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Club Educational Study Guide: African American History Month 2006

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[tags: African American History Month \(/about-us/tag/African+American+History+Month\)](#), [Discussion Guides \(/about-us/tag/Discussion+Guides\)](#)

February presents us once again with an opportunity to strengthen our basic understanding of the fight for democracy and social progress in our country. One decisive question is the relationship of the struggle of the working class to the struggle of the African American people. The core forces of the forward motion for social progress in our country consist of the working class and its organized form, the labor movement, in association with the movements of the nationally and racially oppressed, the movements of women, and the movements of youth. Decisive is the relationship of the working class and organized labor to the African American people.

This educational has the goal of upgrading our understanding of the national question, the fight against racism, and the fight for African American equality. The suggested readings, which are attached, include excerpts from the 2005 October report to the National Committee meeting, the 28th National Convention Keynote Report, the Draft Program, and a few other articles. The supplementary readings include classic writings based on a theoretical foundation which is still sound even if the statistical data have changed.

The club should invite guests to participate in this African American History Month educational and immediately distribute the reading materials and educational guide to all who will be involved. A discussion leader should be selected to guide the discussion.

At least an hour should be devoted to the full educational discussion.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is the national question still important in the USA? Why are African Americans important as a segment of the working class and as a whole people? Why is the unity of the whole of the African people important? Why is the internal unity of the working class important, and why is the unity of the whole of the working class with the whole of the African American people decisive? Why is the relationship of all of the nationally oppressed peoples to each other,

but particularly to the African American people important?

2. How is racism today similar to and different from racism of the past? What does it mean to struggle against racism? How do we answer those who claim white workers cannot be won to support full equality and oppose racism because of 'white skin privilege'? How does the struggle against racism unfold in your club's area of concentration or district? Why is the fight against racism decisive to the movement of the working class and the fight for social progress in this country?

3. What is the relationship between the struggle for more advanced democracy and the struggle against inequality? What is the role of the Party in the struggle against racism and for equality? How can these struggles contribute to the ability of the Party to grow? What can your club do to strengthen its understanding of the fight against racism and for equality and its role in productively waging that struggle in your area of concentration and district?

CPUSA Education Department

Recommended Readings:

1) Excerpts from the October 2005 National Committee Main Report by Sam Webb

KATRINA & ITS AFTERMATH

While the precipitous decline in the political fortunes of this administration is the result of a cumulative process, not everything has the same causal significance. Some things carry more causal weight in the chain of events that account for the sinking status of the Bush administration.

Herein lies the significance of hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

More than anything else, Katrina and its aftermath left a deep imprint on the public imagination of an administration that is morally indifferent, administratively incompetent, and politically self-serving.

It brought into full view the mistaken priorities that favor war and corporate profits over people's needs. It gave sharp definition to the fault lines of race and class? aggravated to the extreme by the race-conscious policies of the Bush administration and its extreme right wing counterparts in Congress, corporate boardrooms and think tanks.

Katrina helped millions of people to see the connections between issues, such as war spending and infrastructure repair, as well as to reconsider the assumptions that frame and legitimize the administration's policies, such as smaller government is better than bigger government.

Finally, Katrina punctured the artfully constructed myth that Bush is the best guardian of our nation's security.

Since the 1960s the conservative movement has bristled at what it calls the 'rights revolution' that began with the great civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King.

The passage of civil rights legislation set in train the enactment of a string of judicial decisions by the Warren Court that expanded democratic rights for millions of people who had been reduced to second and third class citizenship.

For conservatives these decisions were at loggerheads with a strict constructionist reading of the constitution and cut

into the authority of the legislative branch of government. Indeed they wrapped their objections in constitutionalist language and derided what they call 'judicial activism from the bench.'

But their interpretation of the constitution and the intentions of the framers of that document is specious according to respected historians.

Still another field of struggle is the economy where stagnant wages, eroding benefits, deteriorating health care, low wage jobs, pensions erosion, rising housing costs, and now skyrocketing energy prices are roiling working people.

