU. After discussing whether or not to have separate Black and white unions, they are persuaded to have one interracial union by the statement of one of those present – an old Black man. He explains that two organizations he had been a member of – the Progressive Farmers and Household Union – were destroyed and its members massacred in Elaine in 1919 (Couto 1991:183).

... For a long time now the white folks and the colored folks have been fighting each other and both of us have been getting whipped all the time. We don't have nothing against one another but we got plenty against the landlord. The same chain that holds my people holds your people too. If we are chained together on the outside we ought to stay chained together in the union. It won't do no good for us to divide because there's where the trouble has been all the time. The landlord is always betwist us, beatin' us and starvin' us and makin' us fight each other. There ain't but one way for us to get him where he can't help himself and that's for us to get together and stay together.

(in Couto 1991:183)

The STFU organizes a strike to demand land reform, better working conditions and higher wages. Despite union members' unity across color lines, the strike brings reprisals. Strike leaders are arrested, jailed, and forced into convict farm labor – for 75 cents day. The Earle town sheriff arrests thirteen strikers and forces them into peonage; though he is subsequently arrested and punished himself (Couto 1991:184). Finally, in a 1936 strike – again over farm wages, trying to raise wages from 70 cents to \$1.00 a day – union officer Reverend William Bennett is beaten to death, strike breakers are brought in, there is further violence and death of two strikers; and the strike has to be called off (Couto 1991:184). The STFU, like the SCU, cannot sustain itself in the face of violent repression and the New Deal restructuring of agriculture.

Black radicals in the South are key actors in the defense of Black political prisoners falsely accused of rape and a host of other so-called crimes. The communist-led International Labor Defense gives militant voice to Black workers and the poor, exposing the class basis of much racism and racial violence and the absolute injustice of the South's legal system. Most well known for its defense of the Scottsboro Boys, the ILD – which numbers 3,000 by 1934 – is the nemesis of Black elites in the NAACP who prefer to see innocent Black men jailed for life than cooperate with this communist-led legal defense organization whose members are mostly poor Black farm and industrial workers (Kelley 1990:89-91).

Southern state and vigilante violence directed toward Black radicals and interracial radicalism as well as white supremacist and reactionary forces within the unions are powerful forces confronting the growing movement for industrial worker organizing. In 1936, almost forty years after the steel industry moves to Birmingham in 1899 with the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCI), the CIO creates the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), ushering in another brief period – till the 1951 wildcat strike – of interracial union militancy. By the 1930s Black Birmingham workers, mostly from the Alabama Black Belt, are 50 percent of the iron workers and almost 40 percent of steel workers and fill the hardest unskilled jobs in the oldest plants (Stein 1991:183-86). In 1942, in the face of opposition by TCI, the AFL, and the local power structure, radical Black workers and their white allies win the election for the United Steelworkers of America (USA). Victorious in the fight for a single interracial union, they launch a protracted fight for fairness in job assignments and pay which the TCI continually thwarts (Stein 1991:192-96).

In the immediate postwar period new workers and new leadership – including Black organizer and union president Robert Washington – emerge to push the union for greater militancy and the TCI to end

regional and racial workplace and wage discrimination. Black wire worker and grievance committee chair Ernest McLin joins the dissident group and, with interracial rank-and-file militancy and better-late-than-never intervention by the international, they exert pressure on the TCI. In 1951 Black militant workers in the coke plant walkout to protest the TCI's unresponsiveness to their complaints about racial discrimination in the plant. When the TCI moves quickly to punish the strike leaders, the union organizes a general strike of TCI workers – the first sparked by the specific concerns of Black workers (Stein 1991:202-04). As too often happens, these victories and the radical interracial unionism of the USA in Birmingham is not permanent.

Black unskilled workers, the most economically exploited and politically oppressed, are among the staunchest supporters of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the industrial union movement throughout the 1930s and 1940s, as well as later in the 1960s and 1970s. The first attempt at radical interracial union organizing in Memphis comes in 1939 when the Black stevedores in the AFL's International Longshoreman's Association (ILA) ally with white riverboat operators in the CIO and eventually form the National Maritime Union (NMU). Fiery Black longshoreman Thomas Watkins refuses to let Memphis be used for strikebreaking. While the strikers finally win and the CIO gains a beach head, Watkins' life is threatened and he flees Memphis never to return; other Black longshoremen are killed and are "disappeared" (Honey 1991:136-39).

