A MARXIST DEFENSE OF THE L.A. REBELLION

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L.A. REBELLION - A MARXIST DEFENSE

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Introduction

This pamphlet consists of three articles by Sam Marcy that originally appeared in *Workers World* newspaper. The two that appear first were written after the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992. The third was written nearly a quarter century earlier, and appeared on the heels of the many uprisings all across the country sparked by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, in 1968.

The situation of African American people in the United States has in many ways deteriorated since then. The political and economic gains won precisely out of the militant struggles of the 1960s have been so deeply eroded that — as Marcy points out — the poverty rate is higher in South Los Angeles today than it was in Watts in 1965.

The rebellion in Los Angeles was touched off by the racist verdict in the Rodney King beating case, but it elicited sympathy and participation from other oppressed communities. Across the country, Latinos, lesbians and gays, poor whites - millions of people denied justice and dignity by the racist, sexist, homophobic ruling class - saw immediately that the rebellion was justified.

These articles defend the spontaneous revolutionary action of the masses against the monstrous repressive apparatus of the state. At the same time, Marcy points out that "No viable class or nation in modern capitalist society can hope to take destiny in its own hands by spontaneous struggles alone. Spontaneity as an element of social struggle must beget its own opposite: leadership and organization."

Sam Marcy has spent his life as an organizer and writer working to revive the revolutionary essence of Marxism, both as a tool of social, political and economic analysis and as a weapon of struggle. His published books include: *Perestroika: A Marxist Critique*; *High Tech, Low Pay — A Marxist Analysis of the Changing Character of the Working Class*; and *The Bolsheviks and War — Lessons for Today's Anti-War Movement*. Pamphlets by Marcy include: *The Klan and the Government — Foes or Allies?*; *Anatomy of the Economic Crisis*; *Generals over the White House: The Impact of the Military-Industrial Complex*; Poland — Behind the Crisis; and *China — The Struggle Within*. ♦

Marxism and insurrection

May 5, 1992

The brutal suppression of the Los Angeles insurrection offers a classic example of the relationship of bourgeois democracy to the capitalist state. The statistics most eloquently demonstrate the relationship.

The number of arrests in Los Angeles County alone as of May 5 is 12,111 and still rising. The number of injuries has reached a staggering 2,383. Several hundred are critically wounded. Thus the number of dead at present will undoubtedly continue to rise.

All this has to be seen in light of the repressive forces amassed by the city, state and federal government: 8,000 police, 9,800 National Guard troops, 1,400 Marines, 1,800 Army soldiers and 1,000 federal marshals. (Associated Press, May 5)

At the bottom of it all

Marxism differs from all forms of bourgeois sociology in this most fundamental way: all bourgeois social sciences are directed at covering up and concealing — sometimes in the most shameful way — the predatory class character of present-day capitalist society. Marxism, on the other hand, reveals in the clearest and sharpest manner not only the antagonisms that continually rend asunder present-day bourgeois society but also their basis — the ownership of the means of production by a handful of millionaires and billionaires.

Bourgeois sociology must leave out of consideration the fact that society is divided into exploiter and exploited, oppressors of nationalities and oppressed. The basis for both the exploitation and oppression is the ownership of the means of production by an ever-diminishing group of the population that controls the vital arteries of contemporary society. They are the bourgeoisie, the ruling class. At the other end of the axis is the proletariat of all nationalities, the producer of all the fabulous wealth. Material wealth has been vastly increasing along with the masses' productivity of labor. But only 1 percent of the population amasses the lion's share of what the workers produce while a greater and greater mass is impoverished.

Flattering 'the people'

Especially during periods of parliamentary elections as in the U.S. today, bourgeois sociologists are full of effusive praise for "the people." Each and every capitalist politician embraces "the people" with what often becomes disgusting flattery. The people are everything during periods when the bourgeoisie needs them most of all, as during its many predatory wars. Indeed, at no time is the bourgeoisie so attached to the people as when it is in deepest crisis.

