

CLASS – SECOND LECTURE 9/2

Slide 1

Time holder

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Greetings, and welcome to this second IFA community session.

In our first session we debunked the idea of separating humanity into different races. The documentation for this session (video, slides, the written text and the chat) is on my website Alkalimat.org. Please check it out and use it in your classes and everywhere you find it useful.

This is a discussion that continues because of the widespread continued use of the concept race.

Several people mentioned the W I Thomas statement that what people think is real is real in its consequence. This is true. But here is what this means. If a racist believes in inferior races, they are dangerous because of the evil racist violence that they promote. It does not mean that such a thing as different races actually exist. Because a racist thinks races are real doesn't make it so – they are lying.

But we do have to ask, what are Black people? Who are we? What concepts can we use if not race? There are many concepts that make sense, such as ethnicity or nationality, or simply the descriptive terms Black people or the Black community.. We maintain that the concept of race has a biological meaning even if one argues that the concept is socially constructed. The truth is that there is only one human species, or if you insist one human race.

We are challenged to purge racist thinking from our minds. Black Studies is how we must take up this challenge.

Now we turn to how humanity is truly divided. Again, we are going to use objective measures of what we are talking about, and for this the first concept we will explore is class.

Just to begin, each of us can think about how we grew up. What did our parents do to make a living – meaning what kind of jobs did they have, how much income came into the home, and who had the power to hire and fire them. Even how much control we have over our time on a daily basis is part of class. Do we own our home or do we rent. How much are we in debt?

All of these questions are about class, one way or another.

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To begin, I want to remind everyone how the discussion will work after the presentation.

More than 250 people have registered, and more than 100 want to comment. There are several ways to do so. Out time is limited to 90 minutes, including 45 minutes of presentation.

1. During the discussion time, raise your hand (use the reaction button and raise hand)
2. Anytime during the session, write your comments, questions, link, etc in the chat
3. Take the discussion into your classes, your networks and all other Black Studies contexts

Tech support is reading the chat so if there are issues, please let them know in the chat.

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This presentation will take up these five points

1. What is a social class?

2. Comparing two ways of thinking about class
3. How has class shaped Black history
4. What is the class reality of Black people today
5. What is the relationship between class struggle and Black liberation

Black Studies is about the complete understanding of the Black experience, especially the vast majority who continue to experience the racist oppression and exploitation that has been the base line experience in the US since slavery days.

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Here is our basic argument about class.

Everyone needs food, clothing, a place to live, health care and much more. Our class position is how we get those things, both production and consumption. In general, it means everybody has to have a job, or get some kind of government subsidy. People's jobs make up a great division of labor. That is how every society is organized. Everyone has a class position.

The majority of people in every society are the working class.

However, who we are, does not always get accurately reflected in who we think we are. Many of us confuse debt with income and live beyond our means, so some workers think they are in the middle-class. We can consume on thin ice, thinking we are on solid ground. However, whoever owns our debt, owns us.

The news media and some politicians mostly talk about the middle class and not the working class. The working class gets talked about when workers wake up and fight for working class issues like more pay, better benefits, and more safety on the job. Being in the working class, but thinking one is in the middle class, is what we call false consciousness.

Clear thinking is needed for building progressive social movements.
Clear thinking begins with each of us on an individual level.

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So, what does class do?

1. Our ability to consume helps create what kind of quality of life we have – do we have enough to eat, a safe clean place to live, can we afford health care, what kind of car do we drive, what kind of entertainment/recreation do we have, and can we take vacations. All of this adds up to what quality of life we have. All of this takes money. Money does not guarantee happiness, but without it one usually finds it difficult to be happy and secure.
2. On the other hand, power is another aspect of life – do we control how we get our money, or who has power over us. The people with the most power are in one class, and people with little or no power over others are in a very different class.

We can clarify this more because we are talking about two different approaches to class.

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We have two ways to deal with class and class differences, social stratification (and that is what an immediate impact on our quality of life) and political economy (the overall organization of how society is run, and ultimately what determines social stratification).