A year later, in 1940, George Holloway, a Memphis native whose grandfather was a slave and whose father was a Pullman porter union official, leads the fight for CIO affiliation as chairman for the Rubber Workers Union in the Firestone plant. When the workers vote for the AFL, which excludes Black workers from any real participation, Holloway leaves Firestone to become a Pullman porter (Honey 1994:125-27). Clarence Coe, a Black worker from rural Tennessee, gets a job at Firestone in 1941 and leads a successful fight for CIO affiliation. But Jim Crow practices inside as well as outside the factory remain a challenge to Coe and all Black workers, who are further radicalized by these experiences and by the brutalization of Black soldiers returning from World War II (Honey 1994:127-29).

The same year that the first effort at CIO affiliation for the Rubber workers fails, the communist-led United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers Union (UCAPAWA and later FTA Local 19) wins its first organizing victories among Memphis' lowest paid workers, with the help of NMU members. Hattie Walls, a Black cotton worker, easily links the Black freedom struggle and the union movement (Honey 1991:140-41). Even organizers are taken by the militancy and commitment of Black workers. Radical Black workers such as John Mack Dyson and Earl Fisher

and anti-racist whites, many of whom are Communists, make Local 19 exceptional. They elect a Black president and promote Blacks in many leadership roles, stage the first integrated picket line, protest racism within the plant and dismantle segregated job descriptions at the Buckeye plant, and take the lead in voter registration and civil rights protests (Honey 1991:143-45).

In 1946 Holloway returns to Memphis as a leading Black union activist in the International Harvester plant where the United Auto Workers local, affiliated with the CIO, comes in by acclamation. For Holloway, Coe, and other Black radicals the fight for union rights and for civil rights are a unified struggle. But their victories are brief; they are unable to turn the tide of racism in the union and in the larger community. By the 1950s the anticommunist hysteria leads to the expulsion of the FTA and other communist-led CIO unions, resulting in the destruction of the few Black-led unions in the South (Honey 1994:131-33). Coe, reminiscing, sums up one thread of the Black radical tradition this way: "I think when people are badly enough oppressed, they'll find a way and do it. And organizing labor is the only way; it's the only way to do it" (Honey 1994:137).

State violence, Jim Crow terror, and virulent anticommunism are always ready at hand to suppress the organizing efforts of radical interracial farm workers' unions, industrial unions, civil and political rights organizations, and, of course, the Communist Party. The contribution and heroism of southern Black radicals who are killed in the struggle is often lost to history, as is the continuity of the Black radical tradition in the South in the ongoing movement for equality, justice, and democracy.

### **The Struggle for Freedom Once More: 1940s – 1973**

The modern Civil Rights movement, linked to the historic struggle for racial and economic justice, begins in earnest with the post-World War II return of Black soldiers to the South and their militancy in the face of continuing Jim Crow terror. The yearning and struggle of the African American people for their freedom coincide with the interests of a section of the ruling class to embrace aspects of the civil rights agenda in the postwar period of economic expansion. As is true historically, there are contradictions internal to the dynamics of the modern Civil Rights movement. Blacks are fighting once again for freedom, equality, and their democratic rights. Finance capital is fighting for maximum profits – the lowest possible cost of production and the cheapest available sources of labor. The South and its potential pool of cheap labor – Black and white – hold great promise. The problem, however, is Jim Crow segregation.

The history and reality of terror and vigilante violence in the South directed against Blacks as well as whites who dare to challenge southern

fascist rule and its rigid racial, class, and gender hierarchies make the modern Civil Rights movement – both its armed and nonviolent expressions – part of the Black radical tradition. This tradition lives in the Citizenship Schools taught by Septima Clark; in the Montgomery Bus Boycott sparked by Rosa Parks in December 1955; in the courage of young Daisy Bates who faces cries of “lynch her!” as she tries to integrate Little Rock Central High in 1957; in the Birmingham Movement; in the armed self-defense units organized by Robert Williams in Monroe, NC in 1957; in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and its sit-ins, marches, freedom rides, boycotts, voter registration drives, and freedom schools; in the Albany Movement; in Bloody Sunday in Selma, AL; in the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Bogalusa, LA; in the heroic challenge of Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 convention; and in the independent politics of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (Grant 1996:237-384).

