

# Fascism”: A Review of Don Hamerquist's Essay

By Geert (Western Mass.) and Joel (Flagstaff)

May 12, 2008

We thought that commenting on Don Hamerquist's essay, “Fascism and Anti-Fascism” from the book *Confronting Fascism: Discussion Documents for a Militant Movement* (2002, which also includes writings by J. Sakai, C. Alexander and Mark Salotte) would contribute to the debate about anti-fascist work in the discussion bulletin.

The essay is an interesting read with a lot of useful insights. Most importantly, it provides a historical framework that understands fascism as not just a ruling class reaction but also as a popular working-class phenomenon. Certain sections of the fascist movement are genuinely anti-capitalist and fascism is not necessarily just a form of “gorilla capitalism.” These working-class and genuinely anti-capitalist forms of fascism are the ones we should pay particular attention to.

As Hamerquist writes:

*“The emerging fascist movement for which we must prepare will be rooted in populist nationalist anti-capitalism and will have an intransigent hostility to various state and supra-state institutions. The essence of anti-fascist organizing must be the development of a left bloc that can successfully compete with such fascists, presenting a revolutionary option that confronts both fascism and capitalism in the realm of ideas and on the street. As I have said, unless the left can become such an alternative, there is a real danger that fascist movements will be the main beneficiary of capital's developing contradictions. It would be convenient if, for lack of an alternative, large numbers of people would automatically rally behind the left's various tattered flags wherever they got basically pissed off. However, in a crisis there will be alternatives to the left-fascist ones, and the left may very well not look like much of an alternative to capitalism. Sadly, it will not only be hard to distinguish the U.S. Left from various liberal capitalist factions, the lines between it and some of the fascists are also likely to be pretty indistinct. (28-29)*

We assume we all agree with the essence of this important argument: anti-capitalist forms of fascism, however small and marginal at this moment, form an attractive alternative to liberalism for the working class. The revolutionary left has positions and arguments which sometimes seem indistinguishable from the liberal left. (For example, in the battle around immigration how does the revolutionary left differentiate itself from the liberal left?) At other times, as Hamerquist points out, the anti-capitalist tendencies within fascism seem very close to the revolutionary left.

There are a series of other things that we can agree with about Hamerquist's argument:

The anti-capitalist fascist right is competing for many of the same alienated and angry

white workers that the revolutionary left is.

\* Only a revolutionary rather than social democratic alternative can win angry and alienated sectors of the working class away from fascism.

\* The task of the left is to build this alternative, both in terms of culture and political movements and organizations.

\* The “three-way fight” analysis, which clearly comes from this perspective, is generally right that we face a fight against both the reactionary right and the state/ruling class in building a new world.

### **The problem with the analysis**

The goal, as Hamerquist argues, is to build an alternative revolutionary pole that can win folks away from fascism. However, Hamerquist provides no convincing argument for why we should do specifically antifascist work in competing with the fascists to build a popular base. We are not convinced by his analysis that antifascist work can win the working class away from revolutionary fascism. One reason is that his brief discussion of the advantages of antifascist work are not reflective of the experience of Anti-Racist Action. Contrary to Hamerquist's hopes, ARA and antifascist work in the U.S. in general have not a) developed revolutionary cadre or b) developed a popular culture “based on a core of intransigent anti-capitalism” (54). Instead, American antifascist work has built a small base of punks and skins who by and large haven't developed cadre and who remain locked in punk subcultures, subcultures that are “alternative” but hardly “intransigently anti-capitalist.” This was true at the height of ARA's influence in the 1990s and still remains true today.

Hamerquist also argues that fascism is not necessarily white supremacist. This is not persuasive at all. We agree with him that fascism (or similar systems) can emerge anywhere in the world. Globally, then, fascism need not be “white.” But in the U.S. we believe it is inevitable that any fascist program will be white supremacist. His argument that Black nationalism could develop into fascism, for example, is not plausible. Malcolm X's meetings in the 1950s with the American Nazi George Rockwell notwithstanding, the chances of a “Black fascism” or of unity between white separatists and Black separatists at best would be tactical and short-lived, and then quickly turn murderous.

Contrary to Hamerquist, we do not believe that the U.S. is likely to become fascist in the near or medium term because the continuing power of whiteness makes fascism unnecessary. In the U.S., the herrenvolk democracy (democracy for the master race, tyranny for everyone else) has historically performed the repressive functions of a fascist state but with a democratic veneer. Importantly, herrenvolk democracy has given the white working class a voice in government, which undermines efforts by fascist tendencies to build a movement from below to challenge the state. Further, the cross-class alliance that makes up the “white race” has historically brought the white working class together with the ruling class, making a fascist anti-capitalist upsurge unlikely.

That's why Germany gets the Brownshirts, but the U.S. gets KKK.

For these three reasons, we don't think antifascist work is something that revolutionaries in the U.S. should devote a lot of resources on (except for the occasional confrontation with nazi skins to drive them out of a town or scene, etc.). Hamerquist urges a fight of "extreme vs. extreme": the anti-capitalist left vs. the anti-capitalist right. This, however, is what Lorenzo Kombo Ervin correctly rejects as a "vanguard vs. vanguard" strategy. Our approach should instead follow the abolitionists' fanaticism: draw lines between extremes (i.e. friends and enemies), but then use those lines to attack the middle, i.e. the state and capital and political moderates, in order to mobilize a mass base along the lines of our politics. This is where our focus on fighting white privilege remains useful. Rather than fighting with the fascist enemy in a "vanguard vs. vanguard" approach, we build a base by distinguishing ourselves from the state, capital, and liberals. By distinguishing ourselves from this political "middle," we build a politics and program that can compete with and defeat a fascist/white supremacist pole.