But the people — the unarmed masses — become nothing, not even human beings, when they are in the full throes of rebellion against the bourgeoisie's monstrous police and military machine. Does not the Los Angeles insurrection prove all this?

No amount of praise, no amount of flattery, can substitute for a clear-cut delineation of the class divisions that perpetually rend society apart.

To the bourgeois social scientists the masses are the object of history. Marxist theory, on the other hand, demonstrates that the masses are the subject of history. Where they are the objects of history they are manipulated as raw material to suit the aims of ruling class exploitation. They become the subject of history only when they rise to the surface in mass revolutionary action.

Their rising as in Los Angeles is what Karl Marx called the locomotive of history. Their revolutionary struggle accelerates history bringing to the fore the real character of the mass movement.

To speak of the people in general terms, without cutting through the propaganda to reveal the relations of exploiter to exploited, of oppressor to oppressed, is to participate in covering up the reality.

Oppression of a whole people

Most indispensable for an understanding of contemporary society is the relation between oppressor and oppressed nationalities. One cannot apply Marxism to any meaningful extent without first recognizing the existence of national oppression — the oppression of a whole people by capitalist imperialism. This is one of the most characteristic features of the present world reality.

This concept above all others must be kept foremost if we hope to understand what has happened in Los Angeles and in other major cities of this country.

The insurrection and the way it is being suppressed closely follow the exposition by Frederick Engels in his book "The Origin of the Family,

Private Property and the State," and later brought up to date by Lenin in "State and Revolution."

What is the state? What is democracy?

Bourgeois sociologists and scholars and above all capitalist politicians always confound the relationship between the two. They often treat them as a single phenomenon. In reality, the relation between democracy and the state is based on an inner struggle — between form and essence.

The state can take on many different forms. A state can have the form of a bourgeois democracy; it can be a monarchy; it may be ruled by a military junta. And in modern society, on the very edge of the 21st century, it may have a totalitarian or fascist form.

Whatever its form, its essence is determined by which class is dominant economically and consequently also dominant politically. In contemporary society, this means the rule of the imperialist bourgeoisie over the proletariat and the oppressed nationalities.

Bourgeoisie needs different forms of rule

The bourgeoisie cannot maintain its class rule by relying solely on one particular form of the state. It can't rely only on the governing officialdom — even those at the very summit of the state, even when they are solely millionaires and billionaires. Under such circumstances, should there be an imperialist war or a deep capitalist crisis that leads to ferment among the masses the bourgeois state would be vulnerable to revolutionary overthrow.

But the state is not just the officialdom — who presume to govern in the interest of all the people. The state in its essential characteristics is the organization, to quote Engels, of a "special public force" that consists not merely of armed men and women but of material appendages, prisons and repressive institutions of all kinds.

The decisive basic ingredient of the state is the armed forces with all their material appendages and all who service them. Most noteworthy are the prisons — more and more of them — calculated to break the spirit of millions of the most oppressed while pretending to some mock forms of rehabilitation. All the most modern means — mental and physical — are used to demoralize and deprave the character of those incarcerated. These repressive institutions, this public force, appears so omnipotent against the unarmed mass of the oppressed and exploited. But it stands out as the very epitome of gentility and humaneness when it comes to incarcerating favored individuals, especially the very rich, who have transgressed the norms of capitalist law.

In general then, the Los Angeles insurrection shows that democracy is a veil that hides the repressive character of the capitalist state. The state at all times is the state of the dominant class. And the objective of the special bodies of armed men and women is to secure, safeguard and uphold the domination of the bourgeoisie.

Growth of the state

Engels explained that in the course of development of capitalist society, as the class antagonisms grow sharper, the state — that is, the public force — grows stronger.

Said Engels, "We have only to look at our present-day Europe where class struggle, rivalry and conquest has screwed up the public power to such a pitch that it threatens to devour the whole of society and even the state itself."

Written more than 100 years ago, this refers to the growth of militarism. The sharpening of class and national antagonisms had even then resulted in larger and larger appropriations for civilian and military personnel employed for the sole purpose of suppressing the civil population at home and waging adventurist imperialist wars abroad. The state grows in proportion as class and national antagonisms develop. Democracy is merely a form which hides the predatory class character of the bourgeois state. Nothing so much proves this as the steady and consistent growth of militarism and the police forces in times of peace as well as war.

