

Boston: The Meaning of the Struggle

exclusive for Rouge

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The November 29 issue of Rouge carried an article dealing with the struggle by Black people in Boston to desegregate the schools. Unfortunately the article, signed by B. Carapace, gives an inaccurate picture of the nature and implications of the Boston struggle.

First, the axis of the article -- as summarized in its title "Self defense against the racists" -- obscures the real issue of the struggle, the fight by Black people for their democratic rights. Second, the article is factually inaccurate. And third, although it makes reference to the role of an undefined "far left" the article leaves out the role of the two most important tendencies in the American radical movement. It does not mention the leadership role played in Boston by the American Trotskyists -- the Socialist Workers Party and the Young Socialist Alliance. And it leaves out the scandalous role played by the American Stalinists, the Communist Party USA.

Rouge readers will be interested in knowing more about the Boston busing battle, which has become one of the central political issues in the United States today. At stake is nothing less than an attempt by the ruling class to halt any further advances by the Black freedom struggle and even to reverse some of the gains made by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

To understand the meaning of the Boston busing controversy it is necessary to look at it from a broader perspective.

Civil rights movement

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s swept away the system of "Jim Crow" laws that existed in the Southern states. These laws enforced the segregation of whites and Blacks in all areas of life, much like the apartheid system in South Africa. Their purpose was to aid in keeping Blacks a superexploited section of the labor force on the farms in rural areas of the South.

As the South became much more urbanized and industrialized following World War II, Blacks moved from rural areas to the big cities, North and South. This made the Jim Crow system of legally enforced segregation impractical. Moreover, with the rise of the colonial revolution in the 1940s and 1950s, the Jim Crow system became more embarrassing to the U.S. imperialists, who were attempting to pose as supporters of independence for the colonies of the European imperialists.

The turn of the U.S. ruling class toward dumping legalized segregation was reflected in the Supreme Court decision of 1954, which said that segregated schools for Blacks were inherently inferior and a violation of the democratic rights of Black people.

Of course the U.S. rulers would have liked to go slow in eliminating legal segregation. But the masses of Black people, encouraged by the Supreme Court decision as well as by the upsurge of the colonial revolution, surged forward in the civil rights demonstrations of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The civil rights forces were able to take advantage of temporary differences within the ruling class -- demanding that the federal government implement its Supreme Court decision against the local representatives of the ruling class who were not ready to adjust to the new situation. Major gains were won for Black people, and legalized segregation was eliminated throughout the country.

The end of the Jim Crow laws did not, however, mean the end of segregation or inequality. Blacks still lived in ghettos, were the "last hired and the first fired," and had the worst jobs and the worst schools. In fact today it is the Northern cities where de facto segregation is the most extreme.

While the capitalist rulers could make a tactical decision to end legally enforced segregation, they had no intention of ending the actual segregation of Blacks in housing, jobs, and schools. To do that would mean a complete social upheaval and a huge blow to the American capitalist class whose profits are dependent upon the super-exploitation of Black workers.

Ruling class offensive

Beginning in the late 1960s, the U.S. government began a drive to head off and push back the struggle for equal rights for Black people. One of the major battlefields was the schools. In the face of growing demands from Blacks for the right to equal educational opportunities the federal government began to retreat from extending the position embodied in the 1954 Supreme Court decision.

This is the context in which the Boston busing controversy takes place. Underlying this struggle is the simple fact that white schools are better than Black schools, in Boston as well as in every other major U.S. city. One way of equalizing educational opportunities for Blacks is to desegregate the schools. But since Blacks are segregated by housing into neighborhoods separated from whites, the only way to do this is to transport white children into schools in the Black neighborhoods and Black children into schools in the white neighborhoods.

Boston has the reputation of being one of the most liberal cities in the U.S., but as far as racial segregation is concerned, it is like all the rest.

In 1972, representatives of the Boston Black community filed suit in federal court demanding desegregation of the schools. In 1974 the federal court finally ruled in their favor, and against the Boston School Committee (the body that administers the public school system -- in the U.S., schools not under federal control, but administered by the local government). The judge's ruling said that the School Committee had "knowingly carried out a systematic program of segregation affecting all of the city's students, teachers, and school facilities and. . .intentionally brought about and maintained a dual school system."

The judge ordered the schools desegregated by means of the busing program that began last September.