An American fascism, then, is a long-term prospect at best. There's a greater likelihood of the return of herrenvolk democracy and white standing in the U.S. than there is of fascism. The best way to compete with the fascists to win over angry alienated workers is not to fight nazis but to build our alternative by differentiating ourselves from the liberal left and focusing on the fight against the state and capital. Thus, we don't see the reason to make antifascism a central point of our work.

### **Response from Peter Little (Portland):**

May 08

I want to thank Geert and Joel for taking on the significance of antifascist politics and work, and for pushing this argument along. Allow me to "bend the stick" in the other direction for a moment.

We need to be further developing the implications of 3 way fight politics in our work. I think we agree on this point. However, a 3 way fight analysis actually points to the significance of antifascist work.

I also want to apologize for the roughness of this response. I'm erring on the side of getting people a chance to see something as opposed to a polished and well developed response.

Although there are a number of assumptions underlying Geert and Joel's argument that I want to challenge, I want to begin with a simplification they make which actually muddies the debate. With a sweeping gesture, they use a very limited (and debatably accurate) presentation of ARA to sum up the possibilities of antifascist work. The review of Hammerquist and Sakai's, "Discussion Documents for a Militant Movement," makes a

large number of unsupported statements regarding the legacy and potentials for antifascist work in the US. It is my hope that this response will push its authors to produce the evidence and support for their assertions with which to better produce meaningful debate on the subject.

-ARA and antifascist work in the U.S. in general have not a) developed revolutionary cadre or b) developed a popular culture "based on a core of intransigent anti-capitalism" (54). Instead, American antifascist work has built a small base of punks and skins who by and large haven't developed cadre and who remain locked in punk subcultures, subcultures that are "alternative" but hardly "intransigently anti-capitalist." This was true at the height of ARA's influence in the 1990s and still remains true today.

There are two points I want to take up here.

I can't speak to the legacy of ARA elsewhere, but my own anecdotal experience with antifascist organizing in Portland contradicts the preceding assertions about antifascist work, while pointing simultaneously to the dangers of underestimating the possibilities of a popular, anticapitalist fascism emerging on the near horizon.

In the late eighties and early nineties, concurrent with an upsurge of white supremacist youth organizing across the country, white supremacists targeted the Northwest US for the development of a 'White Homeland' (see the Northwest Imperative). In lily white Portland Oregon, the whitest large city in the United States, this manifested in what became a protracted struggle for public and political space. In the course of ten years, a low intensity war raged in the streets of the city. People on both sides (and a number of 'uninvolved' queer and people of color targeted by the fascists) ended up assassinated, beaten, and also imprisoned. Firebombings and home invasions became more than an occasional occurrence, and running street battles outside of youth clubs and music venues between antifascists and fascists became a regular event in youth culture in this city. A few times, these street fights escalated to gun battles and dropped bodies.

This struggle emerged so forcefully that it largely defined the political dialogue and struggles during that time period within the city. The three primary groupings (all with overlapping membership and bases) that organized against this very real threat, (The Coalition for Human Dignity, Skinheads Against Racist Prejudice, and Anti-Racist Action) all had a massive popular base within the city, and were arguably one of the few places where interracial and antiracist popular culture emerged in the city during those times.

When the sr. Bush traveled through the area during this time, the riots that greeted him provoked him to dub the city, "Little Beirut" The crowd offering the greeting was largely composed of ARA and SHARP youth. The point here is not to infer that there was a conscious anti-capitalist pole(although I believe there was) within the popular antifascist struggle in Portland during that era, but that the militance and rebellious spirit of the antifascist organizing spilled across 'issue' distinctions and existed as a clear pole in numerous struggles across the city and region.

The fascist threat at that time was real-it had popular support in segments of the population and was growing in strength. Had forward thinking people not organized to

confront it, it held the potential to reconfigure the political landscape of the region. The folks who organized against it ended up pitted against the state-and both local and federal police responses-both which longed for no more than to lock up both sides and be done, to return to their little quiet white liberal 'peace'. Targeting the middle or the simply the state from a position of fanaticism or zealotry(to create lines), however, wasn't an option. This wasn't, as Geert and Joel argue might be necessary, "chasing nazis out of a scene" or organizing against a specific event they staged. This was a struggle over the life of the city itself, with life and death consequences for those in the struggle itself. Close to a dozen white supremacist street gangs sprouted up in the city, with an active base of hundreds of supporters and an even greater number of sympathizers and affiliates in their ranks. These fascists may have targeted a subculture and a music scene (and parts of the streets and neighborhoods) for recruitment, but to the numerous queer and people of color who were hospitalized, paralyzed, whose homes were firebombed, or who were murdered, there was no choice but to defend their city and their community. The fascist organizing had popular potential, was radical and anti-state, and was a real threat.

The entire piece is underlaid with a static interpretation of economics, race, and politics within the US, on a number of critical issues. It fails to acknowledge the shifting nature of white supremacy, the rapidly transforming (and contested) nature and role of the state in an international economy(and the differing tendencies determining its trajectory), and the centripetal crises that appear to be flinging contradiction after contradiction in the form of mud on the faces of bourgeois democracy's proponents(and its new heroes in the liberal and Democratic party sectors).

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An snapshot of the state in this moment, with repressive ICE raids, massive incarceration of people of color, unwinnable but committed military engagement in numerous parts of the globe, can be deceiving. A snapshot is good at showing the surface of an object at a specific moment in time. What it fails to show, though, is the movement of that object, its trajectory, and even more importantly, the different forces and tendencies driving its internal development.

