

No. 3 — The Rodney King Rebellion and Its Aftermath

THE LESSONS OF THE REBELLION

The rebellion of the most downtrodden sectors of the working class in Los Angeles represents the end of an era. The acquittal of the racist cops who savagely beat Rodney King released the anger of the oppressed into an explosive eruption.

This time bomb had been due to explode for a long time. Most blacks and Latinos lost their illusions in reform many years ago. The "register to vote democratic" strategy of Jesse Jackson and company met with increasing apathy throughout the 1980's and 1990's. In recent years, registration to vote among blacks has gone down 50% in many areas. The upsurge in L.A. reflects the growing awareness among the oppressed that they have nothing to lose but their chains. Consequently militant revolutionaries such as Malcolm X are once again the model for the youth, including gang members. Even the New York Times had to report that "recently some of the gang members have become more politicized, wearing Malcolm X hats in their traditional gang colors of blue or red." (May 12, 1992.)

As disillusionment and defiance grow rampant in the oppressed communities, police brutality and racism increase in response. Police brutality reached new heights as the conditions of the oppressed, particularly blacks, increasingly came to resemble the misery of the downtrodden masses in the semi-colonies who are under imperialist or military occupation. Between 1976 and 1987 in the U.S., 1800 blacks were killed by cops. The death row population nationwide is 40% black, compared with about 10% in the population overall. Of black men between the ages of 18 and 35, 42% are in jail or under the "care" of the racist courts or other branches of the repressive racist capitalist state. Young black and Latino men as a group are stereotyped as criminals, and their criminalization in turn is used to justify the ever-increasing brutality of the police. Hundreds of thousands of Latino workers and youth are under constant fear of being arrested and sent back to face either the death squads or near-starvation on their return to Latin America. All this repression is combined with massive unemployment and exploitation; many blacks and Latinos, even if they can find work, make only the minimum wage. Under these conditions, the revolt was not only inevitable but fully justified.

Spontaneity and its limitations

The tricks of liberal Democrats such as Jesse Jackson ("register and vote") and would-be progressives such as Ron Daniels¹ are no longer sufficient to mollify the anger of the oppressed. We are entering a new epoch in which dissatisfaction with capitalist oppression has become so widespread that it must break out through conscious class struggle, or at least spontaneous rebellion. Reformism can no longer keep the lid on the boiling pot.

While racism provided the major spark, the rebellion engulfed *all* sectors of the working class, including whites. "Respectable" bourgeois papers such as the New York Times were forced to rebut the ruling class stereotype of frenzied gangs rioting, saying (in quoting an executive director of Community Youth Gang Services) that "most gang members raging through the streets were merely part of an angry mosaic of Black, white and Hispanic people who also included residents with 9-to-5 jobs and mothers and their

children." (May 12, 1992.) *Thus, the revolt came from the spontaneous outrage of the most oppressed sectors of the working class and the downtrodden masses who have nothing to lose under capitalism.* To many, the looting was an opportunity to acquire a few luxury items that they could not hope to afford in "normal" times. To others, getting adequate supplies of basic necessities such as baby food and formula, which they normally could barely afford in minimum quantities, warranted taking the minimal risks involved in the looting. According to Bernice Hernandez, a public defender in Los Angeles County, many of those arrested were "people who had no prior record, not even a traffic ticket." (San Francisco Chronicle, May 5, 1992.)

The spontaneous revolt was an act of desperation by the oppressed, who wanted to say that enough is enough. "I know it's my neighborhood that's burning," said an angry worker as he boarded his bus to work, "but I've got to do this to make you listen, I've got to do it. A lot of people are crying out, reaching out." (New York Times, May 15, 1992.) The cops did not, of course, stop the people from burning the neighborhoods of the poor, but did their best to protect the neighborhoods of the rich (although despite their efforts, they did not manage to prevent looting altogether in Westwood and Beverly Hills).

Despite the justified anger, the spontaneity of the revolt also marks its political limitations. Because the rebel-

¹Ron Daniels' "progressive" program does not differ much from those of Jesse Jackson and the "progressive" liberals. On the military budget, for example, Bush stands for a 21% cut, Brown calls for 33%, and Daniels proudly leads with a 50% cut! That is, Daniels' proposal would still allocate the military — capitalism's agent for the repression of the oppressed — thousands of weapons more than what it needs to do its dirty work.

lion was isolated from organized labor, the spontaneous anger was not transformed into a political uprising by the working class and the unions, which are the only force that has the power to shut down the country and defeat the repressive state.

Just because a rebellion or revolution originates with the most oppressed sector of society does not guarantee its success. A spontaneous revolt by the unemployed and the downtrodden alone cannot smash the racist state machine. What was needed was a joint action with industrial workers and other sectors of organized labor including white workers. A conscious working class rebellion with a class struggle perspective could have created multiracial defense guards against the police and armed racists. To succeed, the rebellion required class struggle methods such as general strikes and the arming of the workers in alliance with the oppressed.

In addition to the passivity of the workers as an organized and conscious force, the masses on the streets did not have a program and demands that could have expanded the rebellion to the rest of the working class and transformed it into a political, anti-capitalist social uprising. Since the masses were not armed with a program (or a set of demands) that advanced the struggle by challenging the racist capitalist system, it was only a matter of days before the state recuperated from its confusion and suppressed the revolt.

Why the Revolt Remained Spontaneous

There were several fundamental reasons why the consciousness of the masses was limited to spontaneous acts of revolt. The racism and oppressiveness of the ruling class is the most important of these reasons. Dividing the working class by race, and keeping the most oppressed in a permanent state of repression and desperation, is the capitalist class's best tool for keeping the oppressed masses isolated and alienated from the rest of the workers. Stirring up racism in white working class communities is essential to maintain capitalist order. This explains, for example, why the media replayed over and over the videotape of the beating of the truck driver.