The ruling class continually cultivates racism to keep the working class divided, in order to maintain its domination. This is as true at home as it is abroad. The forces of racism and national oppression have been deliberately stimulated by Pentagon and State Department policies all across the globe.

Marxism on violence

After every stage in the struggle of the workers and oppressed people, there follows an ideological struggle over what methods the masses should embrace to achieve their liberation from imperialist monopoly capital. There are always those who abjure violence while minimizing the initial use of violence by the ruling class. They denounce it in words, while in deeds they really cover it up. That's precisely what's happening now.

Yes indeed, they readily admit the verdict in the Rodney King beating was erroneous and unfair. But — and here their voices grow louder — "The masses should not have taken to the streets and taken matters into their own hands." Their denunciation of the violence of the ruling class is subdued and muffled — above all it is hypocritical, a sheer formality. It's an indecent way

of seeming to take both sides of the argument when what follows is in reality a condemnation of the masses.

In times when the bourgeoisie is up against the wall, when the masses have risen suddenly and unexpectedly, the bourgeoisie gets most lyrical in abjuring violence. It conjures up all sorts of lies and deceits about the unruliness of a few among the masses as against the orderly law-abiding many.

Marxism here again cuts through it all. The Marxist view of violence flows from an altogether different concept. It first of all distinguishes between the violence of the oppressors as against the responsive violence of the masses. Just to be able to formulate it that way is a giant step forward, away from disgusting bourgeois praise for nonviolence. It never occurs to any of them to show that the masses have never made any real leap forward with the theory of nonviolence. Timidity never made it in history.

Indeed, Marxists do prefer nonviolent methods if the objectives the masses seek — freedom from oppression and exploitation — can be obtained that way. But Marxism explains the historical evolution of the class struggle as well as the struggle of oppressed nations as against oppressors.

Revolutions, force and violence

As Marx put it, "force is the midwife to every great revolution." This is what Marx derived from his study of the class struggle in general and of capitalist society in particular.

None of the great revolutions has ever occurred without being accompanied by force and violence. And it is always the oppressor — the ruling class and the oppressing nationality — that is most congenitally prone to use force as soon as the masses raise their heads. In all the bourgeois revolutions in Europe, this new would-be ruling class used the masses to fight its battles against the feudal lords. Then, when the masses raised their heads to fight for their own liberation against the bourgeoisie, they were met with the most fearful and unmitigated violence. All European history is filled with such examples, from the revolutions of 1789 and 1848 to the Paris Commune of 1871. Does not the bourgeoisie, once it has tamed the proletariat at home, use force and violence through its vast military armada to more efficiently exploit and suppress the many underdeveloped nations throughout the world?

It is so illuminating that Iraq, the nation subjected to the most violent, truly genocidal military attack in recent times, has taken upon itself to press a formal complaint in the UN Security Council on behalf of the embattled masses in Los Angeles and other cities. Iraq called on that body to condemn and investigate the nature of the developments here and the irony is that the

head of the Security Council felt obligated to accept the complaint. Not even the U.S. delegate, obviously taken by surprise, objected.

How much real difference is there between the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871 and that of the revolutionary rising of the masses in Los Angeles in 1992? The brutal suppression differs only in magnitude and not in essence. While it might seem that in Los Angeles national oppression alone is involved, in reality it derives from the class exploitation of the African American masses dating back to the days of slavery.

Watts and social legislation

Following the Watts insurrection the bourgeoisie made lofty promises to improve the situation. The Watts, Detroit, Newark and other rebellions did win significant concessions that eventually were enacted into law. They became the basis for a temporary improvement in the economic and social situation of the oppressed people.