We've got to pierce below this surface, to examine the contradictions and forces driving the state at this moment. Below the surface, we can hope to tease out the economic forces driving and crafting the differing tendencies vying for dominance within the state itself.

The review seems to fail to take into account or acknowledge the shifting role of the nation state under a truly global form of capitalism. Old forms of "herrenvolk democracy" (as defined above) reflected a particular moment in the development of national poles of capital. A globalized and international capitalism has made clear its internationalism—we now face the greatest wave of human migration (across the planet) in history. The uprooting and massive movement of peoples is a defining element of this epoch. This is not something that global capital is likely to retreat from. From the shattering of Japan's historic isolationism (and the emergence of immigrant labor for the first time in its history) to the manning of the oil fields of the Middle East by Asian indentured labor to Filipino nurses remittances holding their native country's economy afloat, massive immigration and geographic dispersal of human labor is a defining element not likely to be stemmed or overturned in the absence of a revolution (this is not to assume it would be a liberatory revolution, but rather a radical transformation of relationships of power within a society).

The review's argument fails to acknowledge that the Klan of today is not the Klan of reconstruction or Jim Crow. As Sakai and Hammerquist point out, in the 80s a new, antistate Klan emerged. A defining element of the time's new right wing populism is the notion of multiculturalism as a conspiracy of the liberal state (and international capital.) To the extent that the current migration of 12-20 million undocumented workers to the US country was the end result of conscious policies of economic dislocation in home communities and the engineering of semiporous borders to promote their labor as 'illegal' persons in the United States, there is an element of truth to this belief. Maybe the ruling class will be happy to see white workers duking it out with nonwhite workers over the crumbs that continue to diminish in quantity within this economy, but the reviewers fail to offer any evidence that the state is willing to make meaningful concessions towards a return to old forms of white supremacy and 'herrenvolk

democracy'.

The new form of white supremacy is less an international labor aristocracy in the heart of empire than the elusive promise of 'security'-i.e. diminished: incarceration rates, rates of absolute displacement from waged employment, and open state repression. The old unionized factories jobs with, 'first hired, last fired,' guarantees for white workers are no longer an offering in that bargain.

All indicators actually point towards a new tendency as emergent as dominant within the State. Green capitalism and comprehensive immigration reform are the buzzwords of the emerging and driving tendency within the political class within the United States. This represents Capital's tempering of access to the state by those who've been struggling for a return to such herrenvolk democracy.

This is the same government that waged a counterinsurgency in the 90s against the Militia movement, giving us Ruby Ridge, militant (armed) anti-abortion activism, and the Oklahoma City bombing. If this state is really capable of allowing a return to old forms of herrenvolk white supremacy, why did this state wage a clear and real war against its very adherents? Its important to note that it was this very counterinsurgency campaign which birthed the Oklahoma City bombing, and not the other way around.

This is the same state which, after four years of theatrical gestures made in attempts to keep the anti-immigrant movement (which is housing many of the activists from the right wing populist movements of the 90s) within the scope of electoral activity, has now largely dumped their base(at least federally). The nomination of McCain is the temporary sealing of this fate, as he aligns himself with the green capitalists and comprehensive immigration reformers in the Democratic party. The 'invisible hand of capital' asserts itself yet again.

The State is contested terrain-white supremacists seeking a return to herrenvolk democracy have pulled its policies towards them with their grassroots organizing-in armed border activism, electoral forays, and in regional mobilizations against immigrant communities. These are many of the folks who engaged in armed anti-environmental and land rebellions across the Midwest and West in the 90s. There isn't evidence that the state has taken their attempts at actually influencing the racial composition (as opposed to its racial hierarchy) of the country seriously, however. The numbers of workers actually deported have yet to have real detrimental economic impacts for business in most parts of the country.

In Arizona, where employer associations ARE acknowledging the economically detrimental effects of white supremacist organizing on the state, we now see a new trend within the political class, calling for FBI inquiries against anti-immigrant politicians, and indicating the reigning in(or possible exile) of the anti-immigrant movement from electoral politics. As long as raids maintained a largely symbolic role-terror and repression within increasingly restive working class immigrant communities, but no real impacts on the ability to acquire labor(beyond decreasing its cost), the state was willing to make gestures to keep the anti-immigrant movement within its electoral compact. The McCain candidacy is a stunning indication that both parties are lining up behind their

bosses and challenging the anti-immigrant movement (and its appeals for a return to herrenvolk democracy) for dominance within the state. The question that needs to be asked is-what happens when (as is happening now) this movement loses its access to the halls of power-when it sees that international capital will not allow (in the absence of an insurgency that seizes back the state), the reassertion of old forms of herrenvolk democracy. This image of roiling conflict beneath the surface-different forces driving the state-and the state in motion, offers a very different vision for the future than that of the strong liberal state offered by the reviewers.

The reviewers pose a false dichotomy between antifascist work and "draw lines between extremes (i.e. friends and enemies), but then use those lines to attack the middle, i.e. the state and capital and political moderates, in order to mobilize a mass base along the lines of our politics" while failing to substantially demonstrate how these two activities are separable. The current struggles around immigration draw this out well. Our own work in Portland, and recent experiences in neighborhoods in Maricopa County, Arizona, has demonstrated that to organize around immigrant rights is not possible without taking account of the movement organizing and struggling on the other side of the state (see A Visit to the Portland Gun Show <http://bringtheruckus.org/?q=node/52> )

The leaves a question that begs to be asked in light of the reviewer's spurring to attack the state, capital, and political moderates-if an attack by the left on the state and its institutions succeeded, bringing about its failure (or more likely at this time, it collapsed under its own contradictions), would the left be able to withstand the forces organized to its right? This is a real and serious question, and its implications can be seen played out in various parts of the globe right now, as the collapse and failure of both the left and bourgeois democracy has demonstrated frightening and tragic potentials.

