Black Liberation Series — No. 3

RACISM
INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet is part of a series, the Black Liberation Series, published by the Black Liberation Front. They have developed out a number of BLF discussion documents. These discussion documents were first intended to serve as starting points in the discussions which began to take place within the Black Liberation Front from around 1978. They came about because many members of the organisation, which was formed in 1971, became convinced that the old narrow nationalist political line, which the organisation had followed up till then, had done great harm to it and left it completely unprepared to play an active and leading role in the rising struggle of the Black community.

As a result the papers dealt with many questions which were seen as important to the development of a better understanding of the struggle of Black people for freedom. These ranged from general questions, such as understanding how societies work, to more specific ones such as the structure of the Black community in Britain. These discussions were a clear example of the development of the organisation’s political understanding since it had published the document “Revolutionary Black Nationalism”. This development continues today. During the discussions many changes were made in the original papers, some were rewritten altogether and some were scrapped completely. Nevertheless, this process was an important first step in helping the organisation to break away from its narrow nationalist past and to build a more revolutionary understanding of the nature of Black people’s struggle.

The Black Liberation Front has decided to publish these documents for a number of reasons. In the first place they are intended to provide people interested in joining the organisation with an understanding of the organisation’s general political position. Secondly, it is hoped that they will make a contribution to the ongoing discussion within the Black Liberation Movement.
RACISM

Racism is a fundamental part of modern capitalist society, affecting not only people’s ideas but every other aspect of their lives. It is impossible to separate racism from the present day capitalist system, because from its very birth and at every important stage of its development one of the most important features of capitalism has been racism. For example the notorious practice of chattel slavery, which was justified by racism and maintained by racist laws and social practices, provided the super-profits with which the western European capitalists were able to carry out the industrialisation of western Europe. Without this capitalism could not have developed. Also the spread of capitalism throughout the world, which took the form of colonialism, and which laid the foundation for the present world capitalist system was also totally bound up with racism. This tried to justify the invasion and seizing of other people’s countries which was necessary for the capitalists at that time. It also provided the basis for the racist laws and practices through which the colonialists could set up their exploitation of the native peoples. Racism, therefore, is not a question of personal prejudice but is rather a fundamental part of capitalist society.

WHAT IS RACISM

In the first place racism is a philosophy resting on three main ideas, which are expressed in various degrees of sophistication, depending on who is expressing them. These ideas are that firstly mankind can be divided into “races” on the basis of certain physical features, such as skin colour or hair texture, which a particular group of people have in common. That, secondly these physical features are connected to other non-physical features, such as intelligence and behaviour, culture and way of life, ideology and the social and economic life of the society in which this group of people live. And that finally these “races” exist in a hierarchy, so that some are “civilised” “cultured” and “advanced” capable of intellectual activity and fit for ruling, while others are “uncivilised”, “savages”, and “backward”, unable to take part in intellectual activity and fit only for being ruled over and doing the most menial jobs. Of course none of these ideas are true, and despite consistent efforts no racist has ever been able to produce evidence to back them up.

SOURCE OF RACISM

The next question that comes to mind is, how did racism arise? How is it that such ideas came to form in peoples heads. To answer this question it is necessary to go back into early human history even before the capitalist system came into being. Throughout the world people lived in groups and each group developed a common language and culture. Therefore different societies developed each with its own language and culture. Inevitably there was contact between those societies which lived close to one another. However, sometimes conflict arose among these societies and wars broke out between them. In many cases one society overpowered the other and imposed an unequal relationship on the defeated group. This was the main way the empires of early history came into being and grew, whether in Africa, Europe, Asia or elsewhere. Therefore, in order to maintain and justify this unequal relationship, which usually rested on economic exploitation, there arose all types of ideas about the so-called inferiority of the culture of the group oppressed. Sometimes it went so far as to claim that the oppressed people were inferior to those ruling over them. The Roman empire is a good example of such a situation, where the Romans invaded the lands of many peoples, at the same time propagating the idea that they were superior to the people they had conquered. This type of ideology is usually called chauvinism, and as can be seen, first came into being to try to justify the oppression of one cultural group over another. Chauvinism was therefore an ideology of oppression which developed early in human history, and out of which racism was to develop with the birth of capitalism. Racism differed from chauvinism in various ways, but in particular it identified the “inferiority” of the oppressed people as being based not only in their culture and way of life but in their very physical appearance.