The youth of SNCC, under the mentorship of Ella Baker, swell in number from sixteen in 1961 to 150 in 1964 (Zinn 1965:3-4). SNCC workers – called the “new abolitionists” – form the backbone of the Civil Rights movement in the South. Unlike many activists who come out for specific marches and demonstrations, SNCC workers are the “guerrilla fighters” who move in with the people of rural communities throughout the deep South – tutoring adults for voter registration and educating youth through freedom schools (Zinn 1965:3).

The women of SNCC are also in the forefront of the modern women’s movement, linking the struggle against capitalism, racism, and sexism into a coherent vision. While Septima Clark, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, and Kathleen Cleaver had criticized sexism in the movement, it is the organized response of the women within SNCC that gives form to the Black Women’s Liberation Committee in 1968 (Guy-Sheftall 1995:14)

Not surprisingly, the movement youth activists of SNCC – along with their equally famous elders – meet terror, violence, torture, and even death at the hands of the southern fascist and white supremacist legal system – police, sheriffs, courts, jails – and at the hands of the extra-legal fascist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Councils. After the freedom riders’ bus is burned, and four small Black girls are killed in a Birmingham church bombing, and the death toll of freedom fighters in the deep South continues to mount, and the local and state “law enforcement” officials refuse to stop their participation in and cover-up of the carnage and terror – the federal government is forced, kicking and screaming, to intervene.

Despite the renown of the nonviolent tradition of the South, two of the quintessential expressions of militant Black radicalism – organized

armed self-defense and the black panther – have their origins in the South. Robert Williams, a militant Black radical from Monroe, North Carolina is considered by many the model of armed self-defense in the modern civil rights era and the inspiration for groups such as the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Bogaloussa, Louisiana, SNCC in its militant phase, and the Black Panther Party (Grant 1996:320, 336; Ahmed 1996). The first organization in South or North to go under the banner of the black panther as the symbol of the Black radical tradition is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in the Alabama Black Belt (Grant 1996:350,379). Both expressions capture the imagination of young Black radicals who embrace armed self-defense and the black panther as their own and popularize them in the Black power movement and especially the Black Panther Party.

As a teen Robert Williams organizes a group, X-32, to defend Black women in his town from the assaults of white men by throwing stones at the men. In 1957 Williams, then president of the Monroe NAACP, organizes armed self-defense units to protect Blacks in his community from the racial violence of the Ku Klux Klan. The national NAACP strips Williams of his presidency; and in 1961 he is forced into exile because of trumped up charges of kidnapping a white couple during an outbreak of racial violence (Ahmed 1996).

From exile in Cuba, where Williams and his wife Mabel are granted political asylum by Fidel Castro and are befriended by Che Guervara, they operate “Radio Free Dixie” to advocate for collective armed self-defense for the Black masses who are victims of racial violence. Williams writes *Negroes with Guns* in 1962 to share his experiences from 1957 to 1961; lives in the People’s Republic of China where he meets Chairman Mao Tse Tung and urges him to issue the Declaration of Support for the Cause of African American Liberation; and meets with President Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam (Ahmed 1996). Robert and Mabel Williams return to the United States in 1969; and, before his death in 1996, he succeeds in having all charges against him dropped (Ahmed 1996).

In *Negroes with Guns* (in Grant 1996:320-322) Williams explains his ideology of armed self-defense:

Why do I speak to you from exile? Because a Negro community in the South took up guns in self-defense against racist violence and used them. I am held responsible for this action... I accept this responsibility and am proud of it. I have asserted the right of Negroes to meet the violence of the Ku Klux Klan with armed self-defense – and have acted on it.

Because there has been much distortion of my position, I wish to make it clear that I do not advocate violence for its own sake, or for the sake of reprisals against whites. Nor am I against ... passive resistance... I believe in flexibility

in the freedom struggle...