What made Boston different from other cities where struggles over busing have taken place is the degree of organization of the racist and reactionary forces. The leadership for the racists is in

the local government -- the city council and the School Committee -- both of them controlled by the Democratic Party and both of them all-white.

In addition to having millions of dollars worth of funding and patronage at their disposal, these government officials have mobilized an extraparliamentary force -- weekly rallies, marches, and other activities organized by the most right-wing elements among the whites. The racist antibusing coalition is so brazen that it holds its weekly meetings in the city council chambers.

The Ku Klux Klan, the American Nazi Party, the John Birch Society and other ultraright organizations have openly sent forces into Boston to help organize the racist actions.

The racists organized to stop the buses carrying Black children to attend the relatively privileged white schools. The viciousness and violence of the racists exceeded anything that had been seen since the days of Jim Crow in the South. The confrontation in Boston finally burst into national publicity when a Black man was almost lynched by a white mob on October 7.

The change in the U.S. ruling class's attitude toward desegregation could be seen by examining the response of President Ford to the racist violence in Boston and comparing it to the response of President Eisenhower to the racist violence against Black school children in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957.

In Little Rock, the local government was openly defying the federal law on school desegregation. Eisenhower, after vacillating for several weeks, finally sent federal troops to enforce the law and protect Black children going to school. Ford, on the other hand, announced only two days after the near-lynching in Boston that busing to desegregate the schools was wrong. Ford refused to send federal troops as requested by the governor of the state, who admitted that it could not be guaranteed that the local police forces could restrain the racist mobs.

Ford's approval of the racist offensive gave the green light to reactionary forces throughout the country. His response illustrates how the decisive section of the ruling class favors a policy of blocking any further advances by the Black freedom struggle.

This is the historical dimension of the struggle that is now centered in Boston. Unfortunately, the Carapace article, by focusing on problems of self-defense, misses this broader significance.

How to fight back

To determine the revolutionary political approach in this situation, it is necessary to look at the relationship of forces. This is one of the places where the Carapace article goes wrong. Carapace writes, "Il y a beaucoup d'universités à Boston et les étudiants seraient prêts à se joindre aux piquets anti-racistes. La plupart des syndicats soutiennent les noirs verbalement. Il faudrait faire pression sur ces syndicats afin qu'ils participent à la défense des noirs et aident dans l'organisation des actions."

The fact is that the majority of students in Boston were not at all clearly on the side of the Black community, especially in the

early stages of the struggle. Many white college students as well as high school students, were openly hostile to the Black students. Among the overwhelming majority of students confusion reigned. Most students accepted some of the demagogy of the racists -- who claimed that the antibusing movement was not against Blacks but merely for the concept of "neighborhood schools."

Similarly with regard to the trade unions in Boston. Most of them were either silent on the busing controversy, or came out publicly against busing. The Boston teachers union, which has traditionally been a white job trust with close ties to the all-white School Committee, threatened to go to court to reverse the federal court's desegregation order!

For weeks -- due to the total default of the liberal leadership of the Black community -- there was no organized demonstration of opposition to the racists in Boston whatsoever -- only the resistance expressed by the courageous Black children and their parents, who continued to defy the racists by demanding the right to go to the white schools.

The task was not, as Carapace suggests, to begin organizing Black and trade union self-defense forces. The burning task of the moment was to assemble a coalition of forces capable of building a mass mobilization in support of the Black students, in a situation where the racists were highly organized but leadership among the Black community and its allies was very weak.

What was needed was a persistent, political offensive to explain the real issues and the high stakes involved and to expose the capitulation of the Democratic Party politicians to the racists -- combined with a campaign to build progressively larger mass actions by the Black community and its allies.

This was the only way to bring forth confidence and new leadership from the Black community that was needed to move the struggle forward -- as well as to lay the basis for the possibility of organized Black self-defense. From the beginning, this was the policy of the Socialist Workers Party and Young Socialist Alliance -- in contrast to every other radical group, from reformist to "far left."

SWP and YSA

Here is how the SWP explained its position, in a statement released Oct. 9 by the SWP candidate for governor of Massachusetts in the elections that took place last November.

"What is needed to begin to change the atmosphere in this city is for the Black community and all supporters of civil rights to take the offensive.