It's true that if you look at some of the gross measurements of economic performance you can with some plausibility make the case that things aren't that bad. But if you look closer at statistics that measure economic conditions and well being of those who have nothing to sell but their labor power a far less promising picture comes into focus and it is precisely this that we have to be concerned about.

Most immediately, the rising costs of energy are turning into a crisis for millions of people. People are angry and will get angrier as home heating oil and gas bills begin to arrive. For many who are deep in consumer indebtedness the added costs of energy will be a budget breaker. Some will be unable to pay their energy bills, thus facing the danger of shutoff.

We have to join with others demanding both immediate relief and longer-term solutions to the energy crisis, while opposing new legislative measures made in the aftermath of Katrina to lift the remaining regulations on the energy industries and open up new formerly protected lands and waters to drilling.

Still another field of struggle is the cleanup and reconstruction of the Gulf States. As the water has receded, as the rebuilding has begun, and as public attention has turned elsewhere, it has become clear that the Republican Party would like to turn the whole region into a giant field of unregulated, crony capitalism. Right now there is no comprehensive plan or oversight committee that is comprised of prominent representatives of labor, racially oppressed, women, clergy, youth, seniors, elected officials, and so forth to monitor the reconstruction process.

Moreover, Bush says that he has no interest in such a plan or committee.

Bush joined Habitat for Humanity for a photo op, but is doing little to rebuild the housing stock in the Gulf States and New Orleans for Katrina's victims. Bush said that human services will be provided to all the evacuees, but his Congressional operatives are trying to nix Medicaid assistance to the displaced residents of the storm. Bush asserted that a racial divide still exists in our country, but then lifted Davis-Bacon and affirmative action provisions. Bush claimed that money will be appropriated for Gulf reconstruction, but Congressional Republicans are reducing the deficit under the ruse of paying for Katrina.

The Congressional Black Caucus and other members of Congress, the labor movement, the NAACP, and Rev. Jesse Jackson of Rainbow/PUSH among others are battling this callous attempt on the part of the White House and Republican House leadership to exploit the hardship and misery of hundreds of thousands in the Gulf to their own advantage. The broader movement and, of course, our Party, have to join them and give support to every positive Congressional initiative.

Another field of struggle is the fight against racism and poverty. If Katrina had a salutary effect it was to reintroduce the fault lines of racism and poverty into the nation consciousness and conversation. For the past quarter century right wing ideologues have been saying, with some assist from centrist democrats, that we live in a post-civil rights era in

which rough equality of condition among peoples has been either achieved or, where it hasn't, is explained by other factors than race and racial discrimination.

But Katrina and its after shocks challenged this myth. It brought to the nation's consciousness that millions of African American people and other people of color are locked into conditions of poverty, attend understaffed and under-funded schools, live in substandard housing and hyper-segregated neighborhoods, receive inadequate health care, experience long bouts of unemployment, work overwhelmingly in low wage jobs, and are denied dignity.

Or to put it differently, thanks to the Katrina, the American people have a greater awareness that racism is not simply a prejudice and little more than that. They now see that it decisively shapes the material and spiritual conditions in which tens of millions of racially oppressed people live.

As images from Katrina cascaded across their television screens, millions of people were shocked and asked themselves 'Why'?

Why do so many racially oppressed people live in poverty? Why are so many young African American men unemployed? Why are so many African American men and increasingly women filling our jails? Why hasn't the high school drop rate of young people of color changed appreciably in decades? Why are high schools that are named in honor of our nation's great civil rights leaders more segregated now than they were thirty years ago?

These questions still await an answer, but the important thing is that they were asked and that millions are disposed to consider a different narrative that explains the conditions and persistence of racial inequality in our country.

But as we know windows of opportunity don't stay open forever, thanks in no small measure to the ability of ruling elites to change the subject of conversation. It is easy for people to return to old explanations and understandings rather than confront new narratives that lead in a different direction, even where it is in their interests to do so.