BIRTH OF RACISM

The birth of capitalism in western Europe led to an intensification of chauvinism, which had by now already been in existence for hundreds of years and which had become imbedded in the popular culture and way of life. As the capitalist system of production developed, so it brought together more and more cultural groups into one economic unit. In the first place this process took the form of the subjugation of various cultural groups, as the rising capitalist class sent their soldiers to seize land and bring it under their rule. It was in this way that the English capitalists seized the whole of Ireland. The main ideology which tried to justify this expansion of the capitalist was chauvinism which was already in existence.

The further expansion of capitalism beyond the boundaries of Europe brought the capitalists, in particular the merchants, into contact with many non-white peoples in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries, these people were forcefully brought into the world capitalist system. The more these peoples were subjugated the more the western European capitalists grew in strength and power and the more the capitalist system established itself. During this period millions of Africans were enslaved and shipped to the Americas, every continent felt the invading jackboot of the colonial soldiers and the native people had their lands stolen and were subject to brutal massacres, as capitalism established itself in the four corners of the world.
These were the conditions in which racism was born and eventually took shape. Such a period of international terror as was the case with the birth and expansion of capitalism could not have gone on without attempts to justify and perpetify it. Various European intellectuals and "scientists" in the service of the capitalists produced all types of racist theories, while others spent their time looking for "scientific" proof of the inferiority of the peoples who were being oppressed by the capitalists. In particular a lot of energy was spent trying to divide humanity into 'races' and in establishing the "inferiority" of certain "races" based on such things as the shape of the forehead and the size of the brain. Religion and the bible were also brought into service in the search for this "proof of inferiority", and churchmen dug into their holy books to find the chapter and verse which best justified the capitalist enslavement and oppression of the African, Asian and other peoples. Racism therefore sat at the centre of the capitalist way of thinking and living.

Racism was propagated far and wide by the capitalists and their supporters. Every means which had influence over people's thinking was put to use, whether religion or children's comics, university dissertations or jokes and popular myths, all became tainted with racism. In the first place this widespread propaganda was meant to cover up the crimes of slavery and colonialism, and to provide a justification for them when they couldn't be covered up. Also it was meant to win the masses of workers in Europe to the side of their ruling class, so that they could be used as cannon fodder in this same capitalist expansion. In this way they could be used as sailors either in the merchant or the fighting navy, or as soldiers in wars of aggression to seize more lands, or as settler colonists who could seize the land of indigenous people, turn the people into labourers and start up the production of raw materials for the capitalist industries of Europe.

For example in occupied Azania (S. Africa) Land Acts were passed which declared certain parts of the country to be a "European area" and barred Africans from living in this part of their own country unless they were "genuine farm servants" of the European settlers. In other cases the colonial governments imposed taxes on the indigenous people, who could only get the money to pay these taxes by going to work for the colonial settlers. Another important role of racism was to sabotage the revolutionary struggle which were developing among the working class in Western Europe. One leading British imperialist Cecil Rhodes had this to say about imperialism (the expansion of capitalism worldwide), "My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e. in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and the mines".

The European capitalists made the most of the idea of "race", according to which all Europeans from the most oppressed poverty stricken beggar to the biggest fattest capitalist were all one 'race' and so together were "superior" to the enslaved and colonised peoples. Therefore, following from this idea, the capitalists and their racist creed argued that oppressed and poor European workers shouldn't fight to overthrow the rich and get their freedom, but rather should unite with their capitalists and each one play their role in ruling over the oppressed peoples of Africa, Asia and the Americas. In developing and propagating their racist ideology the capitalists made the maximum use of the fact that those people who were being enslaved and colonised and generally bearing the brunt of capitalist expansion had different physical features to those of Europeans, in particular skin colour, facial structure and hair structure. They also made the most of the differences which existed between the cultures of these people, and those of the peoples of Western Europe.

Racism was therefore, the main tool which the ruling capitalist class in Europe and the USA used to rally the oppressed white workers to the flag of capitalism, and to separate them from the struggles of the other oppressed peoples against capitalism. In order to try to consolidate this position, the capitalists gave certain privileges to the white workers over the enslaved and colonised peoples, with the aim of encouraging them in the belief that they were members of a privileged 'race'. As long as this situation could be maintained, the white workers would give up the struggle for their own freedom, accept their position and sheepishly follow the lead of their capitalist ruling class. Thus racism has always been and continues to be not only a tool for the enslavement and super exploitation of Black people on which modern capitalism is based, but also a means by which to pacify and subvert the struggle of the white working class.