We are all familiar with the ranking system – how much money do you make or how far did you go in school. These are objective numbers we can come up with and use to compare ourselves with others, some have more, and some have less.

On the other hand, there are two different ways to understand what kind of job we have. One way is the technical division of labor that involves

what technology we work with and what skills we need to do a job. A teacher is different from a carpenter, a bus driver from a minister, although one can actually do more than one job as more and more of us work two jobs, so you might be a bus driver and a minister at the same time, just different days of the week.

There is also the social division of labor used for social stratification, and that is the ranking of the prestige of the job. It turns out that surveys of people show that there is a general agreement on the relative social status of jobs in terms of occupational prestige.

But there is another way to examine the social division of labor based on power. Who owns and controls business and who is forced to work for a living. That is the role of political economy. Two people can both be in the same occupation, but in every different classes – one owns the company and one works for that person, although they both might be engineers. The key here is ownership of a company with the power to hire and fire labor

We all know about social stratification, but many of us don't know the full way that ownership and control dominate everything.

But in Black Studies we need to know both ways to deal with class.

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We need an approach to class in Black Studies to do the following:

1. Use both approaches: stratification and political economy
2. All studies of class should be based on empirical data
3. Studies should clarify different classes in the Black community
4. Studies should clarify differences between Blacks and Whites in the same class
5. Studies should make comparisons throughout Africa and the African Diaspora

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We all need as much as we can get, money and education for ourselves and our family. The fight to raise the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 will impact the lives of one third of all workers and 47% of Black workers. You know that would be progress. If we are thinking about the real lives of people then the movement for \$15 would be massive and at the heart of the Black liberation struggle.

But while we fight for more income and more education, we have to keep our focus on the rulers of all of society, and who is in control of the system that keeps us from having the income, education, or health care that we need.

This is why the fight for reforms is critical, making change one step at a time. On the other hand, that will never result in all the changes we need. We build movements to change who rules the society, movements for the total transformation of the society, to end the system of their class rule.

We need reforms within the system, but in the end, we need a new system. Only then can we have Black liberation.

Let's take a moment to examine the thinkers who have argued both positions – we need to study their ideas to fully deepen our thinking.

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Max Weber, a German social scientist, had the view that ones market position (how much money one made), social status (occupational prestige) and party (participation in electoral politics) was key for the organization of classes in society. He is the father of stratification studies.

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E Franklin Frazier, African American Sociologist, long time chair of that department at Howard University after Fisk and Atlanta University. He is best known for the application of social stratification studies on Black people. He led the study of the Black Middle class. Another Howard professor, the economist Abram Harris, led the study of the Black working class.

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Karl Marx, with his associate Frederick Engels, established a political economy framework that targeted the irreconcilable class conflict between the owners of capital and the workers. This framework is what anti-capitalist movements for the entire 20th century have used all over the world. Now, with the technological revolution and the absence of a leading socialist country, we have the challenge to develop this for the 21st century

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W E B DuBois carried this political economy framework into a study of Black history, notably in his 1935 study of the Black Reconstruction. After three chapters profiling the black worker, the white worker, and the planter, Du Bois argues in the fourth chapter that the decision gradually taken by slaves on the Southern plantations to stop working during the war was an example of a potential general strike force of four million slaves the Southern elite had not yet reckoned with.

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The political economy perspective has been used to explain African History. Walter Rodney, an intellectual activist from Guyana with a doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, wrote a path breaking book on imperialism and colonialism in Africa.

Kwame Nkrumah, first president of liberated Ghana, used class struggle as a framework for ending foreign rule over African countries, including the role of an African bourgeoisie.

Abdul Muhammad Babu from Tanzania discusses how political economy can help us understand how scientific socialism is about workers power in building an anti-capitalist future.

All of this points to the importance for the political economy framework to be applied to all of Africa and the African Diaspora.