The racism of the union bureaucracy is almost as essential. The bureaucracy does little or nothing to bring blacks and Latinos into organized labor. The bureaucrats are the lieutenants of the racist bourgeoisie. Most of the unions leaders denounced the revolt and called for law and order. Some of the bureaucrats who from time to time give lip service to the idea of a labor party (the San Francisco Labor Council, for example) condemned the revolt and supported the ensuing mass arrests, state of emergency, and suppression of democratic rights. On the other hand, we should distinguish between the union leaders and the union members. Many leftists who are cynical about the ability of organized labor to be involved in the struggles of the most

oppressed cannot make this distinction. *The workers in the unions need a program and a leadership that connects their struggles to those of the oppressed, just as much as the oppressed need a program and leadership that will reach out to organized labor.*

It is interesting to note that unions with a large black membership and history of militant struggle, such as the International Longshoremen's Union (ILWU), broke ranks with the reactionary denunciations of the revolt. But the leadership of the ILWU in San Francisco has done nothing beyond the token provision of monitors to a legal march against the repression which was led by liberal city officials. The ILWU, which went on a political strike to boycott South African ships in the mid-1980's, has the power to do so again to oppose the repression of blacks at home. To remedy the indifference of the bureaucracy, the rank and file of organized labor must be aroused by demands such as:

- **Open the Unions to the Most Oppressed!**
- **Link the Unions to the Struggle Against Police Brutality!**

To connect the unions with the plight of the most oppressed sectors of labor, trade unionists should also demand:

- **Union Representation, and Union Salaries and Benefits, for all Domestic Labor!**
- **Down with the Massive Cuts in Welfare Benefits!**
- **Unemployment Benefits at Union Wage Levels for all Discouraged Workers, Youth and Welfare Recipients!**
- **For Fighting Multiracial/Labor Defense Guards to Protect the Ghettos and Barrios Against Police Repression and Racist Attacks!**

The Working Class, the Youth and the Rebellion

One of the revolt's problems was that the youth did not have demands that could have transformed their anger into anti-capitalist expression. In order to transform their spontaneous anger about the verdict that symbolized their own oppression, black and other oppressed youth must be armed with a set of programmatic demands that connect their struggle to the working class and transform their righteous hatred of racist America into a class consciousness.

The ruling class, on the other hand, has its program of increasing oppression for the youth. After the rebellion, Bush proposed to increase public funding to private schools to help pay some of the tuition cost (Los Angeles Times). The ruling class, by drastically cutting funding and resources from public schools, has forced working class youth to go to school in hellish conditions. Now the representatives of the capitalist class tell the poverty-stricken black youth to go to private schools, pay their own tuition (with some government assistance), and subject themselves to the reactionary values of the American patriotic family (many pri-

vate schools are religious). Against these outrageous attempts to attack and possibly abolish public schools in the future, we must fight for these demands:

- **For a Massive Infusion of Funds into Public Education at All Levels!**
- **For Free Tuition, Open Admissions and Stipends for Students in High Schools and Universities! Guaranteed Jobs upon Graduation!**
- **No Public Funding for Private Schools! Divert All Corporate and Rich People's "Charity" from Private Schools to Fund Free Public Education Under Worker/Student Control!**
- **Massive Funding for Academic Support Programs for Youth from the Ghettos and Barrios, and for Union-Run Job Training to Upgrade the Skills of the Oppressed!**
- **Down with the Falsification of the Class Struggle Taught in the High Schools and Colleges! For Special Programs on Black and Labor Struggles Run by the Students and the Faculties!**
- **Stop Racist Hiring Policies at Schools and Universities!**
- **For Worker, Student and Faculty Control of the Universities and Colleges!**
- **For Student Strikes Against Budget Cuts and Tuition Hikes, Linked to Union Actions Against Takebacks and Layoffs!**

The above program links the struggle against racist oppression to the class struggle. Armed with such program of action, the oppressed youth would become highly political in the next round of struggle. Programmatic clarity would elevate the political and organizational level of the next revolt and merge it with working class struggles. The struggle for this goal would set the stage for the development of young black and Latino revolutionaries who could play a decisive role in the socialist revolution.

The Liberals, the Left and Illusions in the Courts

The liberal Democrats and black ministers worked around the clock to stop the spread of the rebellion and divert the energy of the people into the safety valve of bourgeois legality. Not only did they condemn the response to the racist verdict, the liberals went so far as to support martial law measures to stop the rebellion! At the same time, they called on the same racist court system that acquitted the cops in the first place to grant justice to Rodney King!

The black ministers who have support within the community kept the masses off the street when martial law and curfews were in effect. In San Francisco, for example, Reverend Cecil Williams, a well-known "progressive" minister, organized a mass meeting in Glide Memorial Church, on Saturday May 2, to tell thousands of blacks and their sup-

porters to stay off the street and respect the state of emergency. As the meeting at Glide Memorial was taking place, the largely liberal Board of Supervisors was considering the lifting of the state of emergency less than ten blocks away. Reverend Williams could have told the masses to disobey the ban on public assemblies and demonstrations, and to march to City Hall and show the liberal Democrats that martial law would not be tolerated by the masses even for a minute. Instead, Williams chose to stop the momentum. He introduced liberal Democrats to the audience (including Rep. Barbara Boxer, who supports the racist death penalty!), and together they told the masses to go home, wait for justice from the racist bourgeois courts, and register more voters! Thus, the liberal Democrats and the ministers played an important role in halting the spread of the revolt.

Most of the left followed the same path. Advocating reliance upon the state instead of the self-organization of the working class and oppressed communities, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) called on the masses to pressure the federal government to indict the cops under the federal civil rights laws! Workers' World Party (WWP) organized a march with liberal Democrats under the slogan "Justice for Rodney King." In both cases, the implementation of justice is supposed to be left up to the courts of the capitalists! The "revolutionaries" from Roots Against War (RAW) (see separate article) called for the indictment of the cops. The more serious left organizations called for the *immediate* jailing of the cops. We in the RTT support jailing the cops, of course, but we do not have any illusions that it will change anything very much. As we explained in an article written before the Rodney King verdict and its aftermath:

"Because of the fundamental role of the police as defenders of the the capitalist/racist system, the realization of [reformist] demands will not 'improve' the police. Even if some cops are fired, many of those who remain will not necessarily be any less brutal, and more importantly, they will continue to defend the interests of the state — brutally if necessary — and will train new recruits in this tradition." (International Trotskyist #5, page 25.)