I don't think that the window has closed yet, but leaders of the progressive movement have to take initiatives on an ideological and practical level, beginning with the rebuilding of New Orleans and the rest of the region.

2) Excerpts from the 28th National Convention Keynote Report

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THE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM

Racism is not a static phenomenon. It changes and has to be constantly studied.

We do this in order to become more effective fighters against racism and for equality. We can't rest on our history, although we should draw inspiration and understanding from it as we go forward.

Racism is one of the main fault lines of our nation's economics, culture, politics, and historical trajectory. It brings billions of dollars and confers enormous advantages to the owners of capital who are overwhelmingly white. It sustains the rule of the capitalist class. It's a shameful violation of our nation's ideals and is morally debilitating.

Racism is not a given of human existence. It is neither above history nor a completely autonomous structure of oppression. If it were, then we might as well give up now.

Rather, racism is a product of history and struggle. As a set of practices and as a developed ideology it arose in the course of capitalist development.

Racism is fluid and adaptable. It doesn't live alone, but mingles with backward anti-working class, anti-people, and pro-imperialist ideologies and practices. They come as a package.

Racism is not simply one group of people thinking badly about another. Or, to say it differently, racism is not just an attitude, not just a feeling or a prejudice.

Instead, racism is materially rooted in the institutional structures of our society. The material conditions and social relations of racial exploitation, subordination and dependence are not relics of the past (slavery and Jim Crow), but rather, they are constantly reproduced in contemporary life.

Racism mobilizes white people in a reactionary direction and facilitated the ultra right's ascendancy to power. In conferring relative advantages on white workers and people, it makes it more difficult for them to see that they have material as well as non-material interests in fighting racism. And, finally, it locks tens of millions of people of color into grossly inferior conditions of life.

NEW RACIST OFFENSIVE

The rise of the right and capitalist restructuring in the early 80s was accompanied by a new racist offensive? featuring the downsizing of manufacturing, which threw hundreds of thousands of workers of color out of work and major cities into long-term crisis, the privatization and hollowing out of the social safety net, the stacking of federal courts with racist judges, redistricting aimed at reducing minority political representation, the growth of the prison-industrial complex, and the weakening of affirmative action.

Since entering office, Bush has ramped up attacks against people of color through the courts, legislation, regulatory measures and executive orders. Despite the "color blind" rhetoric and nominations of a few African Americans and Latinos to high positions in his administration, on the strength of his record, Bush is a racist president. Scratch George Bush and you will find the ghost of Strom Thurmond.

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THE NATIONAL QUESTION

The role of the various racially and nationally oppressed people was another topic that elicited some spirited discussion. Without responding directly to some of the comments, I would like to say a few words on the national question.

The fight for racial equality has been a strategic cornerstone of our outlook for decades.

Early on, we brought to every struggle the slogan 'Black and white, unite and fight.' The realization of this slogan led to the victories in the Depression and WWII and, a few decades later, to victories over legalized segregation.

The slogan reflected our conviction, first of all, that without a more vigorous struggle for Black-white unity little could be won; second, that the fight against racism was an indispensable condition for that unity; and finally, that the African

American people are the main strategic partner of the working class.

The logic of this position rested on the role of slavery in this country's history, the overwhelming working-class makeup of the African American people, the location of Black workers in the strategic centers of the economy, and the interrelationship between the African American freedom struggle and the general class and democratic struggles in our country.

Several years ago, we enlarged that slogan to 'Black, Brown, and white, unite and fight' and emphasized multiracial, multinational unity. This was never meant to diminish the strategic role nor deny the political sophistication and power of the African American people or the necessity of Black-white unity. Rather, this broader unity concept and slogan attempted to capture the changing demographic profile of our working class and people, the new dynamics of class and democratic struggles, and, above all, the new requirements for victory against the ultra right.