This includes the Caribbean

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CLR James and Eric Williams, both from Trinidad, and Frantz Fanon from Martinique, all three use the political economy framework to analyze aspects of Caribbean history.

Williams focuses on the slave trade, showing its relationship to the development of industrial capitalism in Europe.

James examines the Haitian revolution and slavery. The book explores the dynamics of the Caribbean economy and the European feudal system during the era before the Haitian Revolution, and places each revolution in comparative historical and economic perspective.

Fanon seeks the agency of the anti-colonial process in the most marginalized sector, challenging the traditional Marxist view of the lumpen-proletariat. This points to those people permanently excluded from stable employment.

Our use of the political economy framework helps us to understand the history of Black people in this country, this is a most pressing task in our study.

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Our first focus on this country starts with capitalism and the slavery system.

The main class relations were slaves and the owners of slaves. The rule of the slave master was by brutal force. The majority of slave owners had few slaves, but the power was in the hands of the big plantation owners. Slavery was an engine of the capitalist system as well as an obstacle to its development. What was the role of technology?

Cotton was the foundation for the entire industrial capitalism, north and south. More was invested in slaves and related natural resources than the entire rest of the economy in the decades leading to the Civil War.

Field slaves were production workers, and house slaves were service workers. The cotton system based on Black labor was pushed forward by the cotton gin of 1791. At first one slave could clean one pound of cotton per day, but with a hand driven cotton gin this increased to 150 pounds, and with the steam powered cotton gin one person could clean a 1,000 pounds, a full bale of cotton. This led to an increase in people picking cotton to feed the cotton gins.

The economic base of slavery shaped politics, legislation and the court system. It was the reason the Civil War was fought. National politics changed somewhat, but the end of the Reconstruction returned political power back to the former slave owners. At the economic level somethings changed, but others didn't.

Look at this brothers back. Don't feel sorry for him, be proud of him. He resisted and paid a price. He must have been a "bad" brother! He should inspire us today.

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After the emancipation experience (comprised of slave revolts, the underground railroad, the national negro convention movement, the not so civil war, and reconstruction) Black people were still mainly in the

rural South, basically in the map on this slide. It was called the Black Belt.

The economy was still based on cotton, but now Black people were tenant farmers (small farmers). But they were mostly without land so they had to rent land from the former slave owners who chopped up their land into small parcels. The technology was the same until WWII. That's when cotton picking began to decline for Black labor.

This demand for field workers declined sharply in the 1940s by the invention of the mechanical cotton picker. In an hour, a good field hand could pick **twenty pounds of cotton**; each mechanical picker, in an hour picked as much as **a thousand pounds**....picking a bale of cotton by machine cost...\$5.25, and picking it by hand cost...\$39.41. Each machine did the work of fifty people.

This rural tenancy period was the context for the full development of the social organization of the Black community, especially the church and educational institutions, business development and all forms of culture. The diverse Africans thrust into the cauldron of slavery led to a new nationality, the African Americans,

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In addition to the mechanical cotton picker there were three reasons for the great migration that transformed Black people from rural workers in rural southern agriculture, to urban workers in urban based northern industry.

1. The boll weevil bug attacked the cotton plants. During 1909–1935 the production of cotton was cut in the American South by 11 %, ranging from 1% in Missouri to 18 % in Louisiana. This pushed Black workers out of the cotton patch.
2. The mass assembly line created a new demand for labor that pulled Black workers into northern industry. One major example is auto

factories in Detroit. From 1910 to 1930, the Black population of Detroit increased from under 6,000 to over 120,000

3. Another reason is that white workers went off to war and that opened the door for Black workers and women. But, of course, this just continued the process of last hired, first fired.

This has led to the current class organization of the Black community today

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In very general terms, and these are themselves diverse categories, there are four basic classes in the Black community.

The two smallest classes are the extremes – Black people who are in the capitalist class and those facing permanent marginalization never to work in a stable situation.