#### Liberal Democracy's Assumed Stability?

There are two more assumptions underlying the review that I'd like to draw out in this response. The assertion that a US fascism is a long-term prospect, and the mandate then, to attack the middle, the state, and capital, assumes that of the two camps (the fascist right and the state and capital) opposing us the State and Capital are the nearest and most likely threat.

If carbon trading as a response to ecological collapse, the failure to inject stability into a sinking world economy, a collapsing dollar, skyrocketing food prices and inflation, and increasingly frequent demonstrations of utter ineptitude by nation states in the face of natural disasters are a measure of what's to come, bourgeois democracy holds little likelihood of successfully mitigating the numerous (and cascading) contradictions whirling towards its center. At least not in the form it holds now. This starkly poses the question of who is likely to benefit (or prepared to benefit) from its crises? If the breadth of debate over immigration is any measure, the left doesn't hold much compared to the capacity and power of the far right in posing a challenge to that state in the current moment.

The reviewers admonition to draw lines and attack the middle holds echoes of the



German Communist Party's line in the 20s and early 30s in response to the rising power of the National Socialist German Worker's Party. In a fatal misjudgement, the Party maintained the priority was to "Fight the social fascists"(social democrats) as the NSDP was considered too fringe and extreme to be taken seriously.

We'd do well to study that historic mistake and the consequences for the international communist movement.

### **Response to Bring the Ruckus: Four Points**

Don Hamerquist  
9/9/2008

I was interested and encouraged by the BTR discussion of fascism and would like to respond to some of the criticisms of my positions that it includes. I'm happy to see a critical discussion of these issues and hope that my continuing disagreements promote further exchanges without obscuring the substantial areas of agreement. I expect to be corrected if I misunderstand or distort arguments or concepts or in any way misrepresent the views that I don't accept. I'm a little embarrassed by how wordy my piece has become, particularly since it only covers a few of the issues.

To the extent the discussion focuses on work priorities and current tactical possibilities for BTR, I don't have much to offer. I have argued for an emphasis on anti-fascist work at various times in the past, but it was related to the specific political circumstances. I don't believe that anti fascist mass work should always be pivotal or that it has some revolutionary potential that can't be developed in other ways. It is not right to make a fetish of this area of work – nor of any other for that matter.

That said, I do think that the contradictions and conflicts associated with the accelerating globalization of capital will make fascism increasingly relevant to every area of political activity. This calls for a serious treatment of neo-fascisms on a strategic and theoretical level that will undoubtedly include an increased general priority on street-level anti fascist organizing. However, in my opinion, this is neither the essence nor the extent of the issue.

I've loosely organized this piece around four short citations from the BTR discussion. I deal with them in the order they appeared in the material, making only minimal attempts to explore their interconnection and intending no ranking of their relative significance. I'm emphasizing passages that will sharpen differences, realizing that this doesn't take adequate account of other passages and arguments that temper and condition them.

1. *“(Hamerquist’s) ...argument that Black Nationalism could develop into fascism, for*

*example, is not plausible.”*

The estimate of “Black Nationalism” and the consideration of the potential for fascist developments within the U.S. Black population are distinct issues and should be kept that way: I neither argue nor believe that Black Nationalism will develop into fascism or that nationalist movements against imperialist oppression were seed beds for fascism. That position is part of the left fatalism and pessimism which, more commonly, finds Stalin and the Soviet bloc, or whatever it is that China has become, to be the necessary culmination of the working class communist movement.

The re-emergence of U.S. Black Nationalism in the sixties, far from misdirecting the progressive movement in a reactionary direction, impelled a major breakthrough towards internationalism and solidarity with anti capitalist and anti imperialist struggles that were erupting around the world. The Black Nationalist movement shook the implicit assumption that the attitudes and activities of the white segment of the working class would be the decisive issues in the revolutionary process and transformed the U.S political movements of the period in an overwhelmingly positive fashion. The impact was not simply through a quantitative radicalizing. An important byproduct of the Black Nationalist emphasis on autonomy and self determination was its challenge to the structures and attitudes within the left that replicated and reproduced capitalist hegemony.

As the trend towards capitalist globalization has accelerated, revolutionary nationalist anti imperialism has become an increasingly hollow shell and its potential as a vehicle of struggle against capitalist power is rapidly shrinking. It has been unable to effectively counter the neo-colonial response it has elicited from capital and has fractured into a demoralized constituency topped off with an array of warlords, factions, and elites competing for subordinate places at the capitalist table and/or initiating violent authoritarian projects with fascist implications. The partial victories the revolutionary nationalist movement won, in fact and in perception, are emerging as obstacles to future struggles.

The entire process is not just a collection of temporary setbacks that might be reversed. It is a necessary consequence of the qualitatively changing terrain for class struggle and provides additional evidence of the need for changed categories of analysis and new revolutionary strategies. However, the fact remains that it is not Black Nationalism or revolutionary anti-imperialism that leads to fascism, but their failures. The disintegration of revolutionary anti-imperialism, not its success, has contributed to the emergence of a cynical, alienated, and demoralized constituency for fascist movements among Black people in this country. I see ideological and organizational initiatives to mobilize this increasingly marginalized and declassed constituency in a fascist direction. The actual issue between myself and some of the BTR commentators is whether this particular potential for fascism is effectively negated by the unique history and institutional structure of Black oppression and white supremacy in this country. Clearly we disagree on this estimate. I am quite willing to provide evidence and examples to support my view, but at this point it is probably enough to just note the disagreement.