It is clear that multiracial, multinational unity of African American, Latino, Asian,

American Indian, Caribbean, South Pacific, and European American is an indispensable condition for victories against racism and for democracy in this new century. Isn't this the lesson of the successful mayoral campaign of Antonio Villaraigosa? Isn't it the lesson of the 2004 elections? Isn't this the conclusion that we can draw from what successes there have been in the anti-Wal-Mart campaign?

The Mexican and Mexican American people, for example, are bringing a contagious militancy, creative tactics, a coalition approach, and class-consciousness to the struggle for equality and class unity. The main currents of this movement see themselves not as separate from the general democratic and working-class movement, but rather as an integral part of it.

At the same time, we should give no quarter to the pundits who would like to use the growth of the Mexican American and Latino community to foment divisions between

Black and Brown, to weaken labor unity and stir up anti-immigrant hostility.

We have never reduced the significance of the national question to a simple quantitative formula. Politics, as Lenin said, is more like higher mathematics than simple arithmetic.

That's particularly true of the national question.

The material basis for multiracial, multinational unity is the system of racist oppression, exploitation, subordination, and dependence. The subjective basis is both the common experience shared by people of various racial and national backgrounds and the growing understanding of their community of interests.

In making this adjustment, we should not lose sight of the specific features of the national and racial oppression of the African American people or any other oppressed people, for that matter. But on the other hand, what we should accent is the commonality of conditions and struggles.

Anything that is said or done that causes even the slightest division between racially and nationally oppressed communities is a disservice to the struggle for equality. This Convention has to embrace the challenge to deepen our theoretical understanding of the national question and to qualitatively upgrade our day-to-day practice of fighting for equality and against racism.

3) Excerpts from the CPUSA Draft Program

Only the unity of millions of working people led by the working class can win a revolutionary struggle. The unity of labor and community cannot be based solely on the demands and leadership of labor. Labor must also take up the fight for the demands of its allies on the basis of mutual trust. This also allows for the working class to establish its leading role among the mass movements as a whole. The Communist Party always seeks to build principled unity among the working class and all progressive social forces to further their interests and power.

New levels of unity have developed in the working class movement in the recent period. The common struggle against capitalist globalization has ushered in an advanced phase of working unity between the labor movement, the environmental movement, the student movement, and others. Shifts in labor's immigration policy have allowed a new level of unity with immigrant rights organizations.

Labor has increased its support of and work with Labor/Student solidarity organizations in recent years. There is a constant need to reinforce and defend this unity on the basis of common work, mutual respect and understanding.

At all strategic stages of struggle from the present to the construction of socialism, the working class is the most important and consistent class and the only one whose interests are entirely on the side of progress and socialism. That does not mean that at every moment, in every struggle, it will in fact be the leader. But the working class will tend more and more to become the leader of the struggle for progress and socialism.

The working class, however, cannot be the sole force in these struggles, because its opponents at each stage are powerful, with great resources at their command. Only with the maximum of unity and powerful alliances can victory be assured in a peaceful manner. There are other major social forces whose interests substantially parallel those of the working class as a whole.

Special Oppression & Exploitation

The most important of the potential allies of the working class are those who suffer special oppression and exploitation due to capitalism. All oppressed communities are well represented as part of the working class and also include people from other classes. Those who are part of the working class suffer the exploitation and social problems of all other workers, and in addition suffer from 'special oppression' oppression that is not solely based on class. Some people experience triple and quadruple oppression since they face several kinds of intense exploitation, discrimination, and oppression.

The racially and nationally oppressed, women, youth, and immigrants all face types of special oppression. Many features of special oppression cut widely across class lines and effect to some degree all members of each oppressed social group. They affect not only those who are workers or part of the professional and small business groups but to some extent even those from sections of the capitalist class. This common experience of oppression creates a wide basis for unity among the group.

Capitalists directly gain from special oppression. Extra profits are extracted by the special oppression and exploitation of each group and from the disunity caused among working people. Capitalists and their apologists use ideological poison to justify and cover-up both special oppression and the exploitation of all workers. The working class members of the specially oppressed peoples play a key role in building the alliance between the working class and the oppressed group as a whole, since they are an important part of both.