Then there are Black people in the middle class, while the vast majority of Black people are in the working class.

Lest go deeper.

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Of course, there is the general definition of capitalists, people whose main income is based on owning stock. There is also a top Black capitalist elite, those who sit on the boards that control the big corporations.

Over three quarters (76 percent) of public Fortune 1,000 companies had at least one African American director on their board as of September 2022, compared with 61 percent at the end of 2020.

Forty percent of the African American directors joined their boards after June 1, 2020 showing progress since the murder of George in May 2020 based on the massive protest demonstrations declaring that Black lives

matter. Capitalism remains flexible and willing to cherry pick and coopt Black candidates into their lairs.

60 percent of all African American board members are men, whereas 72 percent of all board members are men.

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The cooptation of Black people onto the main capitalist boards does not define the relationship of the masses of Black people to capital.

Black exclusion from the capitalist class is stark when one looks at the wealth gap between whites and Blacks. Check this slide

The top bars indicate the difference in household wealth, but the bottom two bars show the most extreme polarity when you measure stock ownership. Black capitalism exists, but just a tiny bit of the big picture

The pie chart shows the small per cent of Black millionaires.

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A similar pattern holds for highest paying occupations.

The top bar in this slide is for the entire work force, color coded, with Black people in red and orange

In every instance of these examples Black people are underrepresented.

So, there are Black people are at all occupational levels, just not in equitable numbers.

But we also have to ask, is this enough to have the masses of Black people approve of the overall capitalist system?

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The answer is clear, the majority of Black people have a negative view of capitalism. And the reason is because it does not give everyone an equal opportunity to be successful.

54% have a negative impression of capitalism, and 49% deny that capitalism gives people an equal opportunity.

Seems like this is a time for anti-capitalist movements to start moving if they are going to reflect the political views of the Black masses.

So, what about the middle class?

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The middle class is in an interesting position. There has been a motion from business to the professions, and many of the business enterprises are no longer independent Black owned ones but franchises of giant corporations like in fast foods or gas stations.

Also, there is a pattern of taking away middle class privileges forcing people to unionize like teachers, nurses, and graduate students. The class polarization today is forcing many middle class people into working class conditions.

The key to joining the middle class for Black youth has been getting a college degree.

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This slide shows that the more education you get the more income you can expect, like some college gets you 30,000, but finishing college gets you 19K more at 49,000.

However, the greatest disparity between whites and Blacks is at the college level at \$11,000.

On an absolute basis people with less education have a motivation to fight for survival. On a relative basis the people with more education have a motivation to fight as they are falling behind the higher they go.

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This same pattern holds with wealth. More education gets you more wealth, but the greatest disparity is at the highest educational attainment. The more you get, the more you fall behind.

This wealth is mainly in home ownership. Black Americans have a homeownership rate of 46.4% compared to 75.8% of white families.

This difference in home ownership was the result of national policy that refused the same access to government housing loans for Black people as compared to white people

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Similar dynamics of change in class composition are hitting the working class. Most workers used to be in production – auto, steel, or meat packing for example. Then there was a shift from production to service like bus drivers, postal workers, and hospitality and health care.

Now the new technological transformation is bringing in computers and digital tools like robots to force workers to compete with machines day by day, even hour by hour.

Increasingly, demand for unskilled labor is phasing out while the use of computers and other digital tools are become normal job skills required.

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We are in a new stage of how the economy is organized. New tools are becoming dominant.

Companies like Amazon are leading the transformation of workplaces into networks of machines and workers driven by the algorithms of artificial intelligence (what they call AI)

The new work place reorganization includes AI, computers, robots, time motion studies that add up to total surveillance, global scale planning for

a just-in-time supply chain, and new forms of corporate structures realigning on horizontal and vertical levels.

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The pattern of unemployment remains constant, Black people experience unemployment twice that of whites. But these official statistics are not very accurate

1. They don't take into account discouraged workers
2. They don't separate part time from full time workers
3. They don't consider poorly paid jobs keeping people poor
4. They don't consider how long people are unemployed

We need new data.