The question is, of course, *who* will jail the cops? The masses already know that the courts will not do it — that was the spark that ignited the revolt in the first place. So why try to recreate illusions which the masses have already lost? The reformist left and the liberals know that asking the masses to take matters into their own hands would mean a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist state. *This is precisely what they want to avoid.* They would rather ask the courts to consider minor concessions than advocate within the communities that we confront the repressive state politically by taking matters into our own hands.

The masses already know from their own experience that the racist nature of the courts cannot be changed. But

they need to learn what kind of political organizations they have to build to challenge the reactionary/racist power of the courts. Throughout the revolt, the Revolutionary Trotskyist Tendency (RTT) advocated that the masses *not* rely on the bourgeois courts, and urged them to organize their own mass meetings in the communities to select worker/multiracial tribunals to judge the cops, and to implement the tribunals' decisions through the creation of worker/multiracial defense guards to keep the cops out of the oppressed communities.

The creation of worker/multiracial tribunals does not mean community control over the police, as some left organizations (such as WWP) advocate. We need to keep the cops *out* of the communities, not to monitor their racist activities *in* the communities!² The creation of mass tribunals and defense guards would have meant the replacement of the police with the masses' own organizations which would be subject to the democratic decisions of the oppressed. The process of creating such bodies would have given the masses precious political organization and experience that would have enabled them to *see through their own eyes how to transform a spontaneous revolt into an organized revolution against the capitalist state.*

The Role of Separatism/Sectoralism

The setbacks of the union movement during the 1980's had significant negative effects on the development of class perspective in the ghettos. Due to the many defeats of organized labor, the workers and the oppressed in the ghettos have not experienced militant workers' struggles for many years. This has left many workers and youth under the influence of black nationalism or apathy. When the black nationalist struggles in the 1960's were defeated, this led to widespread demoralization followed by a vacuum and stagnation as far as the development of class consciousness was concerned. Since then, even black nationalism has become far less organized, leaving the communities leaderless.

On the one hand, the multi-ethnic participation in the revolt shows that the social and economic crisis is so deep that the overcoming of sectoralism is truly possible if the movement embraces an anti-capitalist program that connects the aspirations of different sections of the oppressed to the rest of the working class. On the other hand, while militant black nationalists did not organize the revolt, the influence of black nationalist ideology played a role in blocking the development of class consciousness. The absence of class struggle perspectives and revolutionary leadership has

left the black community open to the influence of figures such as Louis Farrakhan who poisoned the masses with illusions of black nationalism and black capitalism throughout the 1980's.

This explains some of the erroneous choices of targets during the revolt. While the black community was rightly incensed over the light sentence given to a Korean shopowner in L.A. for shooting an innocent black teenage girl in the back, the answer is not the burning of Korean shops. The tensions between blacks and Asians, both oppressed in their communities, is used by the ruling class as a diversion. The solution to Korean shopowners' overcharging the people is not black shopowners, as some black nationalists teach us, but joint struggle against the profit system, and demands that unite the black, Asian and Latino communities against the common class enemy, such as a sliding scale of wages and prices determined by councils of workers and consumers.

The most exploited sections of working class should unite with demands such as:

- **Massive Public Works Programs to Rebuild the Communities Under the Control of Multiracial Workers With Full Union Membership, Wages and Benefits!**
- **Massive Funding for Quality Housing for the Oppressed. No Run-Down Projects! Millions of Dollars and Permanent Jobs to Maintain the Quality of the New Public Housing!**
- **For Multiracial Defense Guards Linked to the Unions to Protect Against Police Brutality and Racist Attacks!**
- **Black Workers and Youth Should Support the Struggles of Undocumented Latino and Asian Workers!**
- **An Injury to One Is an Injury To All! Down With the INS's Brutal Detention Centers for Immigrants! Full Citizenship Rights for Undocumented Workers! Down with Police Brutality in the Black Neighborhoods!**
- **Abolish the INS! Open the Borders to All Workers!**

"Urban Enterprise Zones," the Ruling Class, and the Oppressed

The Democrats and the Republicans are united behind the idea of "urban enterprise zones," a program to encourage business to invest in the inner cities through tax incentives. But very few people take this joke from the capitalist parties seriously. Token tax incentives will not make a dent in the general decay and decline of American capitalism. The massive layoffs and closures of factories and businesses speak a thousands time louder than the noises from the ruling class about token incentives to market economy and

² The state will never allow the masses to control the police. The police defend the class interests of the capitalists. The capitalists need racist oppression to keep the working class divided and exploited. Thus, it is impossible for the working class to control the police. Demands for police control by community organizations just help to defuse the militant struggles of the most oppressed.

private enterprise.

The new/old noises from the capitalist parties about "urban enterprise zones" are being made to boost those who sow illusions about the oppressed becoming "capitalists" in their own right. Regardless of their criticism of white man's power, the pro-capitalist agents of the ruling class in the oppressed communities are united with the Democratic and Republican parties via the "enterprise zones."

The chatter about market forces and the "empowerment" of local capitalists is pure rubbish. When the capitalists don't make a good profit, they leave regardless of tax "incentives"! This was the reality of the 1980's. Ten of the twelve largest non-aerospace factories in South Central Los Angeles left the area, for example, laying off unionized black workers. The last thirty years have shown clearly that the profit system preserves and increases billion-dollar profits for the big corporations by trimming labor expenses. This is done partially by maintaining a high rate of unemployment in the ghettos and barrios. This guarantees that the standard of living of the few who are employed from these areas stays at or near the poverty line. Because these workers can always be replaced by the unemployed, the bosses can exploit them to the maximum, and tell them to consider themselves lucky to have any job at all.

To stop the inter-community tensions among the oppressed — Asians, blacks and Latinos — we must fight for the reduction of working hours from 40 to 30 without any cut in pay and with full union rights and fringe benefits. When the bosses refuse, and send the cops and the national guard to stop the struggle, *we should unite the workplaces and the communities* and establish workers' militias to defend the oppressed communities and the workplaces against the bosses' army and the cops! There is no other way to fight against the divisions and distractions that the ruling classes introduces among the oppressed communities. Only by a united struggle against the capitalist system can we overcome mutual mistrust and sectoral illusions.

Against the lies and the deception of the capitalists and their agents we must fight for this demand:

- **Nationalize All Failing Businesses in the Inner Cities Under the Control of Workers and the Oppressed Communities!**

This demand could be merely the first point in a program to nationalize industry under workers' control — a goal which can only be fully realized under a workers' government.

