Black Liberation Series — No. 5

THE BLACK COMMUNITY IN BRITAIN
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 struggles 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.
THE BLACK COMMUNITY IN BRITAIN

Black people have lived in Britain for hundreds of years, but the present Black Community has its origins mainly in the post-war immigration from the British colonies and ex-colonies. This was encouraged by the British government in order to fill its post-war labour shortage. However, the underlying factor in the existence of a Black Community in Britain, whether three hundred years ago or at the present, has always been that it came about directly as a result of British imperialism. Therefore the early Black Community in this country arose out of the fact that Britain was the leading slave trading country, and the present Black Community has taken root here precisely because Britain was the biggest invader and coloniser of other people's Countries.

THE EARLIEST DAYS

The Black Community first began to take shape in Britain during the 16th Century. It was made up mainly of slaves who were brought back to this country by slavemasters returning from the Caribbean. Even from those early days, Black people were subject to racist persecution and in 1601 the British government passed a law to deport all Black people from this country. However, despite the efforts of the racists the Black Community in Britain persisted and became more active politically. In particular during the late eighteenth century Black freedmen in Britain such as Ignatius Sancho, Ottabah Cuagano and Olaudah Equiano played an important part in the struggle for the abolition of slavery. Also, movements in Britain for social justice were not without a Black presence. In fact William Cuffay, the son of a St Kitts slave was a leading member of the Chartist movement, the major working class organisation in this country during the 19th century. In 1848 he was elected to the National Chartist Convention, but was soon after arrested and transported to Tasmania. Despite various efforts to expel Black people, or limit their rights the community took root and consolidated itself especially in the main ports involved in trade with Africa and the Caribbean, such as London, Liverpool and Cardiff. The Black Community, however, was constantly under attack and in 1919 following the First World War, there were anti Black riots in Liverpool, London, Cardiff and Newport. Black people, or limit the rights the community took root and consolidated itself especially in the main ports involved in trade with Africa and the Caribbean, such as London, Liverpool and Cardiff. The Black Community, however, was constantly under attack and in 1919 following the First World War, there were anti Black riots in Liverpool, London, Cardiff and Newport. Black people however took various measures to defend themselves against the racist attackers, and during the clashes 4 people were killed. Following these clashes calls were made to repatriate Black people. Between the 1st and 2nd World Wars, the Black Community was estimated to be about 20,000 strong, of which there were large communities in Cardiff and Liverpool. Many Black people worked as Seamen, until the British government passed legislation during the 1920's more or less barring them from this work. There were also a large number of students mainly from Africa and the Caribbean as well as ex-army men who Britain had used to fight World War 1. During this period Black organisations such as the West African Students Union and The League of Coloured Peoples attempted to highlight the problems of Black people in Britain, and to try to find ways of tackling them. However following World War 2 the shape and size of the Black Community changed drastically, as a result of the British government's policy of actively encouraging Black people to come to this country to rebuild it following the wartime destruction and loss of life.

AFTER WORLD WAR 2

In 1947 the SS Empire Windrush arrived at Southampton docks with nearly 500 Black people from the Caribbean. This was the first batch of Black people imported into this country, after World War 2 by the British state to suit its economic needs, and marked the beginning of post war Black immigration into Britain. The vast majority of Black people who came into Britain during this period, came as workers in particular to work in the Health Service, on transport and in the factories. They therefore began to settle in those areas where jobs were available, namely in the big cities like London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leicester. More than anything else their everyday experience of life in this country was marked out by racism. They were openly discriminated against, especially as far as housing was concerned; they were subjected to racism at work both from their bosses and other workers, and by the middle of the 1950's they were coming under increased attacks, and there was fierce fighting between Black people and the racist gangs in Nottingham and Notting Hill. In the following year Kelson Cochrane, a Black Carpenter was stabbed to death in Notting Hill by racists. This was to be the first in a long line of racist murders carried out against Black people in post World War 2 Britain. The bitter experiences of the Black community made it clear that there was a need to organise, so that Black people could fight for their rights. So beginning in the late 50s independent Black organisations like the Coloured Peoples Progressive Association and the West Indian Workers Association were formed. These organisations addressed themselves to the conditions of Black people in Britain, but also carried out actions in support of Black people in other parts of the world. For instance a meeting was called in Birmingham in the early 60s to protest against the killing of Patrice Lumumba, and there was a demonstration in 1963 to the US embassy to support the struggles of Black people in the USA. Such organisations were to prove extremely important for the struggles of the Black community, as the pressure facing it mounted from all angles.