None of the progressive legislation, up to and including affirmative action, would have been enacted had it not been for the rebellions during the 1960s and the 1970s. Yet now, almost three decades after the Watts rebellion, the masses are in greater poverty and the repression is heavier than before. The fruits of what was won have withered on the vine as racism and the deterioration of economic conditions took hold once again. Once more the bourgeois politicians attempted to mollify the masses with endless promises of improvements never destined to see the light of day. This evoked a profound revulsion among the masses. It took only an incident like the incredible verdict of the rigged jury that freed the four police officers in the Rodney King beating to ignite a storm of revolutionary protest.

If revolutionary measures are ever to have any validity, doesn't a case like this justify the people taking destiny into their own hands?

Less workers, more cops

How interesting that technology everywhere displaces labor, reducing the number of personnel.

There was a time when it was hoped that the mere development of technical and industrial progress, the increase in mechanization and automation, would contribute to the well-being of the masses. This has once again shown itself to be a hollow mockery. The truth is that the development of higher and more sophisticated technology under capitalism doesn't contribute to the welfare of the masses but on the contrary, throws them into greater misery.

What has been the general trend? The growth of technology, particularly sophisticated high technology, has reduced the number of workers employed

in industry as well as in the services. The introduction of labor-saving devices and methods has dramatically reduced the number of workers in all fields.

But the opposite trend prevails in the police forces. This is an absolutely incontestable fact.

At one time the police patrolled the streets on foot. Maybe they used a public telephone for communications with headquarters. Today they are equipped with sophisticated gear. They ride either on motorcycles or in police cars or helicopters. They communicate by radio.

All this should reduce the number of police. But the trend is quite the contrary: to increase the forces of repression. This is not geared to productivity as in industry. Their growth is geared to the growth of national antagonisms, the growth of racism, and the bourgeoisie's general anti-labor offensive.

In Los Angeles, the bourgeoisie is forced to bring in federal troops to assist city and state authorities. The social composition of the Army is not just a cross-section of capitalist society. The Army and Marines, especially the infantry, have a preponderance of Black and Latino soldiers. What does this signify?

The U.S. imperialists had to wage a technological war against Iraq out of fear that the preponderance of Black and Latino soldiers could end up in a disastrous rebellion; they might refuse to engage in a war against their sisters and brothers in the interests of the class enemy. That's why the armed forces never really got into the ground war that seemed at first to be in the offing.

In Los Angeles the local police and state forces were inadequate. Only because the masses were unarmed was the bourgeoisie able to suppress what was in truth an insurrection — a revolutionary uprising.

Spontaneity and consciousness

As Marx would put it, such a rising is a festival of the masses. The incidental harm is far outweighed by the fact that it raises the level of the struggle to a higher plateau. The wounds inflicted by the gendarmerie will be healed. The lessons will be learned: that a spontaneous uprising has to be supported with whatever means are available; that a great divide exists between the leaders and the masses.

No viable class or nation in modern capitalist society can hope to take destiny in its own hands by spontaneous struggles alone. Spontaneity as an element of social struggle must beget its own opposite: leadership and organization. Consciousness of this will inevitably grow. ♦

Bush's feet of clay

May 12, 1992

Considering the torrent of words the ruling class has used to express its horror, shock, and utter disbelief over the insurrection in Los Angeles that shook its rule to the very foundations, it's amazing how pitifully little attention has been given to the insurrection's effect worldwide. It took Bush himself to slightly draw the curtain. "I was embarrassed," he said in his nationwide television speech after his visit to the devastated area. Embarrassed?! This is a masterful understatement. An unprecedented humiliation is what it was.

Just a few weeks ago, Bush was the leading representative of the master class, the architect of the "new world order." This is the new order for not just the "free world" but the entire world. But the masses in Los Angeles have made the word "order" an irony.

A few weeks ago Bush was the executive who had ordered Desert Storm and the destruction of Iraq. His name aroused fear and apprehension all around the earth. Now Bush, the modern ruler hiding behind the armor of predatory militarism, stands naked. Like the emperor in the old folk tale, Bush has no clothes.

Bush and the ruling class he represents saw themselves as rulers not only of the Atlantic and Pacific but the Seven Seas. To the amazement of the whole world, the masses of Los Angeles in one unprecedented, utterly incredible social convulsion turned the Neptune of the Seven Seas into a sawdust Caesar.