Why the Mass Arrests and Police State Measures

The unity of the Crips and the Bloods against the Los Angeles police — the first ever attempt of the rival gangs to be political and unite to expose the brutality of the police — makes the bourgeoisie nervous. A member of the Crips had this to say when the capitalist state reacted with

to the uprising with a swift denial of basic democratic rights accompanied by military and police occupation:

"When the LAPD and the National Guard united, nobody worried. Why is it that when black people get together it's a problem?" (San Francisco Examiner, May 9, 1992.)

Quite so! The possibility of any "getting together" by the oppressed was intolerable. Any conscious united action to keep the cops out of the neighborhoods was unthinkable for the rulers. So, as soon as the uprising erupted, the capitalist class declared martial law and sent the army, the national guard and the cops. As a result, dozens were killed and many thousands arrested. California's Governor Wilson didn't hesitate to sign into a law an emergency measure (approved by the Democrats in Sacramento) giving courts seven days, rather than the usual two, to arraign people. In San Francisco, the right to assemble and demonstrate was de facto denied for about two weeks as attempts to demonstrate resulted in thousands of mass arrests which included many people who just happened to be in the area. *At the first sign of trouble, the bourgeoisie threw its precious "First Amendment" out the window!*

Why did the ruling class suppress democratic rights so readily? The revolt in L.A. represented the deep hatred of many workers and the oppressed toward the system. The verdict and the revolt changed the thinking of many people in the oppressed communities. *The upsurge was the immediate expression of a profound frustration over ruthless attacks on every sector of the working class and the oppressed.* The unions' submission to the bosses' attacks on the working class during the last decade did not change the frustration and disillusion, but only deepened it.

The capitalists know that they are sitting on a chain of volcanos. They know that eventually the struggle will expand beyond the ghettos. They did not want to take any chances, so they instituted swift Bonapartist/military measures to quell the revolt and its potential spread. The reaction of Bush, Clinton, L.A. Mayor Bradley, San Francisco Mayor Jordan, and company should *give the working class a hint* about how the ruling class will react if the frustration of the broad masses expresses itself in wide struggles, such as more revolts in the ghettos, massive actions by the unions against the attempts to destroy them, militant struggles to defend abortion rights, actions against the huge budget cuts in social services, etc. The ruling class knows that things will erupt one day, and it is prepared to smash all democratic rights, including official bourgeois democratic rights, if necessary.

The capitalists used the events in May as a useful practice exercise for possible dictatorial rule. If necessary, they will institute a military or a fascist dictatorship. If martial law is not sufficient, the likes of David Duke are waiting in the wings — with the support of growing number of capitalists — ready to launch genocide against militant work-

ers, blacks and the oppressed.

The history of the class struggle in the U.S. is normally relatively "quiet." But when it erupts it is very violent. The workers and the oppressed who normally do not have much of a class consciousness learn very quickly in times of mass struggle (for example, the 1930's). The ruling class understands that due to the long lull in the class struggle, the workers and the oppressed will be very militant when it erupts. *It is prepared to stop it by any means necessary.* In this respect the recent repressive measures are just a rehearsal. Such is the dialectic of the class struggle in the U.S.

Liberalism and the Police State — The San Francisco Example

The most liberal cities in the U.S. (Berkeley and San Francisco) turned out to be the most oppressive (excluding L.A.) in the days of rage, with over 2000 arrests, savage beatings of demonstrators and even passers-by, and massive denials of democratic rights, all led (in San Francisco) by a "liberal" chief of police and his conservative allies (the ex-cop mayor, multi-million-dollar corporations such as the telephone and gas companies, and the local big merchants). The alliance instituted in the Bay Area a temporary Bonapartist dictatorship, whose main task was denial of democratic rights through two days of formal curfew and two weeks of sheer terrorism and police state tactics. This time, the terror was directed mainly against the youth and some ultra-leftists and anarchists; of course, Marxists know that the working class will be next.

The Hongisto/Jordan/PG&E/Pacific Bell axis was dominated by the liberal chief of police Hongisto. After the first mass arrests (following the one night of looting), Hongisto claimed that the black/Latino youth were being led by white "revolutionaries" who want "to get them to be their army." (San Francisco Weekly, May 6, 1992.) Hongisto equated San Francisco to Argentina in the 1970's and decided to fulfill the role of the bloody generals. After the waves of arrests, big businesses with headquarters in San Francisco wrote a special letter to Mayor Jordan and Chief Hongisto to thank them, saying that "Thanks to your quick and decisive actions, San Francisco avoided the bloodshed and gut-wrenching scenes of random violence that occurred in Los Angeles." This was enough to swell Hongisto's head to the point of concluding that, with the Mayor and big business behind him, he had become the undisputed dictator of San Francisco. He forgot, however, that in general, big business is not yet quite ready for this type of transformation. When he decided to make the next move to bring San Francisco closer to Argentina in the 1970's, he crossed a line that the liberal bourgeoisie was not yet willing to cross. It is one thing to beat up and jail thousands of human beings — which the liberal supervisors took no effective action to stop — but it is another

thing to confiscate private property! Thus, when Hongisto confiscated thousands of copies of an issue of the San Francisco Bay Times (a local free newspaper of the lesbian/gay community), which criticized his martial law, he was fired. The bourgeoisie was not ready for a full-fledged dictatorship with the denial of democratic rights such as the freedom to publish and criticize.

Some of the same liberal Democratic supervisors who later (on May 17) marched with the left in defense of the freedom of assembly initially supported the martial law and curfews that were instituted a day after the verdict. Most of these supervisors never demanded the firing of Hongisto or the resignation of the mayor. Now that the cops' terror has brought peace for private property, and Pacific Bell, PG&E and the big hotels and restaurants are satisfied that the situation is once again safe, the liberal supervisors are free to march in demonstrations that defend the right to assemble and demonstrate. But the labor movement and the working class should not trust yesterday's defenders of martial law. The left, the labor movement and the oppressed should mobilize independently from the liberal Democrats and demand:

- **Unconditional Freedom to Assemble and Demonstrate!**
- **No Cops Present at Political Demonstrations!**
- **Drop All Charges Against Arrestees in L.A., S.F. and Elsewhere!**
- **Free All Class War Prisoners and Victims of Racist Frame-Ups!**
- **For Multiracial Workers' Defense Guards, Linked to the Unions, to Defend Demonstrators against Police Brutality and Harassment!**
- **No Illusions in Police Review Commissions!**
- **For Independent Multiracial Workers' Tribunals of Inquiry to Investigate Police Brutality Against Demonstrators!**
- **Link the Defense of Political Demonstrations to the Defense of the Ghettos and Barrios!**
- **For Labor Strikes and Militias to Defend the Unconditional Right to Assemble and Prevent Police Brutality!**

No one who supported the state of emergency and curfew should be tolerated by the working class.