By the late 1950s, the British state which had so actively encouraged
Black people to come and work in this country was beginning to change its
tune. Having satisfied its post war need for cheap labour from the colonies,
the government was making preparations to introduce the first in a long
line of so-called "immigration legislation" which were aimed against Black
people. Thus in 1962 the Commonwealth Immigration Act was passed in
Parliament, and in the following year the British West Indian Association
complained that there had been an increase in police violence against
Black people as a result of the Act. This pattern was to become fixed in the
life of the Black community. As the state stepped up its legal drive against
Black people, so the police became more and more the source of violent
attacks on the Black community. Throughout the 1960s as the post war
Black community became more settled in this country, and their children
began to grow up, the extent and strength of racism as a feature of life in
modern capitalist Britain became clearer and clearer. The attack came
from many sides; government legislation, police violence, racism at work,
attacks by racist gangs, racist housing policies by local government, all
round educational failure of Black children in the school system, in
particular the large number of Black children being declared to be
educationally sub-normal, and the increasing number of Black people
ending up in prison and mental homes. Inevitably, such a situation led to a
growth in the Black Liberation Movement in Britain. By the mid-sixties,
organisations like the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination and the
Racial Action Adjustment Society had been formed. These and numerous
other organisations which existed up and down the country took part in
various activities, including marches, pickets, strikes, the setting up of
Black newspapers, and supplementary schools, all aimed at safeguarding
and advancing the situation of Black people. However throughout the
history of the Black Liberation Movement there were always two visible
political lines. The first based itself on the interest of the Black working
class and the other masses of Black people, and as a result it was very
independent minded and militant in its stands. The second based itself on
the interests of the small Black petty-bourgeois such as doctors and
lawyers and allied itself with British liberals, and as a result it tended to be
more compromising towards the state. These differences were to become
clearer as time passed.

By the early 1970s the Black community was in the grip of the "Black
Power" era. The influence of the Black struggle in the USA had led to the
forming in Britain of the Black Panther Movement and at a later date to
organisations like the Black Liberation Front, the Black Unity and
Freedom Party, Black Peoples Freedom Movement and others. During this
period political activity in the community grew, newspapers, bookshops,
Supplementary schools and Youth Clubs were established. By this time the
1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, had been added to by the Labour
Party's 1965 Immigration Act, and the Heath government was introducing
its notoriously racist 1971 Immigration Act. However, the British
government's legislation did not only concentrate on the question of Black
people entering Britain, it also turned its attention to the Black community
which had already entered the Country. Laws passed in the mid and late
sixties had established first the Race Relations Board and then the
Community Relations Commission and had paid lip service to the
outlawing of racial discrimination in public places, housing and other
services and to punishment for incitement to racial hatred. The real nature
of the British state's new found concern for Black people was soon clear
however, when the first target of the laws against incitement to racial
hated turned out to be Black political activists and not the racist gangs
which were notorious for inciting and organising violent attacks on Black
people. Nevertheless the state's "race relations" legislation was to have a
further effect on the Black movement, in that it opened the door to those
who had been knocking on it for years. The Black petty bourgeois who had
for years tried to persuade the British capitalists to "outlaw racism", and
who were convinced that the struggle for Black freedom could best be
carried out by the oppressors of Black people, greeted the creation of the
race relations industry with joy and saw it as a great new opportunity. As a
result many deserted the independent Black organisations to take up jobs
with the Race Relations Board and with the Community Relations
Commissions. Despite these developments the Black Power movement in
Britain in the late sixties and early seventies which reflected the more
militant political tendency in the Black community, sent a cold shudder
down the back of the British state. The state replied with a police onslaught
against those Black people who were politically active. Cases such as the
Oval Four, the Mangrove Nine and the attack on Grassroots were the result
of direct state action against the militant section of the Black movement.
However the Black community did not remain passive in the face of the
police attacks, and throughout the seventies and into the eighties Black
resistance grew both in size and intensity leading to such major clashes as
Nevertheless by the mid seventies the organised and militant section of the
Black movement had rapidly declined both in size and influence from its
high-point in the early seventies. This decline in part coincided with and
was partly due to the state's Urban Aid programme, which for the first time
made money available for the funding of projects to meet the social and
cultural needs of Black people. The focus of organised Black activity was
moving away from the political organising of the Black community and
drifts towards the running of projects.

The introduction of the 1976 Labour Party Green Paper on Nationality
which later ended up as the Conservative government's 1981 Nationality
Act marked a new phase in the racist attack on the Black community. By the
late seventies the police protected racist gangs like the National Front
were extremely active, beating the Liberal party into fourth place in some
local elections. Accompanying the increased political activity of the
racists came a series of firebombings of Black people's homes and gun and
knife attacks which left a number of Black people dead. Faced with the racist offensive the absence of a strong revolutionary Black organisation was deeply felt. Nevertheless the Black community came out in numbers along with other progressive people to confront the racists, and dealt them some serious blows in confrontations in Ladywood in Birmingham, Lewisham and Southall in London in 1977. The return of the openly racist Conservative government in 1979 set the seal on the revival of political activity in the Black community. By the time of the New Cross Massacre in 1981, the revolutionary section of the Black movement was able, despite many problems, to organise the biggest ever demonstration of Black people in Britain. Some 15,000 Black people marched through the streets of London in a powerful protest against the racist firebombers, their police protectors, and the deliberate cover-up of the incident which was being attempted by the government and the media.