The authors explicitly discount the relevance of fascist political tendencies elsewhere in

the post-colonial non-white world - for example in Africa where many regimes and opposition movements have clearly fascist attributes – and restrict their dismissal of the potential for non-white fascism to this country. This is an important aspect of the American exceptionalism that runs through the entire discussion. I find this stance increasingly problematic on most questions, including the future significance of the institution of white skin privilege, but will only touch on it in this piece.

Since they believe that in the U.S.; “...it is inevitable that any fascist program will be white supremacist...”, they focus on whether any non-white U.S fascist tendency might coalesce a unified, and presumably white supremacist, fascist movement. This is an odd argument, long on assumptions and short on evidence, that doesn’t deal with my actual position. Certainly I think that unity between Black and ‘white’ fascist tendencies is unlikely – but no more unlikely than unity between Black fascists and non-fascists. Accordingly, I agree that any conceivable mass fascist development in this country, including in the Black community will probably “...quickly turn murderous”. I can’t see how that makes it less important, “short-lived”, or of merely “tactical” significance.

Following Luxemburg I think that fascism is the ‘barbaric’ response to the apparent triumph of capital on a world scale, a response that is increasingly unlikely to develop unified and coherent social movements embodied in relatively stable social orders. However, I don’t think that the absence such a unifying trajectory qualitatively limits the strategic importance of fascist movements, non-white or not.

*2. “Further, the cross- class alliance that makes up the ‘White Race’ has historically brought the white working class together with the ruling class, making a fascist anti-capitalist upsurge unlikely. That’s why Germany gets the Brownshirts, but the U.S. gets KKK”.*

Before it is possible to argue from historical parallels - as this excerpt does - we must be sure both that the historical facts are accurately presented and that the social circumstances haven’t qualitatively changed. Here I want to make a few comments on the accuracy of the implied history, leaving aside most of the issues concerning the changing relevance of this history. I hope the narrow response does not obscure broader implications.

On the first sentence:

This white cross-class bloc notion is overstated and too simplistic an explanation for the past historical periods when it was a little more applicable. Beyond this, even if the complexities of actual history are not given proper weight, positing a general tendency for white workers to align with ruling class interests in no way excludes the potential for significant fractures within the overall tendency. And, when such polarizations occur, as they have and will, there is no inherent reason why one of the poles cannot be essentially fascist in character.

U.S. history is complex and contradictory and the cross class bringing “together” is much more conditional and tenuous than this passage suggests. There has always been white working class resistance to such a class alliance, a resistance based in their

contradictory collective experiences - as objects of capitalist exploitation and as subjects of significant, but insecure, political and economic privileges. This resistance has had reactionary outcomes, consider some aspects of the Civil War. It has had more progressive outcomes, consider the eight hour day movement and the industrial organizing campaign of the thirties. Many complex examples could be developed from more concrete historical examples: consider the white racist reaction to the threat of Black labor competition and the use of Black military units during major radical and anti-capitalist class confrontations such as those of the Western Federation of Miners in Northern Idaho and the failed steel organizing campaign following WWI.

On the second sentence: The sharp contrast implied by; "...Germany gets the Brownshirts, but the U.S gets the KKK"; is historically questionable. Prior to his primitivist phase, John Zerzan wrote a piece on the post WWI Indiana Klan that exuded surprise over the extent to which this Klan was radical and pro-working class. Zerzan was clearly ignorant of the magnitude and militance of the radicalism of the contemporary European fascists which might have reduced his astonishment at finding similar attitudes in U.S. reactionary movements. This passage from the BTR discussion is the other side of the Zerzan mistake. It pays too little attention to the elements of autonomy and radicalism that prevented the Indiana KKK – and will prevent modern reactionary groupings aiming at building a base among white workers – from always being pliable, dependably pro-capitalist, adjuncts of ruling class power.

Historical patterns of rule and resistance can be correctly described – although I don't believe they have been in this instance – and there is still an important issue concerning how and to what extent this history is relevant. What has happened does not always illuminate what can and will happen. I believe that the circumstances of class domination have changed qualitatively in this country and that the national cross-class alliances and accommodations that were important to capitalist hegemony are changing in character and significance. Capital has less reliance on the institutions and practices that have traditionally maintained political stability in the imperial center, notably including those involved in this particular white privilege "cross-class alliance". Decisive ruling class fractions in this country increasingly see its benefits as being outweighed by its costs, particularly the costs of diverting attention and resources from more urgent and bigger contemporary challenges to global capital.

*3. "What's the difference between fascism as a movement and in power? Hannah Arendt argues pretty convincingly (regarding nazism) that there really isn't one."... "Arendt argues that the Nazis and Stalin actually became more radical in power."*

So how does Stalin come into this discussion? I have some thoughts on how "actually existing socialism" might be relevant to fascist potentials, but they don't support any minimalist view of the importance of fascism.

Laying that aside, the initial question is perplexing. The differences between fascism when it is a movement and when it is in control of a state seem obvious to me. They provide one overriding reason why it is important to confront fascism before it gains

state power. In one case you are competing for a constituency, ideologically and programmatically (and sometimes militarily) while contending with the reality of capitalist state power and cultural/ideological hegemony. In the other you are attempting to overthrow a militarized state structure animated by a totalitarian ideology. For an example of the difference, you don't wage a culture war against a fascist state unless you want to be dead, but this would normally be an essential part of the struggle against a fascist organizing thrust.