Multiracial Unity for Full Equality and Against Racism

The foremost potential allies of the working class, through the various stages of struggle all the way to socialism, are the nationally and racially oppressed peoples. At the same time, racism is the single most important weapon of the ruling class to weaken the class and democratic struggles. It is a classic divide-and-conquer tactic. Spreading division among the working class and between the working class and its allies weakens all movements and struggles. Against this division, we must build multiracial unity with antiracism and the fight for full equality at its core. The working class is the most multiracial, multinational class in our society, and multiracial unity is key to building internal unity in the working class as well as in society as a whole.

The U.S. is perhaps the most multiracial and multinational country in the world, with almost 300 million people that include almost every race, nationality and ethnic group on the planet. Racially and nationally oppressed people live and work in every region, in every state, and in every major city. They are primarily working class and generally occupy the lowest-paying, most exploitative jobs. Among the nationally and racially oppressed are African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Latino peoples, Native Americans, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, and Arab and Middle Eastern peoples.

Racism in its many forms continues to play a central role in every aspect of U.S. life, including keeping the ultra-right in power, and in producing super profits, and in developing and justifying the creation of institutional discrimination

The working class must fight against racism and for full equality of all nationally oppressed if it is to unite internally and enter lasting alliances with the organizations and movements of racially oppressed peoples. By the same token, the nationally and racially oppressed groups must support labor's demands in order to unite internally and to ally with labor.

From its inception, the United States was built on racism. From the displacement and near genocide of Native Americans, to the enslavement of African Americans, to the theft of much of Mexico, to the racist exclusion of Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants and the current xenophobic hysteria against Arabs and South Asians, racism has been a convenient tool for the maintenance of power and superprofits by the ruling class at the expense of oppressed people. Racism is a tool that not only exploits racially oppressed people, it aids in the exploitation of white workers as well.

Racism affects the unity of the working class at all levels. Racial discrimination in hiring, racist wage and salary policies, racial stratification of various industries and trades undermine the interests of all workers. The ability of employers to pay workers differently based on skin color, country of origin, immigration status, or hire date in two-tier wage systems, creates downward pressure on the wages of all workers.

It allows bosses to extract even higher profits from racially oppressed workers. Racism is good for business, but is bad for working people of every race.

White workers have a powerful self-interest in fighting racism. White workers will gain greater victories to the degree that they unite with nationally and racially oppressed workers. Multiracial unity in the workplace and on the shop-floor is the key to winning victories for all, to lifting wages, conditions and dignity for every worker.

The workplace is not the only place where building multiracial unity is essential. Multiracial unity is necessary at all levels of the class struggle. This is the reason for the long-standing coalition between the labor and civil rights movements. Not only do these movements have common enemies, they have a common agenda of expanding

economic, social, and civil rights. The working class and racially oppressed people have common interests in housing, employment, education, and other areas.

White people do not themselves experience racism, but should take the lead in combating all instances of racism and national oppression wherever and whenever they occur. These acts are the building blocks of grassroots unity and trust. They prove the struggle against racism is not for racially oppressed people to combat alone. It is in the self-interest of all workers, leading to greater unity, respect, and strength for the labor movement and all other movements.

African Americans

Historically and continuing today, African Americans and their organizations play a tremendous role in democratic and class struggles, and in building alliances with progressive movements, especially the labor movement. The reasons for this key role include:

- 1) the central role played by slavery in providing capital for U.S. political and economic development;
- 2) the central role resistance to slavery played in winning the Civil War, the 'Second American Revolution';
- 3) the central role played by the Civil Rights revolution in defeating Jim Crow laws and practices, mobilizing virtually an entire people and their allies, challenging and defeating entrenched reaction in the South, forcing changes in the voting laws to expand democracy, setting the stage for movements of other oppressed peoples;
- 4) the exceptionally high percentage of African Americans who are working class;
- 5) African Americans are among the largest nationally oppressed peoples, and live and work in strategic locations and industries around the country;
- 6) the level of coordinated struggle that the labor movement and the African American people have already achieved;
- 7) the bell-weather role played by the successes and the setbacks in the struggle for African American equality with respect to the struggles of all other oppressed peoples.