The majority of white people in the United States have literally no idea of the violence with which Negroes in the South are treated daily – nay, hourly. This violence is deliberate, conscious, condoned by the authorities. It has gone on for centuries and is going on today... Negro existence in the South has been one long travail, steeped in terror and blood – our blood. The incidents which took place in Monroe, which I witnessed and which I suffered, ... can no longer be borne. That is why, one hundred years after the Civil War began, we Negroes in Monroe armed ourselves in self-defense and used our weapons. ... [O]ur policy worked. The lawful authorities of Monroe and North Carolina acted to enforce order *only after, and as a direct result of, our being armed.*

Another expression of southern Black radicalism is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) in Alabama, one of several independent political organizations that emerge in the South following passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act to assert the right of Blacks – and poor whites – to vote and hold office in opposition to the racist violence and elitism of the southern Dixiecrat wing of the Democratic Party. Lowndes County is 81 percent Black and has 2,681 Blacks and 2,100 whites registered in 1966. The LCFO runs several candidates in the November 8, 1966 election – two housewives, two self-employed and three who lost their jobs – who narrowly lose to the white candidates (Grant 1996:350-51). In addition to its militant demand for electoral participation, what is perhaps most noteworthy about the LCFO is that it is the first organization to adopt the black panther as its symbol. Stokely Carmichael (later Kuame Toure), former SNCC chairman, is an organizer in Lowndes County and takes with him to the North the black panther symbol that becomes the trademark of the Black Panther Party and militant Black radicalism throughout the country (Grant 1996:350).

In the words of John Hulett, LCFO chairman (Grant 1996:379-80):

... Some time ago, we organized a political group of our own known as the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, whose emblem is the Black Panther. We were criticized, we were called communists, we were called everything else, black nationalists and what not, because we did this...

Too long Negroes have been begging, especially in the South, for things they should be working for. So the people in Lowndes County decided to organized themselves ... not only for the people in Lowndes County, but for every county in ... Alabama, in the Southern states, and even in California.

... [N]o person can be free while other people are still slaves...

Black radicals in the South organize, collectively arm themselves, resist nonviolently, and some even give their lives to bring an end to over four centuries of racial violence and discrimination and to win – once again

– the most basic democratic right, the right to vote. What these freedom fighters cannot fully appreciate is that even greater struggles for economic rights and the barest essentials of human survival lie ahead. The victories of the modern Civil Rights movement address the need for greater political inclusion of African Americans and other peoples of color in the electoral process and an end to racial discrimination. However, these legal reforms fall far short of remedies that address the economic inequality of Black workers and farmers – women, men, and youth; the poor and near poor; and similar working people of all colors and nationalities. And, as the economic crises of late twentieth century capitalism deepen in the United States and globally, even these political reforms come under attack.

### **The Struggle for Survival in the New Global Economy: 1973 – Present**

One of the significant results of the Civil Rights movement is the integration of Blacks into the American class structure – Black capitalists into the capitalist class, the Black middle-class into the middle-class, and Black workers into the working-class. The Black upper and middle classes make great strides with the legal reforms of the civil rights era. Because of the integration of Blacks into the class structure, the Black middle-class – as a section of the Black population – can no longer lead the Black liberation struggle and thus can no longer be at the cutting edge of the Black radical tradition. Members of the Black middle-class can be and are, as individuals, part of the Black radical tradition; but to do so they must abandon their class ideology.

In contrast, for Black workers – as a class – there is no such improvement. While Black poverty falls from a high of over 50 percent in the 1950s, it barely dips below 30 percent over the next forty years, and is almost 50 percent for Black children in 1998. In the South – home to the majority of the Black population – things are even worse. Underlying the fate of the Black masses are fundamental structural shifts in the new global economy that no legal reforms can alter. Black workers do not have the luxury of embracing any other ideology than Black radicalism if they are to be liberated.