"The gains of the civil rights movement were the result of mass actions, exerting moral and political pressure on the government to act to stop racist attacks. The major civil rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s -- in Southern cities such as Little Rock and Selma -- became the focus of national and international attention and concern.

"Boston is the Little Rock and Selma of 1974.

"We appeal to backers of civil rights and opponents of racism throughout the entire country to take action in solidarity with the Black students here, and in support of the demand issued by Black leaders for federal troops. . . .

"The stakes in Boston are high, and getting higher. The outcome of the struggle here will have an impact far beyond the city of Boston. The time for action is now."

The statement also explained that, "All necessary force must be used to smash the racist offensive and guarantee the safety and constitutional rights of Black people in this city." To this end, it gave full support to the demand from the Black community for federal troops to be sent to protect Black students, and to the right of the Black community to organize its own defense by any means necessary.

The SWP used its newspaper The Militant to sound the alarm throughout the country on the importance of the struggle in Boston. 3,200 copies of the Oct. 18 issue headed "Stop Boston Lynch Mobs!" were sold on the streets of Boston in one week -- mostly to Blacks.

SWP and YSA members worked with others to build protest meetings on Boston campuses and in the Black community, and to begin to call demonstrations. At first these were small and difficult to build. But the SWP and YSA carried out this work consistently.

This patient work, in conjunction with Black students and others willing to fight finally culminated in the Dec. 14 march of 12,000. (The police estimate was 20,000.) This action began to break the monopoly that the racists had achieved in the streets and in the media. A racist counter-mobilization, held on the following day, was less than half the size.

Together with Black student leaders, the YSA and SWP have provided the leadership in organizing a student conference scheduled for Feb. 14, that will plan how to continue the mass action offensive begun on Dec. 14.

Demand for federal troops

The Carapace article is also wrong in regard to the role of the Black liberals and the "far left" groups in relation to the demand that the federal government send troops to Boston to protect the Black children.

Carapace says that rather than organizing self-defense forces, "Les dirigeants noirs réformistes ont simplement lancé un appel aux troupes fédérales pour qu'ils rétablissent l'ordre. Après les luttes des années soixante, cela ne stimulera certainement pas une mobilisation chez les noirs!! Malheureusement, même des organisations d'extrême-gauche ont repris le mot d'ordre des réformistes sans faire appel à l'auto-défense et ont ainsi freiné toutes les mobilisations."

This is wrong on all counts. First of all, the demand was not for federal troops to "restore order," but for troops to go into the white racist strongholds and disperse the racist mobs, so that the Black school children could enter the white schools in safety.

This demand is not "reformist," as Carapace implies. Revolutionists support the law on busing to desegregate the schools; the

demand for troops is simply a demand that the government enforce the law. This is completely principled. It would be absurd to support the law, but refuse to support its enforcement.

Furthermore, it was not the Black liberals who championed this demand. Only a few Black politicians momentarily called for federal troops immediately after the near-lynching that took place October 7; but they dropped the demand like a hot potato.

The Congressional Black Caucus (a grouping of all the Black members of the U.S. Congress) refused to raise this demand, despite an appeal to them from a coalition of Black organizations in Boston to use their authority to get federal troops sent.

The call for troops came out of the Black community itself -- especially from the Black students and their parents facing the racist mobs.

Each day the buses carrying Black children, who have refused to be intimidated by the racists, are pummeled with bricks, rocks, and iron pipes. The bus routes are lined with racist posters and slogans like "Kill niggers." The only force preventing the racist mobs from stopping the buses and attacking the Black students are the city police, who ride alongside the buses each day on motorcycles.

When the police proved unable or unwilling to restrain the racist mobs, Blacks throughout the community began calling for the federal government to send troops to enforce the desegregation order.

This demand had also been voiced by militants who participated in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, when massive pressure by the antiracist movement forced the federal government to send troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to protect Black children going into white schools, and to Selma, Alabama, in 1965 to protect a civil rights march.

The truth is that the liberals were afraid of the radical implications of this demand, which is to call for the use of any force necessary to stop the racists. And they feared the political sharpness of putting the federal government on the spot.

Carapace argues that the call for federal troops discourages the organization of Black self-defense. This is false. The two demands are complementary.