I suspect the real point here is not this question, but the notion that the Nazis became "...more radical in power". Notwithstanding Arendt, I don't think this is the case. The issue comes down to what is meant by 'radical'. Arendt's conception of radicalism emphasizes the repression and regimentation that culminated in massive national, cultural, and racial genocide and world war. From this vantage point, the Hitler of *Mein Kampf* is less radical than Hitler in power (and Stalin more radical than his Bolshevik predecessors).

However, without in any way minimizing the radicalism of German state fascism, we can't adopt this analysis. Arendt discounts the crucial element - the anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist aspects of totalitarian radicalism. When these are included, there is no way that Stalin appears more "radical" than revolutionary Russia and the Bolsheviks. More to the point, every previous fascist regime has moved away from the radical anti-bourgeois/anti-capitalist elements of the movement which brought it to power. In Germany these elements were very substantial and their influence was ended by the physical liquidation of a major section of the NSDAP a few months after the Nazi capture of the German state. There is no way that the NSDAP in power is more "radical" on these crucial issues without its substantial Strasser/Rohm wing – although it arguably might have been more reactionary and genocidal.

This is an important point. The left has obvious and increasing difficulties articulating and organizing around a clear and consistent liberatory anti capitalist alternative. Our failures to develop a popular case for social revolution provides a cautionary context for looking at the debates within modern fascist movements about the significance of the failure of Nazism to complete its "Second (anti-capitalist) Revolution". The danger in the way the question of 'radicalism' is handled in this part of the BTR discussion is that it discounts the potential challenge from the non-state transnational fascist movements that we are likely to face, minimizing their ability to provide plausible ideological and programmatic alternatives for either Black or white working class constituencies. I suspect that this attitude also questions the genuineness of neo-fascist radicalism, regarding it as more posture than principle. These amount to dangerous 'history is on our side' assumptions and, particularly when the discussion is not limited artificially to this country, the absence of logical reasons to accept them and of supporting evidence for them is pretty equally evident.

*"As long as the white working class in the U.S. has access to the state (such as via the herrenvolk democracy before 1965 and through various white privileges today), it has no need to opt for fascism:"*

Of course, I noticed the caveats that immediately follow this passage in the text.

However, it is hard to take them seriously since they apply to eventualities that have previously been dismissed as remote possibilities in passages such as the following: *“An American fascism, then, is a long-term prospect at best. There’s a greater likelihood of the return of herrenvolk democracy and white standing in the U.S. than there is of fascism.”*

So I will deal the issues of estimate and analysis in this passage as they stand.

Before getting to my disagreements, I want to indicate my understanding of some ambiguous terms that are employed; “access”, “state”, “need” and “opt”. I realize I could be wrong about the intended meanings and it could make a difference. I doubt that the authors view the U.S. state as one where real power is shared between the working and capitalist class. That is, I doubt that they believe that the U.S. is not actually a class state. So where this passage says “white working class...” access to the state”, I’m reading it as meaning access to the government. This is the language used at other points in the discussion. I also don’t think that access is the best description for this relationship between white workers and the government. Perhaps ‘participation’ would be more appropriate, particularly if it were understood that this participation is not formal, but part of an institutionalized process for distributing selective material concessions.

I’m reading the assertion that white workers will “have no need to opt for fascism”, to mean that they will not choose this option under current or foreseeable conditions. I think the issue is not one of objective necessity, but of subjective inclination and volition. As I have said, fascism would be a polarizing issue among these allegedly incorporated white workers, and they will not be opting for or against it as a unified subject with a common perception of need. White workers can provide an important terrain for fascist organizing initiatives even if these are selectively directed towards particular subgroups and only have potential to take root among minority fractions.

Continuing on the issue of terminology, I don’t accept the repeated reference to the “white working class” as if it were a political subject, either one which is – or is not - potentially revolutionary. In fact, there is no white working class. The working class is multinational or transnational with a small and diminishing minority of privileged white (particularly white male) members. Working class shouldn’t be defined racially, ethnically, or in terms of relative privileges – although these factors must all be included in a concrete understanding of the U.S. segment of the working class.

Beyond this, there are definite and growing problems in looking at class through the lens of nations and states. It is a short step from positing a nationally defined working class to accepting the limits of trade union reformism and parliamentary social democracy and reifying the most invidious ‘border fence’ forms of “competition within the working class”. The conception of a national U.S. working class abstracts from the objective reality of massive and growing movements of workers across borders and doesn’t place proper priority on concrete steps to promote and develop working class internationalism. (I believe that my position on this question is consistent with the white skin privilege analysis which the authors clearly hold. I doubt whether we will wind up

with significant disagreements on this point.)

To clarify some differences with the approach taken in this citation, I want to locate the general argument of the authors in the array of left positions on fascism. Clearly they reject conceptions of fascism that blur any distinction between it and capitalist repression. They appear to also reject more sophisticated variants of the same position that posit a capitalist tendency, preference, or 'drive' towards fascism that is identified with the program of a particular ruling class fraction.

Although it can be embodied in very different political approaches, from the most reformist popular front stage strategies to the most sectarian "class against class" postures, this latter position has been the dominant left conception since fascism emerged as an ideology and mass movement. The more or less official 'communist' position treats fascism as a capitalist policy option – a potential form of rule - often forgetting to add that traditional communist doctrine placed it as a policy of last resort, adopted out of strategic weakness where and when capitalism was in crisis and faced with a serious revolutionary working class political challenge.