What is new and what is at the root of the deteriorating quality of life of the Black masses is the revolution in today's economy. The global integration of the economy; the high technology revolution; the downsizing of corporations, the government, and social institutions; and deregulation and privatization are transforming every aspect of society and our lives. High tech – computers, robots, automation, etc. – is permanently eliminating jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, and even the service sector and the knowledge industry. The jobs that remain and are created are

most often temporary, part-time, low-paying, and lack benefits (Greider 1997; Rifkin 1996).

Within this context the Black radical tradition in the South in the 1980s and 1990s is expressed in two trends. One trend is Black radical organizations; the other trend is multiracial organizations that are led by Black radicals. All of these organizations are primarily working-class. They embrace demands for economic, political, and social equality that challenge the basic relations of capitalism. They also view themselves as organizing for the fundamental structural transformation of American society. The popular movement necessary to make this a reality is still struggling to come out of its ebb; but is growing and gaining strength. Black radicals in the South are an essential part of building today's movement for equality (race, class and gender), freedom, and popular democracy.

### **Conclusion: The Struggle Continues – 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

From the anti-slavery movement, to Reconstruction and Populism, to the struggle against Jim Crow reaction, to the modern Civil Rights movement, to social and economic justice struggles, Black radicals in the South have won limited and fleeting reforms within capitalist economic, political, and social relations. But time and again the weight of southern history and the dominance of white supremacy, both ideologically and structurally, have reasserted themselves. Today things are very different – different from the 1860s, the 1890s, and the 1960s. The high-tech revolution embedded in the new global economy has fundamentally transformed the world in which we live.

Today's Black radical organizations and multiracial organizations led by Black radicals are in daily struggle to secure the necessities of life for their members, protection from an increasingly repressive police and prison system, a future for their children and youth, and an understanding of the new realities confronting working-class women and men of all colors and nationalities. There are no quick victories and it seems that each day things get worse. Jobs disappear – first from one region to another and then across national borders. Robots and computers permanently replace workers everywhere. Human beings as workers are increasingly superfluous to the production and distribution process, families are in trouble, and communities are torn apart. Workers are still needed as market consumers; but – without quality jobs and livable wages – they are less and less able to purchase the goods and services that are being produced in ever great abundance. The rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. The poor and youth, especially the Black poor and Black youth, are demonized, criminalized, and brutalized by a growing police state.

There is no section of the ruling class today – unlike previous periods – whose interests coincide with those of the Black masses to reform the political and economic system. Rather, all sections of the ruling class are unified in their resolve to maximize profits, increase productivity, and balance the budget on the backs of the poor and near poor. The success of today’s primarily working-class organizations led by Black radicals is measured not so much by reforms won – since they are few or nonexistent – but by the expansion of their organizing efforts in building a new social movement for equality, freedom, and democracy. Where Black radical organizing succeeds, organizations are led primarily by Black working-class southerners based in the South. They have no where to go – no options. They must stay and organize for structural economic and political change no matter how great the repression. Their survival depends upon it.

These organizations include no representatives of the ruling class; and the interests of the workers and the poor are increasingly at odds with the interests of capital. Thus, these organizations are without funding and other resources that supported earlier Black radical movement building in the South and elsewhere. In today’s condition, time, and place these Black working-class led organizations must be long-lasting, must challenge the weight of southern history, and must succeed in fundamentally changing the economic, political and social system.

Indeed, we argue that the environment is ripe for radical multiracial organizations among working-class women, men, and youth in the South. The new realities of the global high-tech economy threaten the very survival of a far greater *absolute number* of whites than of Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans in the South (and throughout the country). We do not underestimate the historic and institutional pull of white supremacy and the power of elite manipulation of the “race card.” Rather, we suggest that the new reality of permanent and growing poverty and repression among white women, men, and youth as well as its intensification among working-class communities of color sets the conditions for working class-based multiracial organizing in the South.

In the final analysis, the Black radical tradition in the South has less to do with communism, nationalism, or any other “ism” than with the demands put forward within the historical context of the times. A movement grounded in the demands of the least of us – those fighting daily for their very survival – is the only path to the liberation of all of us. Today, the heroic Black radical tradition in the South must be at the heart of these emerging working-class-led struggles to build a movement that will end the capitalist system and the class, color, and gender oppression which is its essential foundation. Nothing less will liberate the Black masses.

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