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Black people are more unemployed at every educational level, but the greatest difference is with less education.

There is an inverse relationship between education and unemployment, the more education the less unemployment, the less education the more unemployment.

Education is important for the working class. But workers need to organize.

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The general organization for workers are the trade unions. The majority of workers in this country have never been unionized, and the level we have had has been declining over the last 40 years. But, within this Black workers have been the most unionized.

2023 is a time for new organization efforts as suggested by the current strike wave. The U.S. labor movement saw a resurgence in 2022, with high-profile organizing campaigns at companies including Starbucks,

Amazon, and Trader Joe's. Further, more than 16 million workers were represented by a union in 2022—an increase of 200,000 from 2021.

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show the number of workers involved in major work stoppages (strikes and similar activities) increased by nearly 50% compared with 2021.

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All people coming out of the working class don't work. There was full employment during slavery – every slave was put to work. But, in the wage labor system the capitalists use unemployment to keep wages down. What they say is “if you don't like what's going on there are unemployed people more than willing to take your place” – that's the line they try to shove down our throats

Under current conditions, almost 20% of Black people will never have a good job, and will be marginalized, criminalized, and slowly but surely liquidated via no health care, substance abuse, and self-inflicted violence. The system has no future for this class

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One of the main ways that the unemployed marginalized workers are dealt with is to throw them into prison. There are more people in prison on a per capita basis in the United States than anywhere else in the world.

Blacks are 6 times more likely to be imprisoned.

Penal labor in the United States is explicitly **allowed** by the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States"

Here is how the ACLU sums up incarcerated labor:

“Our nation incarcerates over 1.2 million people in state and federal prisons, and two out of three of these incarcerated people are also workers. In most instances, the jobs these people in prison have look similar to those of millions of people working on the outside: They work as cooks, dishwashers, janitors, groundskeepers, barbers, painters, or plumbers; in laundries, kitchens, factories, and hospitals. They provide vital public services such as repairing roads, fighting wildfires, or clearing debris after hurricanes. They washed hospital laundry and worked in mortuary services at the height of the pandemic. They manufacture products like office furniture, mattresses, license plates, dentures, glasses, traffic signs, athletic equipment, and uniforms. They cultivate and harvest crops, work as welders and carpenters, and work in meat and poultry processing plants. But there are two crucial differences: Incarcerated workers are under the complete control of their employers, and they have been stripped of even the most minimal protections against labor exploitation and abuse.”

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One of the impacts of being marginalized and unemployed is living in poverty. This is particularly critical for young people.

In 2020, the weighted average poverty threshold for a family of four was \$26,496, that’s 13.25 per hour for a full time job. The government is totally out of touch, lacking a real connection to the cost of living. Four people means two kids and two adults, or a single mom with three kids. At this rate you still end up working full time but being forced to use free food outlets to survive. What kind of way is that to live?

This slide shows that Black child poverty rate is triple for Blacks more than whites.

There are people who work but are still below the poverty line. The working poor are people who spent at least 27 weeks in the labor force (that is, working or looking for work) but whose incomes still fell below

the official poverty level. In 2020, the working-poor rates for Hispanics and Blacks were 7.4 percent and 6.7 percent, respectively, compared with 3.7 percent for Whites and 2.6 percent for Asians.

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So, to review we have discussing four main class categories, with the majority of Black people being workers.

Black capitalists

The Black middle class

Black workers

And the marginalized impoverished anti-class

Of these four groups, Black workers are the key focus for organizing movements for transformative social change. Black workers are the majority and they are essential.

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Black workers have organized the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. Bill Lucy, AFSCME, led this organization for 40 years, the longest serving leader of a national labor organization. His successor is Terry Melvin (shown on this slide) secretary-treasurer of the powerful New York State AFL-CIO ios the new CBTU leader.