- **For Multiracial Tribunals Drawn from the Unions and the Oppressed Communities to Investigate All Supporters of the State of Emergency!**
- **For Labor Actions to Force the Resignations of Those Found Guilty!**

How to Deal With Unjustified Violence

The recent events in L.A. pose a question for workers as to what their attitude should be towards those who allegedly beat up white workers during the uprising. Should

the working class, for example, defend the blacks who were arrested for the beating of the white truck driver? We think that the racist courts have no business arresting and trying them. The same racist prosecutors and courts who did not even arrest the cops who beat Rodney King, allowing them to stay free on minimal bail, insisted on an astronomical bail for those accused of beating the truck driver. The racist judge who is presiding over the trial insisted that the funds for bail for the accused blacks be examined to assure that they were not stolen. In other words, the judge and the courts treat black people as common murderers and thieves, while they let the racist cops off the hook. While ignoring the injuries and deaths caused by the cops during the rebellion, the capitalist class is using the trial of the blacks accused of beating the truck driver to consolidate law and order by intimidating anybody who is thinking about rising up again against racist injustice. The courts are likely to falsify the evidence and find the blacks guilty whether or not they are the ones who did it!

But while the working class should defend all those who were arrested in connection with the revolt against prosecution by the capitalist court system, it should not endorse any unjustifiable beating based on race. While the black community has the full right to defend itself against racists and fascists (not only cops!), its anger should not be directed against any other race as a whole. Unprovoked attacks based on race only allow the ruling class to foment hysteria and further divide the working class. While we should not hand people over to the racist police and courts, unjustified assaults should be tried by worker/multiracial tribunals in open mass meetings. Worker/multiracial defense guards should defend the communities against unjustified violence just as they should defend them against the cops and racist attacks.

The Army and the Revolt

Treating U.S. blacks and Latinos the same way he treats the masses in the semi-colonies, Bush invaded L.A. with the army. He sent the Seventh Infantry from Fort Ord — the same troops who carried out the invasion of Panama — and the Marines, who were involved in the imperialist massacre of the Iraqi people.

But the capitalist politicians know that a massacre in L.A. could ignite a revolution at home. Many soldiers came from the same kind of ghettos that exist in L.A. Many of the black soldiers accepted the army's "job offer" out of despair, i.e., because there were no other jobs available. If these soldiers are ordered to shoot at their brothers and sisters, they will probably switch sides and join the rebellion.

There was little shooting from the army during the revolt, at least as far as can be determined from published accounts, which state that only one person was shot by the

army or national guards. Indeed, there was tension within the army. According to Challenge, the newspaper of the Progressive Labor Party, nine soldiers refused to go to L.A.

The intense social tension in L.A. did not change after the army left. The bourgeoisie is insecure, its nerves are jumpy. It is clear that if another rebellion by the oppressed takes place, the army (that part of it which remains loyal to the state) is likely to shoot and possibly kill dozens.

To win the struggle against the racist state, the oppressed need to win the army over to their side, or at least neutralize it. If the army continues to play a role in the oppression of the ghettos and barrios, revolutionaries must advocate tactics for winning the army over to the defense of the oppressed communities.

Within the army, revolutionaries should advocate the right of black and all anti-racist soldiers to form independent committees to discuss what to do if ordered to oppress the ghettos and barrios. If such committees develop on a large scale, it will be difficult to suppress them and put their members in jail. The black/working class anti-racist committees in the army should be committed to support the struggle of the soldiers' brothers and sisters, and should demand the right to receive military training from officers chosen by them from the oppressed communities and the trade unions (especially unions with a large black membership).

Such demands may seem utopian. But in times of social turmoil, there is massive doubt and discontent among those soldiers who came from the ghettos and the working class. The soldiers, like the rest of the masses, need a program of action that directs their discontent in the right political and military direction. The creation of anti-racist committees based on the working class would prepare the soldiers to see the nature of the racist pro-capitalist officers and the objective role of the army in the suppression the communities. Such preparation would make it easier for the soldiers to defend the communities, and to refuse to shoot their brothers and sisters if ordered to do so.

The task is to win the soldiers over to the side of the oppressed. By doing that, we cut the major artery of the repressive apparatus of the racist capitalist state. This could bring about the transformation of a revolt into a full-fledged revolutionary struggle. When the army is ordered to suppress an uprising in the communities, our slogans should be:

- **Army and National Guard Out of the Ghettos and Barrios!**
- **For Labor Actions to Force the Army and the Police Out of the Communities!**
- **Soldiers — Don't Shoot Your Brothers and Sisters!**
- **For Soldiers' Committees to Defend the Communities Alongside Anti-Racist Trade Unionists and the Oppressed!**

The Road to Liberation for Blacks and the Oppressed

As the economic situation worsens, blacks and the most oppressed strata of the workers face increasing hardships and repression. They will be drawn more and more into actions that unite them with the rest of the workers in opposition to cutbacks, speed-ups, layoffs, etc. Being the first and most harshly hit by these attacks, they will be in the forefront of the new militancy arising in the unions and rest of the working class.

In the last twenty-five years, both the reforms of the civil rights movement and black nationalism have demonstrated their inability to resolve racist oppression. While the bourgeoisie was willing to make some concessions to the civil rights movement in a time of economic boom (the 1960's), today, in a time of crisis, it is taking away those concessions one after another.