There are many features and problems with this position that don't require mention here, but one fact is relevant: The 'option' for fascism, if it is chosen, will be taken by the ruling class, or some faction of it, acting according to the array of ruling class perceptions of what is required to maintain power. Disgruntled white workers might be involved as foot soldiers in a fascist organizing thrust, but it would not be their 'option'.

Apparently the authors are arguing that fascism has no potential within the ruling class because the viability of white supremacy makes it unnecessary and that any potential for a mass white autonomous fascist movement is ruled out by the persistence of the same system. (As mentioned above, a non-white potential base for fascism is also excluded - apparently as an article of faith in U.S. exceptionalism.)

In the mid seventies, some of us in STO agreed with the first proposition: so long as the institutions of white supremacy functioned within the working class, the ruling class would have no need to "opt" for fascism. The early STO position was rather quickly and summarily rejected. It contained an element of truth, but presented it in an abstract and one-sided manner that didn't recognize the autonomous and radical side of fascism, treating it only as a secondary technique of capitalist. This de-emphasized the potential for an autonomous fascist movement to impose itself on capitalism. More practically, it also de-emphasized the problems of working in conditions where such autonomous fascist movements existed and posed a real threat.

The position capsulized in this citation holds that the white section of the working class has no need to "opt" for fascism so long as it is privileged. This is significantly different from the early STO position because it implies that white workers understand and accept their privileges and will not see through or beyond them. STO regarded white privileges as real material benefits, but never discounted the potential for individual and collective repudiation of the system that generated them. White privileges didn't eliminate revolutionary potentials among white workers, they provided limits and barriers that must be confronted if these potentials were to be realized. We maintained

that white workers should and could be organized to act in their class interests.

However, if white workers have the potential to break with capital to the left, the possibility for them to break to the right can hardly be excluded. Indeed, since such a break to the right might simply be an extension of the ideology of white supremacy, it could be seen as relatively more likely.

There have been a number of revolutionary strategies that discount revolutionary potentials among white workers generally and view privileged white workers as ruling class auxiliaries. Since its central point is that white workers are satisfied with their privileged position and that these privileges are stable, the BTR position leads in the same direction although I presume that they would be reluctant to arrive at the same destination. However, the same estimate that minimizes the potential for a fascist movement among white workers actually applies even more against any potential for a liberatory revolutionary movement among them. Applying the logic underlying the simple argument presented in this citation, "...access to the state..." - "no need to opt for fascism", one might just as well say, access to the state... no need to opt for social revolution; or access to the state... no need to engage in class struggle. We know the political tendencies that have taken the white privilege concept to exactly these conclusions. I assume no one in BTR does or there would be more of you up here in the woods wondering what happened to the prairie fires.

To get into these issues a bit deeper, the selection maintains that white workers had access to the state (government) "...via the herrenvolk democracy before 1965 and from various white privileges today". How valid is the concept of herrenvolk democracy; and what happened in 1965?

I have to admit the term, herrenvolk democracy, is new to me and I will rely completely on the definition that the authors provide:

*"In the U.S., the herrenvolk democracy (democracy for the master race, tyranny for everyone else) has historically performed the functions of a fascist state but with a democratic veneer."*

I think that this notion of democracy for the master race, tyranny for everyone else has only marginal applicability to the U.S. It's doubtful if it even applies to South Africa – perhaps it fits Rhodesia, pre ZANU/Andy Young. Presumably the "master race" is white. Since the reference is to master, we can overlook the fact that white women had minimal formal or substantive democratic access to government in the U.S. until quite recently. In what sense then was there "democracy" for male white workers?

My view has always been that the U.S. is a bourgeois democracy; i.e. a system based on democracy for the bourgeoisie and something a bit different and decidedly less participatory or representative for everyone else, including in almost all cases, white male workers. Possibly there were some localized situations where there was effectively 'democracy' for all white males, maybe during the various genocidal operations against the native population. Normally, however, there was bourgeois democracy, where white workers might be privileged with some minimal voice in their continued exploitation and some possibility to participate in the repression and oppression of people outside of



their cohort, but little more.

Moving to the related second part of the phrase – “tyranny for everyone else” – I have to object again. I’m no fan of the constitutional parliamentary system anywhere including this country, but it did not and does not embody tyranny for all except white males. This is particularly the case if this tyranny is seen as the functional equivalent of a fascist state, as the authors maintain it should be. Fascist states are totalitarian and militarized and, while they may utilize a plebiscitary pseudo-democracy at times, they oppose parliamentarism. This is just not an adequate or accurate picture of U.S. society and history prior to 1965.

Then, what about 1965? I was alive then and more or less politically active. It wasn’t a particularly calm period, there was the Malcolm assassination, the Gulf of Tonkin escalation, the L.A. riots, the invasion of the Dominican Republic; and – various parliamentary gestures to the Black movement; the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Bills. But I missed any watershed event that marked an epoch changing passage from herrenvolk democracy to something else based on “various white privileges”.

I’m afraid the authors must be looking at the extension of the franchise to Black people in the U.S. South as the key change – although I’m ready to be corrected if this is mistaken. The voting rights bill was a byproduct of a significant struggle, but at the time it had minimal importance other than providing some slight additional support for reformist perspectives in the movement. Its continuing impact has been ambiguous and in no way marks a change in methods of capitalist rule. To argue differently is to place far too much significance on the hollow formal parliamentary aspects of bourgeois democracy. Exactly what I fear was also done with the notion of “democracy for the master race” in the other half of the definition of herrenvolk democracy.