**RACISM IN PRACTICE**

Of course racism was not just an ideology, but more important for the enslaved and colonised peoples it was the main way through which their exploitation was maintained and intensified. Therefore both under slavery and under colonialism all the fundamental laws were racist and were aimed at denying the oppressed peoples any rights so that maximum profits could be squeezed from their labour. These racist Laws were backed up by all types of racist practices from discrimination to lynching which were designed to terrorise the oppressed people and keep them in their down-trodden position. For example under slavery many racist laws denied the African people — any rights, and these were backed up such practices as torture and hanging. The constitution of the USA, a major slave owning country at the time declared that the African slaves were two-thirds of a person. Under colonialism, the story remained more or less the same. For instance in Africa the colonialists passed many racist laws to force Africans to become labourers on their farms and plantations. Throughout slavery and colonialism racism was the main means through which the capitalists carried out and maintained their exploitation of the
peoples of Africa, Asia and the other parts of the world they invaded.

The present day example of occupied Azania (S. Africa) where the settler colonials exploit the African people, using racism as their main means, gives a good example of what racism meant to the enslaved and colonised peoples.

**RACISM AND MODERN BRITAIN**

As Britain was the leading power in practising both slavery and colonialism, its relationship with Black people has always been racist. Equally, over these long years, racism has occupied such a central part of British capitalist life, that it has invaded all sectors of the society and its effects are felt everywhere. This has been brought out most clearly by the experiences of Black people who live in Britain.

The growth of immigration into Britain from the Caribbean and Asia in the post-war period did two main things. First it emphasised that the relations between British capitalism and Black people was as racist as ever. For after years of slavery and colonialism people were left in such poverty and hardship, that they had to abandon their homes to try to make a living. Further it showed that the British ruling class still maintained Black people as a pool of super cheap labour within the capitalist system, which could be moved around the world as and when they saw fit. Nothing more than a new, but more sophisticated slave trade. Secondly it imported into the cities of Britain the contradiction between Black people as an oppressed and colonised group and British capitalism. Black people were imported into Britain by the British ruling class to fill the lowest social and economic positions, and the whole machinery of racism which has evolved since slavery was intended to maintain them in such a position that they could be exploited at an even higher rate than the British working class. Whereas in Africa, Asia and elsewhere the fight against this super-exploitation took the form of the fight for independence and against colonialism, among Black people in Britain it began to take the form of the fight against racist oppression and for social and cultural rights.

Thus, as the Black community settled in post war Britain, it came under persistent racist pressure, such as was common during slavery and in the colonies. At the head of this attack has been the British capitalists, who are well experienced in this practice and who had brought us to Britain in the first place. First Black people have found themselves in the worst jobs, receiving the lowest pay and working the longest hours. We work in the factories, on the buses and trains, and in the hospitals and kitchens. We live in the worst social conditions, are subject to racism in education, are most affected by unemployment and bad housing and more and more of us are ending up in prisons and mental institutions. In order to keep us in such an exploited condition the capitalists carry out widescale campaigns against us, with the aim of intimidating and frightening us. In particular a large number of openly racist laws about “immigration” and “nationality” have been passed against us. In connection with this, leading politicians have claimed that we are “swamping” the country and others claim that we should be “repatriated”. The mass media usually plays a big role in organising and whipping up such campaigns. As more and more Black people have become opposed to this oppression and angry at their lack of rights, the capitalists have wheeled out their internal army, the police, to deal with the Black Community and keep them in their place. In fact the widescale Police brutality against Black people in Britain is already notorious. Coupled with this have been the attacks of the capitalists, the fascist gangs. Their attacks against the Black Community have included bombings and stabbings. Another feature of life for Black people in Britain has been the suppression of their Cultural rights, and numerous efforts are made to ‘integrate’ and ‘assimilate’ them and to make them into ‘Black British’, meaning to destroy our own cultures.

The experience of Black people in Britain is the direct continuation of our experiences under slavery and colonialism. It shows that the bridge between capitalism and Black people is and always has been racism, and that in fact racism is the particular way through which capitalism organises the oppression and super-exploitation of Black people.