THE COMMUNITY TODAY

Today the Black community in Britain which is made up mainly of Asian and African people is estimated to be about 2.6 million strong which represents about 3% of the total population in Britain. Over 50% of the Black community is concentrated in a few areas namely London and its surroundings, the Midlands in particular Birmingham and Leicester, the Manchester - Liverpool area in Lancashire and the Leeds - Bradford area in Yorkshire. The Black community is overwhelmingly a working class community, with some 85% of Black people of working age involved in manual labour, this compares with a figure of about 70% for the British population.

About 50% of the Black men work in the manufacturing industries and transport and communication, whereas about 50% of Black women work in Service industries in particular catering and the Health Service. Without a doubt the working class is the main class in the Black community, and its position at the very bottom of Britain's capitalist system can be seen from the fact that when unemployment was about 9.3% for British people it was 16.7% among Black people; that whereas 9% of British people were estimated to be living in poverty in 1979 the similar estimate for the Black community was 16%; that Black workers consistently earn less than British workers and that even the Home Office had to admit in 1981 that Black people were 50 to 60 times more likely than white people to be the victims of racial attacks.

Apart from the working class there are other smaller classes in the Black community. The Black petty bourgeoisie is made up mainly of professionals such as lawyers and doctors, and of small employers and managers. About 5% of the Black community are professionals, and about 10% are employers and managers. Most of the Black petty bourgeoisie do not have any independent financial resources, and are mostly to be found occupying well paid positions in the state apparatus in particular in local government and the Race Relations system. Generally speaking this class has tended to provide the political voice of the Black community, and many of the members and leaders of the Black movement in this country have come from this class. This has mainly been due to the fact that members of this class, as a result of their jobs and training, usually have the skills which are necessary for building organisations. In particular they tend to be better with words and expressing their ideas as well as dealing with official bodies, and other such activities. Inevitably the petty bourgeoisie have tended to interpret the Black struggle from their own point of view and position in society. As a result they stress the racial aspect of the Black struggle, while playing down or opposing the relevance of class struggle and socialism to our struggle for freedom. This has been due to the fact that for the petty bourgeoisie to ensure their leadership of the Black community they must stress those points which unite them with the rest of the community, namely race and opposition to racism, while down playing those factors which isolate it from an overwhelmingly working class community, namely the issues of class struggle and socialism. Although the Black petty bourgeoisie is not a united class, and has many factions within it, its essential political strategy is one of trying to carve out a place for itself within the system. They therefore try to present the main thrust of the Black struggle, as a struggle for more Black business and more Black "representatives" in councils and other official bodies. However, whereas the system can meet the demands of the petty bourgeoisie without any fundamental change, the same is not true for the demands of the Black workers. The demands of the Black working class for self-determination and an end to exploitation and social injustice present a direct threat to capitalism in Britain and cannot be met within the system.

The other recognisable class within the Black community is the Lumpens. This is a very small class within the community, which makes its living outside the laws of the state. Largely, the Lumpens are involved in robbery, prostitution and other similar activities as a way of life. Some Black youths fall under the influence of this class as a result of long periods of unemployment.

The Black struggle in Britain which is a struggle involving both the class struggle and the struggle of Black people as a whole against racist oppression has in recent years shifted to the Centre of political life in Britain. In particular Black resistance to police violence has led more and more people to speak out against police brutality and has exposed the police before large numbers of people as racist thugs. Further the Black Peoples Day of Action in 1981, the militant uprisings throughout the whole country later in the same year and the struggle around the killing of Colin Roach in a police station in 1983 have all had a serious impact on the political life of the whole country. The rising tide of the Black movement has shown up more clearly the different positions which the different classes and sections of classes within the Black community take with
regard to carrying this movement forward. Two important developments which have become even clearer in recent years is that a section of the Black petty bourgeoisie is becoming more integrated into the state machinery, in particular being appointed to important posts in local government, and that there is a growing understanding among Black people of the importance of unity between African and Asia people.

The struggle between the various classes and sections of classes within the Black community, over the direction the Black struggle should take, can best be seen by looking at the various political positions which the Black organisations take up. The most politically backward sections of the Black petty bourgeoisie, are represented by the slavish uncle toms of such organisations as the so-called West Indian Conservative Association. For them the Black struggle is nothing more than a plea to the British bankers and capitalists to support Black business. They do not support the struggles of the Black community, and some go so far as to declare themselves to be "British before anything else". These reactionary uncle toms are the British state’s agents within the Black community. However this section of the Black petty bourgeoisie is fairly small, and due to its openly uncle tomb behaviour it finds it difficult to have much influence in the Black community.