Who will angry soldiers fight?

Now more than ever the combined officer corps of the Air Force, the Army, the Marines and the Navy will have to think twice about a new Desert Storm. They will have to pay attention to what Sen. Sam Nunn, the long-time chairperson of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said when Congress debated having a volunteer military.

Nunn warned that the white personnel of the armed services are diminishing while the Black and other "minorities," as he put it, are growing numerically larger. It is a consequence, he said, of the volunteer system, which he deprecated. He favored conscription instead. But the Congress, aware of the anti-war sentiment sweeping the country at that time, turned

down conscription. If the naval command now dares to think in terms of a genocidal Desert Storm kind of attack, they can conjure up the ghost of the Potemkin mutiny in addition to the Los Angeles insurrection. It is not a happy thought for the militarists.

For so many years the empire of finance capital has seemed invincible and unconquerable. Can the Los Angeles events affect U.S. worldwide military supremacy? Does the insurrection fundamentally change all this? Does it bring up, as though from the rearguard, an utterly new phenomenon, a heretofore unexposed vulnerability?

Rome's dependence on slavery

The ancient empire of Rome, with its military prowess, also seemed everlasting — as long as chattel slavery remained stable and endurable. Rome's great military feats, its artistic monuments, its aqueducts, theater, literature — all were possible as long as slavery endured. But when slavery began to crumble, when an ever larger section of the patricians, the nobility, and other free people all lived off the labor of the slaves, rebellions took hold. Rome's might was possible only as long as slave rebellions could be contained, only as long as the slave system did not disintegrate.

For the U.S. empire, the Los Angeles insurrection has sounded the alarm bell. Although repressed with unmitigated force with daily scurrilous attacks by a kept press which is free only to lie and to slander, the insurrection nevertheless lives on.

While the ruling class maintains a serene public face, this uprising has changed the agenda of their inner councils. They are now far more preoccupied with domestic affairs. International questions have been shoved way into the background.

Rarely has there been such an illustrious example of the relation between foreign and domestic politics. For foreign policy has been ever more an extension of domestic policy. Except in the historiography of the bourgeoisie, domestic politics always seem to be merely a reflection of quarrels within the ruling class. They appear to be affairs exclusively in the domain of the exploiters, involving the share of booty each would derive from the sweat and blood of the exploited.

But the rebellion adds a new dimension to the statement that foreign policy is an extension of the domestic struggle between the oppressors and oppressed, not just the struggle among the oppressors.

The Iraqi government swiftly caught the significance of the rebellious masses and their merciless repression by the combined forces of city, state

and federal government. Iraq introduced in the UN Security Council a complaint against the U.S. for violation of human rights.

In doing so, Iraq rose from the humbled to the humbler, to the delight of the vast majority of the human race and even to many on the council itself. The Security Council had to accept the complaint, and even the U.S. delegate could not oppose it.

'We have problems at home'

None of this is altogether new. In the post-World War II period Walter Lippman was regarded by many in the capitalist establishment as the foremost writer articulating U.S. foreign policy. He could thereby also act as occasional critic. Lippman understood the foreign policy implications of the Watts rebellion of 1965.

After writing for more than two decades in the New York Herald Tribune exclusively on foreign affairs, Lippman was forced to publicly proclaim, "We now have problems at home. Our attention has to be drawn in that direction."

During the Johnson administration, there is no question that they attempted, through the projects known as the Great Society, to alleviate some of the most onerous and grossly discriminatory practices in order to better prosecute the Vietnam war at a time when the capitalist economy was rising. But no fundamental alteration in the general conditions for Black people took hold.

Executive, police power strengthened

The insurrection demonstrates to the hilt where the development of the governmental apparatus of the city administration of Los Angeles is going. As in the state and federal governments, the tendency is toward increased centralization, moving power away from the legislative branch and into the executive. The mayor's office — the executive branch — grows stronger and power shifts in time of crisis to the police and military.