Therefore, in Britain today racism represents the whole economic, legal, social, political and ideological machinery through which the British capitalists keep the Black community at the bottom of society and wrings the maximum profits it can out of us. The whole ideology of racism which has already become an established feature of life in capitalist Britain is daily reinforced. The mass media, the educational system which does not expose the crimes of Britain’s enslavement and colonisation of Black people, openly racist films such as ‘Tarzan’ or others which glorify colonialism or mercenaries, all play their part in this process. At the same time every other means of influencing people’s ideas are put to use for this purpose, and racism is passed on from generation to generation in the popular culture.

The individual racism, whether conscious or unconscious of various white people come across so often in their everyday life is a reflection at the individual level of the British state’s all round racist ideology and policy for the oppression and super-exploitation of the Black community. This individual racism shows up the extent to which the particular individual is under the influence of the ideology and philosophy of the British ruling class, and to what extent he or she supports their racist aims and practice.

**ANTI-RACIST FRAUD**

As a result of the massive struggles which Black people have carried on against racism in particular against slavery and colonialism, as well as the development of the revolutionary forces throughout the world, the British
capitalists have been forced to change their tune with regards to racism. In order to try and present themselves as ‘supporters of freedom and democracy’ many of them get up and make noises about being opposed to racism. The British state even went so far as to set up first a “Race Relations Board” then a “Community Relations Commission” which they claimed were designed to ‘fight racism’. However, according to their theory racism has got nothing to do with capitalism, and comes about simply through ‘individual prejudice or ignorance’. Therefore, all that is needed is to educate enough individuals and racism will disappear. As the British state sees it there is of course no need to fight against the capitalist system for a better life.

However, the experience of Black people in Britain shows this to be a complete lie. We can see that racism is not an ‘individual problem’ but a definite policy of the whole state. The same state which claims to be against racism, introduces racist laws in Parliament such as the Nationality Act 1982, raids the homes and work places of Black people in order to deport them, subjects Black people to all types of harassments at airports, unleashes its police force to attack Black people and protect the racist gangs and takes many other actions against the interest of the Black community. Against all these attacks the organisations such as the “Race Relations Board” and the “Commission for Racial Equality” which are supposed to “fight racism” do not lift a finger, instead they concentrate their efforts on cases of individual racism and divert attention from the state’s racist onslaught. The fact that the so-called “anti-racism” of the state is a fraud can be seen from the fact that many of the states leading figures such as Thatcher and Denning are in fact racists.

BLACK RESPONSES TO RACISM

Over the hundreds of years of racist oppression Black people have responded in many ways. Some of us have been overcome by the ideology of racism, and such people usually consider themselves inferior to white people. Often they look down on Black people’s history, way of life and achievements and usually make such statements as “Black people never achieved nothing” or “Don’t Trust Black people”. In particular some Africans try to cut themselves off from Africa, believing what the European capitalists have drummed into them that it is a ‘place of savages’. They will even deny that they are Africans.

Some Black people accept the fundamental foundations of the racist ideology which the capitalists preach and try to turn it around on the ‘white man’, as they say. According to them racism is inherent in the ‘white man’, and as they see it the fight against racism is a fight against the ‘white man’. Of course such a view is very useful to the capitalists, because it hides the relationship between racism and capitalism. Secondly it diverts the struggle for Black freedom away from the capitalist state, which is the source of racism, into a useless struggle against individual white people.

Such a policy gives the state maximum opportunity to spread confusion in the Black Community by placing Black faces in the state machinery. Those who are after these well paid jobs, usually try to justify it by arguing that the problem is that Black people are not represented in the system and that by employing them and those like them, serious steps will be made towards solving the problem.

Among Black people, those who aspire to be “businessmen” have their own analysis and ‘cure’ for racism. In Britain, in particular, they call for more money from the banks and the state to “support Black business” and they make impassioned pleas to Black people to support them. In many cases African small traders are filled with envy when they see the business which the Asian people with such statements as “we don’t stick together, that’s our problem.”

Look at how the Asians are getting on. The aim of this, of course, is to alienate the African people from the Asian small traders, so that their African counterpart can reap the benefit.

However, none of these views represent a basis on which the fight against racism can be carried out. This can only be done if we bear in mind at all times the relationship between capitalism and racism, and if in fighting against one we also fight against the other.
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No. 6: Who Controls Africa?