

*The attached is an excerpt from an introduction I wrote to a book that is supposed to be coming out this year containing two articles by CLR James. I am submitting it with two aims in mind: (1) to correct a misreading of James that has gained currency among some who oppose him as well as some who support him; (2) to contribute to the discussion of Lenin and the role of Marxist organization. Please circulate it along with this note to the relevant parties. -- Noel*

James' rejection of the vanguard party, however, did not lead him to reject Marxist organization. For proof, one need only recall the great attention and energy he dedicated to building Facing Reality, an avowedly Marxist organization headquartered in Detroit with branches around the U.S. (These efforts are recounted and documented in *Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization*, edited by Martin Glaberman.) But what would the Marxist organization do? This is where it gets difficult. I once asked him that question and got from him the reply, "Its job is not to lead the workers." Very well, I said, but what was it to do? For an answer, I got the same: It was not to act like a vanguard party. It was obvious that James was not going to elaborate with me, a person who might for all he knew carry with him the vanguardist prejudices of the "left" he had been fighting for decades. I would have to extrapolate the answer from his works. To these, then, I turned.

In *Facing Reality*, coauthored by James, Grace Boggs and Carlos Castoriadis, in the section "What To Do and How to Do It," it says, "Its task is to recognize and record." That is a start. Over the next few pages, *Facing Reality* lays out a plan for a popular paper that will document the new society as it emerges within the shell of the old. As should surprise no one, it is most concrete when discussing what was then called "The Negro Question in the United States":

For the purpose of illustrating the lines along which the paper of the Marxist organization has to face its tasks (that is all we can do), we select two important issues, confined to relations among white and Negro workers, the largest sections of the population affected.

1) Many white workers who collaborate in the most democratic fashion in the plants continue to show strong prejudice against association with Negroes outside the plant.

2) Many Negroes make race relations a test of all other relations....

What, then, is the paper of the Marxist organization to do?...

Inside such a paper Negro aggressiveness takes its proper place as one of the forces helping to create the new society. If a white worker... finds that articles or letters expressing Negro aggressiveness on racial questions makes the whole paper offensive to him, that means it is he who is putting his prejudices on the race question before the interests of the class as a whole. He must be reasoned with, argued with, and if necessary fought to a finish.

How is he to be reasoned with, argued with, and if necessary fought to a finish?

First by making it clear that his ideas, his reasons, his fears, his prejudices also have every right in the paper....

The paper should actively campaign for Negroes in the South to struggle for their right to vote and actually to vote.... If Negroes outside of the South vote, now for the Democratic Party and now for the Republican, they have excellent reasons for doing so, and their general activity shows that large numbers of them see voting and the struggle for Supreme Court decisions merely as one aspect of a totality. They have no illusions. The Marxist organization retains and expresses its own view. But it understands that it is far more important, within the context of its own political principles, of which the paper is an expression, within the context of its own publications, meetings, and other activities in its own name, within the context of its translations and publications of the great revolutionary classics and other literature, that the Negroes make public their own attitudes and reasons for their vote. [Published 1958; given the massive disenfranchisement of black people

in 2000, 2004 and 2008, which no major or minor candidate has chosen to make an issue, it might not be a bad thing if revolutionaries, without abandoning their view of the electoral system, were to join in a campaign on behalf of prisoners' right to vote--NI.]

Such in general is the function of the paper of a Marxist organization in the United States on the Negro question. It will educate, and it will educate above all white workers in their understanding of the Negro question and into a realization of their own responsibility in ridding American society of the cancer of racial discrimination and racial consciousness. The Marxist organization will have to fight for its own position, but its position will not be the wearisome repetition of "Black and White, Unite and Fight." It will be a resolute determination to bring all aspects of the question into the open, within the context of the recognition that the new society exists and that it carries within itself much of the sores and diseases of the old.

While the above passage focuses on the role of a paper, it provides a guide for other aspects of work. James's approach was in the best tradition of Lenin (whom James much admired). Lenin, it must be remembered, did not invent the soviets (councils). What he did, that no one else at the time was able to do, not even the workers who invented them, was to recognize in the soviets the political form of the new society. The slogan he propagated, "All Power to the Soviets," represented the intervention of the Marxist intellectual in the revolutionary process. In basing his policy on the soviets, those "spontaneous" creations of the Russian workers, he was far removed from what has come to be understood as vanguardism.

I recall once in the factory, a group of workers walking out in response to a plant temperature of one-hundred degrees-plus with no fans. Our little group, schooled in the teachings of James and Lenin, understanding that the walkout represented a way of dealing with grievances outside of the whole management-union contract system, agitated for a meeting to discuss how to make that walkout the starting point of a new shop-floor organization based on direct action. That was not vanguardism but critical intervention.

Another example from personal experience: I once worked a midnight shift in a metalworking plant. There were two other workers in the department on that shift, Jimmy and Maurice. Maurice had been having money troubles, which caused him to drink more than he should, which led to missed days and more trouble on the job, which led to troubles at home, etc. I came to work one night after missing the previous night, and Jimmy told me that Maurice had brought a pistol to the plant the night before, planning to shoot the general foreman if he reprimanded him in the morning about his attendance. "Did you try to stop him?" I asked. "No, what for?" queried Jimmy. "What happened?" I responded. "When the foreman came in," explained Jimmy, "instead of stopping to hassle Maurice, he just said hello and kept going to his office. He doesn't know how close he came to dying."

I, of course, did not want Maurice to shoot the general foreman because I did not want him to spend the rest of his life in prison for blowing away an individual who was no worse than the generality of his type. Jimmy looked at matters differently: for him, Maurice's life was already a prison that could be salvaged by one dramatic NO, regardless of the consequences. Who was right? Well, I had read all the books and knew that ninety-nine times out of a hundred nothing would come of Maurice's action: the plant guards or the cops would take him away or kill him on the spot. But on the hundredth time, something different might happen: the workers would block the plant guards, fight the cops, and the next thing you knew you had the mutiny on the *Potemkin*. The new society is the product of those two kinds of knowledge, Jimmy's and mine, and neither could substitute for the other. As a person who had decided to devote his life to revolution, my job was to Recognize and Record the new society as it made its appearance.

In 1969, a black worker at a Los Angeles aircraft plant, Isaac ("Ike") Jernigan, who had been harassed by management and union and then fired for organizing black workers, brought a gun to work and killed a foreman; then he went to the union hall and killed two union officials. Our Chicago group published a flyer calling for workers to rally to his defense. Not much came of it until... the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit reprinted our flyer in their paper. A Chrysler worker, James Johnson, responding to a

history of unfair treatment including a suspension for refusing speedup, killed two foremen and a job setter, and was escorted from the plant saying “Long Live Ike Jernigan.”

The League waged a mass campaign on Johnson’s behalf, including rallies on the courthouse steps, while carrying out a legal defense based on a plea of temporary insanity. The high point of the trial came when the jury was led on a tour through Chrysler; it found for the defense, concluding that working at Chrysler was indeed enough to drive a person insane. (This was Detroit, and many people already knew that to be true.) Johnson was acquitted and sent to a mental hospital instead of to prison; as an added insult, Chrysler was ordered to pay him workmen’s compensation. Such was the political power contained in the simple words, Recognize and Record.

The task of revolutionaries is not to organize the workers but to organize themselves to discover those patterns of activity and forms of organization that have sprung up out of the struggle and that embody the new society, and to help them grow stronger, more confident, and more conscious of their direction. It is an essential contribution to the society of disciplined spontaneity, which for James was the definition of the new world.