Trade unions are essential organizational forms for all workers, and as we have shown, Black workers recognize this and have been more organized into unions than the working class in general.

But Black workers and the Black community need more, and often need to push a more radical agenda than most trade unions have so far been open to

What can we learn from history about this?

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We can learn from the 1967 Detroit rebellion. Here is what wiki says about it:

An estimated 10,000 people participated. Thirty-six hours later, 43 were dead, 33 of whom were black and 10 white. More than 7,200 people were arrested, most of them black. The scale of the riot was the worst in the United States since the 1863 New York City draft riots during the American Civil War, and was not surpassed until the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion 25 years later.

1,189 people were injured: 7,231 people were arrested: 2,509 businesses reported looting or damage, Dollar losses from property damage ranged from \$40 million to \$45 million.

At the heart of this rebellion were Black workers.

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The very next year Black auto workers took their new consciousness out of the 1967 rebellion to begin organizing beyond the limitations of the UAW, the trade union for auto workers. At a union convention, they march under the chant, “UAW means you ain’t white” and “We finally got the news about how our dues are being used.”

Thus began the RUM movement, the revolutionary union movement. First was DRUM, the Dodge revolutionary union movement. Followed by FRUM (Ford Revolutionary Movement, and UPRUM (United Parcel Revolutionary Movement, etc.)

The militancy transforming Detroit political culture came from such key figures as Malcolm X, James Boggs, and Rev. Al Cleague, and Milton and Richard Henry. They changed the consciousness of Black people as a class based definition of Black Power raised in 1966 the year before the rebellion.

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DRUM led to an organization that united the RUMs, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

Why is this important? The League is an example of what is possible.

They clarified what they contributed – I quote from a speech:

The League appeared to stand for the black workers standing up at the head of the black liberation movement. This gave it a strong appeal to activists throughout the country. This stand of the League stood in strong contrast to the position of the Black Panther Party which promoted that it was the black lumpen proletariat which was the vanguard of the black people's struggle.

The League appeared also to take steps beyond the traditional union caucus mold. It promoted itself as a group independent of and against the union bureaucracy. But the League, in some of its work with respect to the trade unions, verged on promoting a black syndicalist trade unionism. In its work the League did help to expose the UAW's class collaborationism and especially the racist underbelly of this allegedly pro-civil rights union.

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On a broader level there is a critical role for Black workers leading the Black liberation movement and linking it to the general class struggle.

Mao, reflecting world revolutionary thinking, sums up the connection of this: “The evil system of colonialism and imperialism arose and thrived with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of Black people.”

We could have quoted Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam, or Che Guevara of Cuba, or Maurice Bishop of Grenada, or so many others from all over the world

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Clearly, Malcolm X and Marx agreed on this point.

Marx said: Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin

Malcolm said show me a capitalist and I'll show you a bloodsucker.

You will find more argument in my pamphlet Capitalism: What it is and how to fight it. Email me and I'll send the link.

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The South remains the region with the greatest concentration of Black workers in the worst situation of rightwing oppressive practices. No surprise there.

A leading example in the South of a social justice workers organization is Black Workers for Justice based in North Carolina. Workers have been the mass base of all civil rights organization, but they have mainly been under the leadership of middle-class forces like ministers or lawyers, but this is an organization for workers led by workers themselves.

The Southern Workers Assembly is a social justice network of militant workers organizing in workplaces to build city wide workers assemblies, tools of working class power, to confront the rule of capital.

Both BWFJ and the SWA have really informative websites, including political education material with videos

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Let me end with a brief summation:

1. Every society is made up of a class structure
2. This is both by stratification and political economy
3. The majority of Black people are in the working class

4. Black liberation is a class question

5. Black liberation cannot be realized under capitalism

The first lecture argued that all of humanity is one and that racism is a lie trying to separate us into different races.

This second lecture argues that OK we are in different classes, and the critical focus for progressive change has to be on the working class as the working class is where you will find the majority of Black workers.

Our third session will be on culture.

Lets talk.