Black nationalism has not achieved much either. The

main tenets of black nationalism are an emphasis on the commonality of interests of all black people (which includes black agents of the bourgeoisie such as the 318 black mayors!) and rejection of white workers as potential allies. Black nationalism has two objective functions in capitalist society. For the extremely tiny layer of black bourgeoisie and the very small layer of black petty bourgeoisie, the "black enterprise" movement serves as a protective shelter against the white bourgeoisie. But more importantly, black nationalism objectively serves the capitalist class by hindering the prospect of a united class struggle, since significant changes and improvement for the black masses can only won by a struggle alongside that of the rest of the working class. While such a struggle is impossible unless white workers fight for the elimination of racist oppression (they *must* do this to advance their own class interests), the rejection of white workers as a whole hampers the liberation of blacks.

History shows that the struggle against special oppres-

Race-Baiting and Sectoralism

One of the lessons of the upsurge concerns the role played by those who advocate divisions according to race (sectoralism) within the movement. A leading radical youth group in the Bay Area with this ideology is Roots Against War (RAW). RAW spokespersons have asserted publicly that only people of color can lead a mass movement against racist oppression; whites (particularly white males) who support such a movement and want to participate in it can only submit themselves to leaders who are people of color!

These views helped to destroy a mass meeting at the San Francisco Women's Building on Sunday May 3, 1992. On Friday May 1, the police had arrested over 400 people at a demonstration in the Mission district. Many of the arrestees were people who just happened to be the area. When the angry arrestees joined with their supporters in a mass meeting two days later, RAW destroyed it.

The meeting was so undemocratic that in comparison, some of the meetings conducted by right-wing union bureaucrats look good! As the crowd of 400-500 people waited for the discussion to begin, RAW and a few leftists from the Revolutionary Workers League stood haggling in front of the meeting. (See our open letter to the RWL about their role in the meeting.) As the crowd became increasingly impatient, a

speaker from the Revolutionary Trotskyist Tendency (RTT) addressed the crowd, demanding that the self-proclaimed unelected leaders step down, that the meeting democratically elect a chairperson and set up an agenda, and that resolutions be adopted on the basis of one person, one vote. Unfortunately, without a microphone or a bullhorn, most of the people could not hear the proposals. Those who heard them applauded, and some shouted for the speaker to chair the meeting. At that point, one of hagglers for leadership grabbed the bullhorn and immediately convened the meeting, without an elected chair, an approved agenda, or an agreed-upon democratic procedure.

Addressing the gathering as a passive audience rather than a body of assembled activists, the unelected leaders spoke one after another. Spirited speeches were made advancing the conflicting short-term logistical plans of the various factions. None sought to organize these assembled activists into working committees to reach out to the communities or to labor. None argued for setting up a democratic procedure. In the absence of an agreed agenda or procedure, the RWL's attempt to introduce at least some discussion of program fell flat on its face.

When some discussion from the floor finally took place, a RAW spokesperson denounced as racist any white

speaker who disagreed with the RAW "leaders," even about such mundane issues as the best date to hold the next demonstration. Some RAW speakers insisted that only people of color could lead and that white men should shut up and take a back seat. An attempt to propose political demands for the march was denounced as "white boys trying to cram their politics down our throats" — even though the demands being suggested were nearly identical to those adopted by RAW itself later the same week! Even if we presume that the RAW leadership has a better perspective than this divisive ultra-nationalist jive, they said nothing in their speeches to correct their followers' separatist anti-working class perspective.

As the meeting continued to degenerate, and it seemed impossible to reach agreement on anything — even the date for the next demonstration — people started to vote with their feet and leave. RAW thereupon announced that it would organize its own demonstration on Wednesday, and then walked out of the meeting en masse, throwing hundreds of arrestees and activists into disarray.

Curiously enough, RAW subsequently held an unannounced meeting with CISPES, Prairie Fire and few other reformist groups that share its sectoral perspectives. This "coalition" shifted

sion must merge with the working class's struggle against capitalism to succeed *even partially*. Separatist movements arise in times of *low* activity in the overall class struggle. The Garvey "back to Africa" movement took place amidst the reactionary atmosphere of the early 1920's. On the other hand, during the working class radicalization of the 1930's and 1940's, black and white workers fought their common enemy through the same class organizations. The relative quiescence of the working class in the 1960's led to the revival of the sectoral movement. But when the working class once again occupies its rightful place in the class struggle, the overwhelmingly proletarian and urban character of the black population means that *the separatist movements will recede as the class struggle intensifies*. Growing numbers in the oppressed sectors will identify with the struggle for power of the working class as a united force. The black masses will seek liberation through the proletarian revolution.

For now, blacks and the oppressed need a program that is based on the revolutionary mobilization of the integrated working class to their defense. Many of the demands from the program that we have outlined above could not be realized under the framework of capitalism. Those which are realized will be by-products of the revolutionary struggle, because to defend them against renewed attacks it will be necessary to fight capitalism all the way, that is, to undertake the socialist revolution.

Within the framework of class struggle perspectives, blacks and the oppressed will play a leading and crucial role. Being one of the most oppressed sectors of the working class, black workers must be in the vanguard of the socialist revolution for such a revolution to triumph. A socialist revolution will establish a workers' government in which blacks and other oppressed workers will play a leading role. Only then will blacks and the rest of the oppressed, alongside the working class as a whole, be truly liberated.

the day of the next demonstration to the following Friday. So much for mass democracy - RAW style.

Some may ask why we bother to give a detailed account of this fiasco. The May 3 mass meeting presented a unique opportunity to build an extensive united front that could have been the first stage in mobilizing many thousands to take action against the police state tactics of the local bourgeoisie in San Francisco. The enthusiastic young arrestees could have been the beginning of a healthy base for such a movement. A large united front based on the tradition of workers' democracy would have allowed real discussion of the political direction and program of the mass movement. The RTT's proposals to such a coalition would have included multi-racial workers' tribunals to prosecute the cops; multi-racial workers' defense guards against the police and racist-sexist violence, 30 hours work for 40 hours pay (full employment without a cut in pay), free tuition and open admissions to the universities, etc. (See main article.) Even if our proposals had not gained the support of the majority, a growing united front would have had to re-assess its political direction as the effectiveness of the majority's ideas were tested in action. A coalition that mobilized thousands could have appealed to the labor movement and the working class, which ultimately is the only class that can smash the dictatorial power of the racist cops and defend basic democratic rights by using

methods of class struggle such as strike actions.