The African American people play a big role in national politics. Their concentration in large urban centers, high working-class composition, heavy concentration in the labor movement, and high level of political/social organization including churches and mosques, civil rights organizations, and social and fraternal organizations, all make it possible for these groups to politically mobilize millions, including many beyond the African American community.

In national elections, African Americans vote overwhelmingly against the ultra right more than any other group. There are thousands of Black elected officials nationally; almost all run as Democrats. Because they vote almost unanimously as a block in most elections, African Americans have a level of influence beyond their actual numbers.

Mexican Americans

Mexican Americans together with African Americans are the two largest nationally oppressed peoples in the U.S., with Mexican Americans being one of the fastest growing sections of the population. The Mexican American population is concentrated in the U.S. Southwest, land that was originally stolen from Mexico, with U.S. domination being imposed

on the many Native American and Mexican American people living in those areas. Mexican Americans mainly vote Democratic and have a major and growing impact on national elections. They have emerged as perhaps the most decisive group of voters in California and the southwestern states. Nationally, there are thousands of Mexican Americans holding public office, most elected as Democrats. The Mexican American people are overwhelmingly working-class and are a major force in the trade union movement nationally.

There are also many large national, regional and local mass organizations among the Mexican American people that have a big impact on the U.S. political scene. Among the problems faced by Mexican Americans are language discrimination on the job and in schools, cultural suppression, anti-immigrant laws and abuses, and lack of full political representation.

Immigrants

The labor movement has recently embraced the importance of unity between immigrant and native-born workers. Not only did anti-immigrant sentiment and racist repressive laws allow bosses to relegate immigrant workers to near-slavery conditions with no recourse, but it also undercut the attempts by native-born workers to organize unions and win concessions from management. Attacks on immigrants in farm fields, at the borders, and by law enforcement lay the basis for undermining everyone's rights.

The U.S. has large communities of immigrant workers. These workers are often super-exploited, working in the most primitive, unhealthy, non-union conditions. Each immigrant group faces its own national oppression, and many face racial oppression as well. Basic human and labor rights are often denied them. Thousands of undocumented, mainly agricultural workers crossing the border with Mexico are subjected to the murderous policies of the Border Patrol and racist vigilantes. They are hounded, chased down like criminals. Hundreds have tragically died or been murdered, especially in border areas, for simply trying to unite their families or find a better life.

For most Latinos, common use of Spanish and shared experience of discrimination in the U.S. are forging unity among Latino peoples. At the same time many immigrants from Latin America speak an indigenous language as their first language or do not speak Spanish at all. Latinos are extremely diverse culturally and in terms of national origin. Over half of all Latinos in the U.S. are foreign-born and face discrimination as immigrants, including Brazilians whose language origins are Portuguese.

Supplementary Readings:

Many of these readings can be found on the CPUSA website.

Gus Hall 'The Nation's Most Dangerous Pollutant' in *Fighting Racism*, pages 15-41 'Black-White Unity and the Working Class' in *Working Class USA*, pages 263-274

Barbara Jean Hope in *People's Weekly World*, November 18, 2004.

James Jackson 'Class Forces in the Black People's Movement' in *Revolutionary Tracings*, pages 141-145 'Black Liberation and Working Class Unity' in *Revolutionary Tracings*, pages 146-149 'On the Theory of Black Liberation in the U.S.' in *Revolutionary Tracings*, pages 149-158

Dee Myles in *People's Weekly World*, February 23, 2002

Jarvis Tyner in Political Affairs

Henry Winston 'The Nature of the White-Black Relationship' in Class, Race, and Black Liberation, pages 101-114

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