The organization of self-defense by a section of the working-class movement or an oppressed national minority arises out of a mass struggle around economic or political demands. The organization of self-defense does not mean abandoning demands on the government. This was illustrated in the experience of the Southern civil-rights movement, where the beginnings of self-defense of the Black community, and demands for protection of demonstrations and Black students by federal troops, went hand in hand.

Black self-defense

This was also illustrated by what took place in Columbia Point, a small Black area of Boston. For a short time this small section of the Black community began to organize a rudimentary form of self-defense, that is, "observation patrols" to protect the community from

white vigilantes who rode through the Black apartment complex firing their guns at windows.

However, in the main struggle in Boston -- the struggle over busing -- the tactical problems of defense are much greater than in the defense of a section of the Black community like Columbia Point. The problem is not how to protect an area densely populated by Black people, but how to protect the buses carrying Black children into the white racist strongholds.

In this situation -- a life-and-death matter for the Black students -- most Black people correctly saw that only an armed force comparable in size and strength to federal troops would be capable of protecting the small groups of Black children scattered throughout numerous schools many miles from the Black community. To talk about organizing a non-existent Black and labor self-defense force, under conditions where for several months it had proved impossible to organize even a modest-sized demonstration to support the Black students, is to ignore the realities of the struggle in Boston.

"Far left" groups

Contrary to the Carapace article, none of the so-called "far-left" groups called for federal troops. The sectarian and Maoist groups generally denounced this demand as unprincipled. This stance showed how far out of touch these groups are with the real situation. The SWP and YSA backed the demand. The CP and YWLL gave it token support at one point.

The "far left" groups were not, however, the most vociferous opponents of intervention by federal armed forces. The most vociferous were the racists.

The relevance of the demand for troops was confirmed dramatically three days before the Dec. 14 demonstration, when a white mob of several hundred people held Black children captive inside South Boston High School for four hours, literally screaming for blood and trying to get into the school. After a violent confrontation with the mob, the police were finally able to get the students into buses and out of the white neighborhood.

A Revolutionary Perspective

While it is necessary to make demands upon the government, it would be wrong to place any confidence whatsoever in the capitalist government to meet the needs of the Black people. The only force that the masses of Black people can rely upon is their own mass power and that of their allies.

What the SWP and YSA have attempted to do from the beginning is to build up a mass movement in Boston that can spearhead a nationwide political counteroffensive against the racist drive. This perspective has had to be carried out against the policies of both the liberal capitalist politicians and the so-called "far left" groups on each of the most important questions: 1) the need to focus the struggle on keeping the buses moving to enforce the desegregation plan, in direct opposition to the racists, 2) the need to put the federal government on the spot with the demand for federal troops and all force necessary against the racists, and 3) the need for mass action. This perspective has the merit of putting the struggle in

proper focus so that the question of self-defense arises naturally and on the correct basis -- mass struggle.

In fighting for this perspective, the SWP and YSA have found allies throughout the country among militant young Blacks as well as trade unionists, Chicanos, and others. A central point of discussion at the national convention of the YSA Dec. 28 to Jan 1 was on how to move forward the nationwide solidarity movement in support of the Boston Black community.

Default of U.S. Stalinists

In contrast to the energetic campaign carried out by the American Trotskyist movement against the Boston racists, the Communist Party USA avoided treating the Boston events in an urgent or dramatic manner. One reason was that the busing confrontation arose during an election period, and the CP policy is to cover up for the liberal Democrats who were capitulating to the racists in Boston. Furthermore, they didn't relish denouncing Ford too sharply just before he was off to meet with Brezhnev in Vladivostok.

The default of the Stalinists in the Boston struggle was epitomized by their boycott of the Dec. 14 demonstration -- the largest action thus far against the racists. The Stalinist youth group, the Young Workers Liberation League, held its convention in Philadelphia on the same weekend as the Dec. 14 demonstration. Stalinist leader Angela Davis demonstratively addressed the YWLL convention on Dec. 14 rather than attending the anti-racist action.

The YWLL decided to go ahead with their convention as scheduled despite an open letter from the Young Socialist Alliance urging them to postpone it in order not to conflict with the demonstration.

The struggle to defeat the racist offensive in Boston serves as a test of all the organizations on the left in the U.S. The leadership role being played by the American Trotskyist movement and the blow that has been dealt to the Stalinists, are significant in the context of the future of the class struggle in the United States. The struggle of Black people for democratic rights will be central to the American socialist revolution.

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