Without democratic procedures and political discussion it is impossible to build such a united front. The effect of tactics such as those used by RAW at the May 3 meeting is to divide the movement according to races. Race-baiting miseducates the masses, wrecks any democratic proceeding, and ruins any possibility for integrated class action against the state power of Mayor Jordan and his dogs in the police department.

These kind of tactics allow the ex-Stalinist/Maoist leaders of RAW to organize smaller demonstrations with their own liberal program and organizational manipulation. A few hundred activists confronting the police cannot be a substitute for a real mass movement that discusses and debates its political direction and tests it in mass actions. With the continued arrests of the activists, these tactics fell apart within a few weeks, as they were bound to do.

Without a class struggle program, it is not possible to build a lasting movement that challenges the repression of the capitalist state. But pardon us! While the majority of the demonstrators did not have a clear program and perspective, RAW did: it relied on the liberal wing of the racist bourgeois courts by calling for indictment (not even conviction and jailing!) of all the racist police who beat Rodney King! RAW marched on the streets like mili-

tant liberals after it destroyed a mass meeting that could have discussed why the masses should rely on their own power to stop police brutality and racism. Unlike RAW, which asks the racist courts for justice, we propose to organize mass meetings in the angry communities to elect our own tribunals to judge the cops and the capitalist state. Such mass meetings could lead to the creation of defense militias in conjunction with the labor movement.

The local bourgeoisie in San Francisco is not threatened by a confrontation with a minority with a liberal program. Its right hand (Mayor Jordan and police chief Hongisto) locks the activists in jail again and again, while its left hand (the liberal supervisors, the liberal black ministers) tell the masses: "Don't follow these leftists! Their program is not different than ours, but we have a realistic means to deliver it; that is, the Democratic Party!" This is how the petty bourgeois sectoralists and the liberal bourgeoisie collaborate. And the result? The activists get demoralized after learning nothing of how to advance the struggle, while the broad masses stay home. The only winners are the police department and the liberal politicians, who cover up for the police with empty promises of better restraints on the cops.

We understand that in subsequent meetings, RAW has not repeated the tactics it used on May 3, 1992. We hope that this change in behavior indicates that RAW has learned from its errors.

An Open Letter to the Revolutionary Workers League

Dear Comrades,

We think that you committed very grave mistakes at the mass meeting at the Women's Building on May 3, 1992. This was one of the most undemocratic meetings recorded in recent history. It was a meeting during which Roots Against War (RAW) destroyed a potentially large and healthy united front coalition that could have formed in the wake of the mass arrests in San Francisco. Such a coalition could have sparked a mass movement against the racist, police-state-type repression in the city.

Your first mistake occurred when the 400-500 arrestees arrived at the meeting. Instead of calling for a meeting in the tradition of workers' democracy, the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL) haggled with RAW for a long time as the impatient crowd waited for a word from the unelected leaders. While you may have been trying to bargain for proper democratic procedures, a date for the demonstration, etc., it was wrong to do this behind the backs of the people. When our comrade tried to interrupt the haggling and demanded that the people from the floor elect a chairperson, set an agenda, and adopt a democratic procedure of one person one vote, the RWL's comrades said nothing to back him up. Poor acoustics may have hindered the ability of some of your comrades to understand what was said, but we know that at least one of your comrades was near enough to hear the speaker from the RTT.

The meeting degenerated very quickly, as the unelected chair presented various speakers from RAW and some from the RWL (all of whom stood up as leaders in a row in front of the crowd). Without an agreed upon agenda and a democratic procedure, RAW was able to dominate the meeting and destroy it. RAW refused to allow anyone from the RTT to speak, while the unelected chair chose several members of the RWL, none of whom said a word about the undemocratic and manipulative way the meeting was run.

Your comrades raised some correct programmatic points such as forming workers/black tribunals and militias to defend the communities, and building a workers' party. But without minimal democratic procedures such as an agenda item that allows discussion on the points of unity and a vote on the proposed slogans, raising programmatic points was rather useless, as events proved. In the degenerated context of that meeting, the people did not take any of your points seriously.

Your silence on the question of workers' democracy was compounded by your failure to make *any* political criticism of RAW. RAW tried to divide the crowd according to racial lines, telling the assembled that only people of color can lead and that white males should sit back and shut up. Several of your comrades spoke after this, but none of them raised a word of criticism of this reactionary, sectoral division of the movement. RAW's tactics enabled RAW to announce themselves as the leaders of the movement, leave the meeting, and organize their own demonstration, irrespective of the people's wishes.

The sectoralism of RAW and the disregard of its lead-

ers for democratic procedure worked hand in hand to destroy a potentially large, on-going united front and to dampen the enthusiasm of the young arrestees at the meeting. The RWL remained silent on both of these crucial points.

The May 3rd Meeting and the RWL's Politics

The RWL's blunders during the May 3 meeting did not fall from the sky. They stemmed from the RWL's consistent political capitulation to the so-called "specially oppressed," whom the RWL considers to be the revolutionary vanguard. Abandoning Marxist analysis altogether at a recent forum, an RWL leader went so far as to claim that all lesbians are members of the working class. Typically, in all of its publications the RWL calls for a workers' party in which organized labor is just another element (usually last on the list) among many cross-class groupings that include petty bourgeois gay, lesbian, and women's organizations. Recently, the RWL went even further in its capitulation to popular front-type (cross-class) movements. In its proposed resolutions for the second national conference of the National Women's Rights Organizing Coalition (NWROC), which is dominated politically by the RWL, the RWL proposed that:

"NWROC will fight within NOW (the National Organization of Women — ed.) at both the local and national levels, demanding that NOW break with the Democrats and Republicans as sexist parties and commit itself to building a party of the workers and oppressed to defend the rights of women." (Proposed NWROC resolutions, page 1.)

In this resolution, the RWL is asking a bourgeois women's organization which supports the Democratic Party to build a workers' party. In other words, even a bourgeois organization can be a part of the workers' party bandwagon, together with petty bourgeois gay and lesbian organizations, as long as it is part of the "vanguard" of the specially oppressed. In contrast to this opportunist view of the RWL, Marxists tell the masses that NOW as well as the Democratic Party cannot be part of a workers' party based on the working class and its militant struggles. We should tell working class women within the rank and file of NOW to break with NOW and join the struggle for a workers' party, not ask NOW to build it!