This mode of analysis doesn’t enlighten U.S. history. While I can see some instances where it might apply, it is nowhere near an adequate explanation of the historical system of subordination and domination in this country. It doesn’t help us understand southern and western populism, the New Deal, the Eight Hour Day struggle, the Seattle General Strike, the racist socialist government in Milwaukee, etc. etc.

I question the relationship of institutionalized white skin privilege to the potential for fascism as the issue is presented in the above citation, but my differences probably go further than that. I think that it is necessary to generally reassess the role of institutionalized white skin privilege and reevaluate the strategies in which the concept is central. I will attempt to begin this in the remainder of the piece.

Since the concept of white skin privilege is part of a number of quite different strategies, not to mention much left conventional wisdom, some of which rejects a working class perspective on capitalism and revolution, I want to be clear that the points I make are with reference to the strategic approach associated with STO. I believe BTR has a generally similar approach.

Historically, white skin privilege in the U.S. functioned to incorporate white workers within the hegemony of capital by treating them as a privileged interest group even when this resulted in limitations on labor competition and kept short and middle term

wages higher than they might otherwise have been. This institution was central to some aspects of the class struggle and the development of U.S. capitalism that distinguished it from other capitalisms. With some notable and temporary exceptions, the U.S. labor movement has been pro-capitalist, divided by internal competitions and infected with a guild exclusivity to the point where it doesn't present the most elementary alternative vision of society. There has been no labor party and no continuing social democratic tendency capable of contesting for control of the government or for basic structural reform.

On the other hand there has been more social mobility in this country than in other capitalist countries. From before the civil war to nearly WWI, white workers could realistically expect to acquire property and possibly leverage themselves or their children out of the working class into the petty bourgeoisie or better. This potential provided a qualitative aspect to the privileges of white workers that augmented the quantitative advantages they also received.

For the better part of two centuries the social base provided by the white skin privilege was seen as crucial to long term capitalist stability and the ruling class made significant concessions to maintain it. These concessions were double edged and complex. While there were economic costs involved in privileging white workers, there were benefits for capital as well. The white labor mobility expedited the advance of Taylorism and Fordism, allowing and even impelling U.S. capitalism to develop labor productivity and extend its internal mass market more rapidly than its national competitors. This, in turn, increased its capacity to provide significant tangible differential benefits for white male workers and their families.

So long as capitalist development did not supercede the division of the world between oppressor and oppressed nations, and so long as "actually existing socialism" provided some semi-plausible comprehensive alternative to it, this system worked fairly well in this country. However, it obviously was not the only way that capitalist societies, including this one, contained and incorporated the class struggle and for some time it has not appeared to be any more viable than other methods. It seems to me that its unique role in this country depended on unique, and, I believe, transitory and temporary features of national development.

Things have changed. Capitalist production is effectively globalized. It has no 'outside'. Maintaining political equilibrium in particular countries, including this one, is increasingly subordinated to requirements for profit maximization and political equilibrium in a world capitalist system, a system which is no longer in any sense 'white' or even Euro-American. The loyalty of U.S. white workers is no longer worth as much and less will be paid for it. The social democratic and 'communist' challenge to global capitalism are increasingly defanged and incorporated, reducing the potential risks of incorporating potential challenges within the hegemonic framework of capital through social democratic parliamentarism. This further undermines any incentive for the ruling class to subsidize white supremacy.

These developments in the global capitalist system have not occurred without generating popular resistance that is increasingly costly to contain. There are other

squeaky wheels for the concession/repression apparatus of capital – often ones that present much more pressing risks than any possible domestic white working class insurgency. These challenges develop from the elements of secular crisis in the system ( the BTR discussion serves us poorly by avoiding this topic because it has been the site of so many left mistakes.) and have enlarged the terrain of operations and expedited the training of cadres for important neo-fascist movements which both directly and indirectly impact the politics of this country. Ruling class segments are aware of these realities and ruling class policy can best be understood as a response to them rather than a mindless demonstration of military force and financial cupidity encased in nostalgia for white power.

The concept of working class white privilege has always been susceptible to a simplifying determinism which assumes that the reality of a privileged position will be automatically reflected in a consciousness of being privileged and in a sense of superiority and entitlement to such privileges that white workers will fight to protect. This view is present in parts of the BTR discussion. For example; ‘access’ to government is translated too easily to support for government and the possibility of a felt ‘need’ for basic change is eliminated by the fact, not the consciousness, of being privileged.

White workers can feel they are superior and thus deserving of privileges, but not recognize that they have them. It is not only possible, it is common to find that the recipients of privileges feel that they are actually the victims of discrimination, and that groups with greater access to government are more critical of it and cynical about it. Thus the formula: privileged status equals cross-class alliance equals support for one’s own capitalism and ruling class is frequently disrupted in real life.

White workers in this country are no longer going to be fully buffered from the impacts of international competition and that is going to undermine their allegiance to the old system of rule. Whatever differential access white workers have to government, the benefits that result will be reduced. If the privileged sector think and feel left out and left behind – not so privileged and maybe even discriminated against - even when these may not be objectively true; it will shatter their compact with capital and open the potential for fascist developments as well as more hopeful challenges to the system.

The question between me and BTR, I think, is whether we are facing such a tipping point in the struggle or whether it is only a remote future potential. I think the former. It seems that they are more concerned with the potential for the administrative resurrection of some reactionary white nationalist regime which I can’t see having any life outside of the fevered imagination of a Buchanan or Tancredo. In any case, such a reactionary nightmare about a betrayed heroic and idyllic past would be the stuff of fascist movements. If it is viable, the commitment of white workers to the current system is not.

Apologies again for the wordiness and the lack of clarity.

*--Don Hamerquist*