The majority of the Black petty bourgeoisie are employed within the state system, and in recent years there has been a growth of this class especially within local government. A small section of this class is found outside the state apparatus running small businesses in the import/export business, as well as in the music business, publishing and small manufacturing. As a result of its position in society the petty bourgeoisie does not have a consistent stand, but changes from one day to the next. Their oppression as Black people drives them to protest, but their fundamental belief in the system and desire to make out within it prevents them from going too far. Their social position between the Black working class and our arch enemy the British ruling class puts conflicting demands on the petty bourgeoisie. In trying to please these two opposing social forces, the petty bourgeoisie has developed a politics of opportunism, militant one day moderate the next. One day they are opposing police violence against Black people, the next they are calling on the Black community to support the police. Further they argue that there is a need for more Black people in positions of power within the capitalist system, of course they are the ones who tend to benefit when these positions are open to Black people. In recent years this trend which has some political influence within the Black community has tended to drift towards the Labour party. Despite the fact that the Labour party is known as the party which is against racism when it's in opposition and for it when it's in power, the Black Labour activists have decided to throw their lot in with it, and to try to convince the Black community that it is our best hope for freedom.

Progressive and revolutionary members of the Black petty-bourgeois often join the revolutionary Black movement. This is the political trend in the Black community which is not trying to find a place in the capitalist system, but is trying to organise and work for the genuine freedom of Black people, which in the first place means freedom for the Black working class. This revolutionary Black movement, unlike the other political forces in the Black community, represents the interest of the Black working class and the other masses of Black people. Its politics is based on the everyday experiences of Black workers in Britain, and its demands for an end to state harassment including anti-Black legislation and police brutality, for genuine education for our children which makes them conscious of themselves and academically equipped, for decent housing and decent wages for our work, represent the interest of the Black working class. Basing itself on such demands, and bearing in mind our history of struggle, the revolutionary Black movement understands that these demands cannot be met within capitalism, since the system has not even been able to meet the demands of the British workers. Therefore the revolutionary Black movement sees as a fundamental part of the struggle for Black freedom the need to overthrow the system of capitalism throughout the World.

BLACK WORKING CLASS PROGRAMME

Today a Black working class programme for the Black struggle in Britain must be based on two important ideas. Firstly the struggle of Black people in Britain cannot simply be reduced down to the general struggle between workers and capitalists which is going on in the country. Black people occupy a particular social and economic position in Britain which reflects the relationship between Britain and Black people as an imperialist one, in which Black people unlike British workers have been subject to enslavement and colonialism. It is from this fact and the history of Black struggle that the right of Black self-determination emerges as a fundamental of Black struggle in Britain. The other equally important idea is that the struggle of Black people does not take part in a vacuum, but in a country and a world divided into the struggle between the oppressed peoples and the capitalists and their supporters. This struggle is reflected within the Black community itself. Within Britain the general class struggle affects the Black struggle and Vice Versa. This means that the Black Liberation struggle has to be in one camp or the other. It is either with the oppressor and for the capitalist system or it is with the oppressed and for socialism. Therefore today the Black Liberation movement must have these two fundamental features Black self-determination and the struggle for socialism.

Black self-determination challenges the very basis of modern capitalist Britain, since at the very heart of Britain's growth into a leading capitalist and imperialist power, has been the enslavement and colonisation of Black people. This relationship is reflected even today, and Black people are the most oppressed group in Britain. Therefore the demand for Black
self-determination represents an attack on the colonial relationship, which has served British capitalism’s enrichment at our expense in the past and which continues to do so today. The demand for socialism on the other hand, represents the only means by which a solution can be found to the many problems facing Black workers. Only when Black workers have political power can we begin to overcome the many difficulties which are facing us. This is why the ideas of Black self-determination and socialism are so crucial to the cause of Black freedom.

In order to carry forward its work the revolutionary Black movement needs to have a clear idea of what is necessary. The number one aim must be to isolate the British state, and a merciless struggle must be carried out against all those within the Black community who make it their job to canvass support for the British ruling class. A revolutionary programme for Black Liberation must be put forward, not a programme which is trying to find a place in the capitalist system, but one aimed at ending that system and bringing about Black freedom on the basis of Black self-determination and socialism.

An all-out effort should be made to unite the Black community around such a programme. Such a programme would provide the basis for united action with the revolutionary movement of the British working class, as long as this movement respected Black self-determination and opposed racism, white supremacy and British imperialism. This represents the surest way of advancing the cause of Black liberation.
ALSO IN THIS SERIES
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No. 2: Capitalism and Socialism
No. 3: Racism
No. 4: Pan-Africanism
No. 6: Who Controls Africa?

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