The class nature of an organization is crucial. This is why we fight for a working class women's movement linked to the unions and the struggle for a labor party. While we recognize the possibility that individual members of NOW and even the Democratic Party will break with their organizations and join a workers' party when it is formed, only organizations of the oppressed that are based on the working class should be asked *as organizations* to become part of a workers' party.

The RWL, the Oppressed, and Sectoralism

In the same document (the RWL's resolutions for the second national conference of NWROC), the RWL put forward a sectoral line, portraying young black women, young

gays and lesbians, etc. as the vanguard of a cross-class mass women's movement. While Marxists acknowledge the important and even crucial role that blacks must play in the leadership of the class struggle in the US, for example, this can be realized only in the context of a *working class movement with a class struggle perspective*. Despite the heroism of many blacks who supported militant black nationalism (the Black Panthers, for example), black nationalism cannot pose any real solution for the black masses. It goes without saying that the above also applies to cross-class movements such as the Rainbow Coalition that tied black workers to the American capitalists via the Democratic Party.

The RWL provides insight on the real class character of the movement it fights for when it writes that:

"... [I]t is the association of the militant clinic-defense movement with the spectre [sic] of a new generation of rebellion that has made it so worrying to the capitalists and the courts and so frightening to the liberal feminists trying to prove their ability to *keep the 1960s from coming again*." (Ibid., page 9, our emphasis.)

No comrades, we do not want the 1960's simply to come back. The above quotation expresses petty bourgeois radical perspectives and not the goals of revolutionary Marxists. The movements of the 1960's, though they produced some limited gains regarding civil rights, were replaced by the historical backlash of the 1970's-1980's, precisely because they were not centered on the working class and its organizations. The 1960's were to a large degree struggles of separatists, sectoralists, and single issue movements that

involved mainly the petty bourgeoisie (with the exception of the Black Panthers and a few others). At best, these were cross-class movements, which is the very reason why the gains they produced are being taken back so easily. By contrast, the historic gains achieved by the working class in the 1930's have proven far more difficult to erase completely. From the documents submitted to NWROC, it is clear that the RWL has not broken with the concept of radical sectoral movements in which the working class as a conscious class force is only another ingredient in a multi-class mix. While on the one hand the RWL uses transitional demands, these are meaningless if it calls for a cross-class type of movement that can only end in class collaboration. The posing of many formally transitional demands in a sterile way (as laundry lists) is what makes the RWL a centrist instead of a reformist organization.

The RWL's Capitulation to Spontaneity

Lacking a Marxist clarity in recognizing the contradictions of the revolt in Los Angeles, the RWL tailed the spontaneous movement. In a leaflet that was issued as the revolt was taking place, the RWL wrote under the cover of NWROC:

"The *only* thing 'wrong' with these rebellions is that they are still geographically limited and are not sufficiently organized." (Our emphasis.)

Only those who don't understand the ABCs of the politics of the class struggle (that is, those who capitulate to

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spontaneous movements) can seriously claim that revolutionary Marxists view geographical limitation and insufficient organization as the *only* things wrong with the rebellion. Unlike impressionist centrists, Marxists always understand that geographical and organizational problems usually come about as a result of a wrong and/or inadequate program (or the absence of any political program and perspective, as in the case of the L.A. revolt), as well as a lack of class consciousness.

There were several political problems with the revolt. First, it was isolated from the organized forces of the working class and therefore it lacked what was necessary to transform it from a spontaneous rebellion against racism and oppression to a class rebellion. The fact that a rebellion begins with the most oppressed sector of society is not enough to guarantee its success. Most of the people involved were permanently unemployed and *could not smash the racist state apparatus* without a conscious class perspective involving the proletariat, the most oppressed sectors of the working class, and even white workers. The simple lesson is that the working class (conscious of its power as a class) must actively join the rebellion. A conscious working class rebellion should create integrated defense guards against the police and supplement the rebellion with class struggle methods such as general strikes and the arming of the working class (not only blacks/Latinos). As long as the revolt is limited politically, the state can isolate it and contain it, as it did in L.A. and San Francisco.

In addition to the passivity of the proletariat as an organized and conscious class, the masses on the streets were hindered by the lack of a program and demands (multiracial workers' tribunals against the cops, multiracial workers' militias, 30 hours work for 40 hours pay, etc.) that could have spread the rebellion to the rest of the working class and given it a political, anti-capitalist character. Without this link to organized workers with an anti-

capitalist program, the upsurge was very limited politically and it was vulnerable to the repression of the state. Thus the rebellion was characterized mostly by the anger of the poor and the oppressed who grabbed from the shop windows what they cannot get in "normal" times.

There were many historical reasons why the class consciousness of the revolt was limited. Most significant of these are the racism and oppression of the capitalist state that keeps the masses isolated in the ghettos. The racism of the union bureaucracy that keeps many blacks and Latinos out of the unions and consequently removes the unions from the struggles of the oppressed is also important.

The setbacks of the union movement had a negative effect on the development of class consciousness in the ghettos, but sectoralism and black nationalism also played a role. The defeats of black struggles in the 1960's (which were led by the ideology of black nationalism) led to widespread demoralization followed by stagnation in the development of class consciousness. This led to the emergence of figures such as Louis Farrakhan, who repressed class consciousness even further. Thus, when the revolt started, the downtrodden masses did not possess the necessary class perspective and political organization.

Without a dialectical understanding of the contradictions behind the upsurge, it is easy to fall prey to sectoralism. Capitulation to sectoralism and the spontaneity of the movement are fundamental centrist/opportunist errors that are the driving forces behind the RWL's capitulation to sectoral, petty bourgeois groups like RAW (for example, during the meeting on Sunday, May 3).

We write this open letter with the hope that an honest examination of the mistakes made on May 3 will compel you to examine the political methodology that led to these errors. We will always welcome debates and discussions between our organizations to clarify such matters.

Like what we have to say? FIND OUT MORE!

For more information about the Revolutionary Trotskyist Tendency,
write to the address nearest you:

National Office:
RTT, P.O. Box 10748, Oakland, California 94610

East Coast Office:
RTT, P.O. Box 2089, Cathedral Station, New York, NY 10025