The city council of Los Angeles has 15 members. Three are Black, three Latino and one Asian. Thus city council members from oppressed peoples constitute a formidable minority. Yet in times of a real crisis, the city council, even with such a heavy minority bloc, turns out to be utterly impotent. Scarcely any members give voice to the oppression of the people. Should any do so, the capitalist media barely take notice.

In every major city in the United States there has been a slow but undeviating tendency for the police power to grow stronger, as the legislative branch grows weaker. More power is arrogated to the executive branch,

which in turn strengthens the police power. This tendency is also evidenced in most European capital cities, but it is especially accentuated in the principal cities of the United States.

It's no accident that in cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Los Angeles and San Francisco, the police and military forces of the cities grow while the legislative branches become mere talking shops. In times of crisis they fall into a complete torpor. And the mayor handily invokes emergency powers that in turn authorize the police to virtually act as an army of occupation.

They should have seen it coming

If in the weeks and months before the insurrection there was anyone who had an inkling of what was coming, it was the Los Angeles Times. This paper is the principal mouthpiece of the big-business community in California and one with a sprinkling of liberalism.

It dispatched staff writers Charisse Jones and Hector Tobar to live next door to each other for a month on the 900 block of West 53rd Street of South Central Los Angeles. There, said the Times, great changes were in full swing.

Jones reported on the experiences of Black people, while Tobar explored life for the neighborhood's Latinos. Their findings were published in the Feb. 16 and 17 Los Angeles Times.

The article on Feb. 16 purports to analyze a massive shift in population that had altered what it calls the area's urban landscape with new residents, Latinos. There are vivid descriptions of individual Latino households explaining how and why they migrated in such huge numbers to this area.

In recent years, it says, thousands of Latino immigrants had moved to West 53rd Street and its surrounding blocks, profoundly transforming the area's character.

"In little more than a decade, what was once the largest Black community in the western U.S. has become one of the nation's fastest growing Latino communities. By the turn of the century, experts say, Latinos will outnumber African Americans in South Los Angeles," said the Times.

A certain Reina Maldonado, resident of 53rd Street, said, "When we first came here, it was almost all Black people. Pretty soon it will be all Latino. And then you wonder who will be next to replace us. The Asians?"

The Times continues, "As the area's Black population slowly disappears there is a feeling among some of the newly arrived Latinos of being pioneers and of creating something new."

'Black community disappears'

In the Feb. 17 edition, written by Charisse Jones, is basically the sad story of the Black residents whose community is slowly disappearing. It is obvious the reporters made an intensive study which demonstrated the massive shift of Latinos and the declining Black population. Despite this intensive effort, the result is superficial if not hollow.

The articles might have rung an alarm bell of the deteriorating economic situation. They might have warned of the oppressive character of the city and state governments, and most of all the police.

But not a word of this appeared in this very elaborate study. All one sees is a massive shift of population. Is that in and of itself the fundamental cause of the insurrection? Or is it the frustration arising from the monstrous repression by the police, the city government, and the state? Not a word of this is in the study.

There is nothing in the Times' articles on the economic situation of the Black people. How many are employed, unemployed, partly employed. How many middle class Black people are there. What are they doing?

Only after the rebellion, on May 11, does the Los Angeles Times condescend to inform its readers that Census Bureau figures of 1990 show that the income, employment and education of South Los Angeles fell below the city and county averages. In some cases the area was even below its level in 1965.

At 30 percent, the 1990 poverty rate for households in South Los Angeles was twice the rate for the city overall. That figure was nearly three times the national rate of 11 percent. It was also higher than during the 1965 Watts rebellion, when 27 percent of the area's households lived in poverty.

All this information was available after the 1990 census to city, state and federal governments. But they paid no attention.

Who are the criminal few?

Equally guilty is the kind of reporting done in the May 18 Newsweek, where we find that a small group of the "underclass" rioted and devastated the area while 30 million African Americans stayed home as orderly law-abiding citizens. What a shameful fraud. What a lie.

It was exactly in this language that the reactionary writers and publicists for the absolutist monarchy described those who attacked the Bastille in the French Revolution and contrasted them to "the vast majority of law-abiding citizens."

It counterpoises what it calls a small criminal group to the vast majority. But the real small criminal group is the millionaires and billionaires who

are not at all orderly and law abiding but who rob, cheat, deceive and will use any artifice to maintain their superabundance of wealth and power and pursue the extraction of superprofits.

Insurrections throughout history

It is impossible to understand the nature and impact of the Los Angeles insurrection unless one considers that it is one of more than 200 rebellions reaching back to the days of slavery. Reporters Jones and Tobar try to divorce this relatively small community from the chain of historical evolution in the Black liberation struggle. This is impossible.

Just alluding to the 1965 Watts insurrection or the ones in Detroit, Newark and elsewhere is still inadequate. For a full-rounded exposition of the nature of the struggle, one has to view it in terms of class and national oppression. It is both a national liberation movement — a national struggle, to use the Leninist term — and a class struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression.

Without seeing this dual character of the struggle, one inevitably falls into the trap of confining it to petty reforms and patchwork solutions. Moreover, the white workers must fully awaken to their responsibilities. Otherwise, they will sink ever lower and absorb more of the blows of capitalist oppression and exploitation, adding to the problems rather than becoming, together with the Black, Latino and other oppressed people, part of the solution. ♦

1968: The King Assassination Sparks Mass Rebellions

April 11, 1968

In order to avoid the explosive effects of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, the U.S. government immediately embarked on a massive diversionary tactic of unprecedented proportions. It can be said without exaggeration that the administration mobilized virtually all its political, social and psychological resources to put across its maneuvers. To insure a cooperative effort, the government had the full support of practically all sections of the capitalist class.

To begin with, the government has a pre-existing arrangement with the total communication system of the U.S. on how to deal with such a contingency. The press, radio and, of course, TV brought the message of the ruling class across to the point of utter and complete saturation. It was virtually impossible for anyone to avoid its effects except by shutting their ears or closing their eyes.

But powerful as the weapon of imperialist propaganda is, by itself it has yet to prove effective enough to stop a widespread rebellion. No one knows this better than the architects of the "contingency plans for civil disorder" — the would-be executioners of the Black people. For, along with elaborate plans for propaganda, they had even more elaborate and more massive plans for the use of brutal and violent methods of repression.

On the surface, the ruling class strategy was calculated to convey a warm message of good will and deep sorrow at the murder of Reverend King, and a promise to do justice to the Black people, at long last. But through the message ran the all-too-familiar plea for "peace, brotherly love, and nonviolence" — code words that have invariably meant, in practice, abject submission to the will of the masterclass, especially during times of rebellion.

No wonder the message fell flat on its face! Even where it is for the time being heeded, it will surely backfire before too long. The deeds of centuries of oppression cannot be undone by a torrential rain of sanctimonious rhetoric while the fundamental problems remain totally unsolved.

It is precisely with this in mind that the government really prepared not one plan of approach to the impending Black revolt during the coming summer, but two. One was for ideological purposes, to deceive the Black and

white masses with finespun phrases, empty promises and elusive long-term plans for freedom, which never seem to even get off the ground.

What distinguishes this plan from all the others lies precisely in its massive character, in the fact that the government mobilized all and sundry to approve it and to trumpet it so long and loudly, as if its very duration would lend it credibility.

The other plan, prepared parallel with the first one, was the classical use of sheer brute force, and it is this which, for the moment at least, has proved decisive as it always does when the masses are unarmed and unorganized.

The rebellions which opened spontaneously upon the heels of the announcement of the assassination of Reverend King were so widespread that they had an almost universal character throughout the length and breadth of this land. The magnitude and depth of the uprising were so great that President Lyndon Johnson had to cancel his Vietnam conference in Honolulu to attend to the crisis here — a sure sign that for the moment at least, the war of liberation at home took precedence over the war of liberation waged by the Vietnamese people abroad.

It is sufficient merely to remember that the storm of uprising engulfed 110 cities as of April 9, as revealed by the New York Times. Nowhere in recent history has there taken place such a simultaneous and completely spontaneous rising as we witnessed last week. Its very scope and magnitude send terror and confusion into the camp of the ruling class. The very fierceness and boldness of the mass rising were the only real factors that stopped the government from unloosing as extreme a terror as it did last summer.

Nevertheless, in the space of barely three days, the government made 16,255 arrests, left 3,550 injured and 38 dead, all as of April 8.

It must be remembered that many smaller cities did not report at all at press time. Many of them generally refuse to release the true number of arrests or injured except on official request from higher authorities.

No matter how the bourgeois press will distort the real character of the events following the assassination, there are two fundamental aspects of these events which cannot be obscured by mere propaganda.

The first one is that the uprisings were not of an accidental character, or solely a protest at the murder of Reverend King, but were a general expression of the revolutionary momentum inherent in the liberation struggle. The King assassination crystallized and accelerated the tempo of the rebellions.

The second aspect of the rebellions is the implicit rejection of the theory of nonviolence as a method of achieving liberation. The ruling class could scarcely fail to notice this.

To the extent that more token concessions are made to the Black masses, they are to be regarded as a by-product of the struggle carried on by the masses, and not at all as concessions handed down from above to assuage the grief of the masses.

(It is plain for all to see that the passage of the current token civil rights bill in the reactionary House of Representatives by such a decisive majority is clearly a concession to the rebellions of the past week.) Throughout the entire period until the burial of King, the ruling class so manipulated all of the important public events that aside from the rebellions themselves there was no truly visible and significant independent expression of the Black masses.

Radio and television, press and pulpit, as well as outside gatherings, all of which were controlled by white bourgeois elements, monitored almost all public expressions of political sentiment. Few indeed were the independent militant Black voices given the opportunity to be heard except for short intervals and on rare occasions.

The very sight of Nixon, Rockefeller, Kennedy, Romney, Humphrey and the other pillars of imperialist racism at the funeral could not but help add insult to injury. The masses of people were even deprived of having their own way of interpreting the events. No wonder the masses resorted to retaliatory force!

In the epoch of imperialist decay, force has been the only arbiter in great events. Not a single important contemporary world issue has been decided without it, and until imperialism is swept off the face of the earth, that is how it will invariably be. Peaceful methods for the solution of great problems as well as small will prevail and endure after the reactionary obstruction of monopoly capitalism and racist oppression are swept away by a proletarian revolution. ♦

MUNDO OBRERO
WORKERS WORLD

Workers World Party is a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party inside the belly of the imperialist beast. We are a multinational, multigenerational and multigendered organization that not only aims to abolish capitalism, but to build a socialist society because it's the only way forward!

Capitalism and imperialism threaten the peoples of the world and the planet itself in the neverending quest for ever-greater profits.

Capitalism means war and austerity, racism and repression, attacks on im/migrants, misogyny, LGBTQ2+ oppression and mistreatment of people with disabilities. It means joblessness, increasing homelessness and impoverishment and lack of hope for the future. No social problems can be solved under capitalism.

The U.S. is the richest country in the world, yet no one has a guaranteed right to shelter, food, water, health care, education or anything else — unless they can pay for it. Wages are lower than ever, and youth are saddled with seemingly insurmountable student debt, if they even make it to college. Black, Brown and Indigenous youth and trans people are gunned down by cops and bigots on a regular basis.

The ruthless ruling class today seeks to wipe out decades of gains and benefits won by hard-fought struggles by people's movements. The super-rich and their political representatives have intensified their attacks on the multinational, multigender and multigenerational working class. It is time to point the blame at — and challenge — the capitalist system.

WWP fights for socialism because the working class produces all wealth in society, and this wealth should remain in their hands, not be stolen in the form of capitalist profits. The wealth workers create should be socially owned and its distribution planned to satisfy and guarantee basic human needs.

Since 1959, Workers World Party has been out in the streets defending the workers and oppressed here and worldwide. If you're interested in Marxism, socialism and fighting for a socialist future, please contact a WWP branch near you. ☐

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