

BRITISH PASSPORT



UNITED

**RACIAL OPPRESSION:
HOW TO FIGHT IT**

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RACIAL OPPRESSION : HOW TO FIGHT IT

■ In the closing weeks of 1978 the Special Patrol Group (SPG), the paramilitary strike force of the Metropolitan Police, began large-scale manoeuvres in South London. The main targets of police harassment were West Indian youth. Patrolling the area in armoured cars and in plain clothes, squads of armed police conducted spot searches and interrogated people in the street. As one local newspaper described it, 'The Brixton operation involved 150 officers, 120 SPG men and 30 detectives from Scotland Yard. During the month they made 430 arrests and charges and questioned 1000 people...' (*South London Press*, 8 December 1978). After a few weeks of terrorising blacks in Brixton, the SPG moved on to Hackney in East London. Once again its purpose was to intimidate the black community.

Commando assaults are only the most dramatic aspect of the state's offensive against ethnic minorities. The offensive gains its everyday legitimacy from a much more insidious weapon: immigration controls.

Immigration controls are not simply aimed at the physical exclusion of foreign workers. They act as a constant threat to the black population - to their right to work and live here. The function of immigration controls is to isolate blacks socially and politically.

In response to the capitalist recession the bourgeoisie in all advanced capitalist countries has stepped up the oppression of foreign workers. In Holland, strict

quotas on work permits have brought immigration to a standstill. The French police has instituted spot checks for immigration credentials on the Paris underground. Hundreds of thousands of Germany's 'guest-workers' have been sent back to Turkey and Yugoslavia. In every advanced capitalist country ethnic minorities have borne the brunt of rising unemployment and deteriorating conditions at work.

The official labour movement has not resisted these attacks; indeed it has often encouraged them. In the US the AFL-CIO, the American equivalent of the TUC, blames foreign workers for undermining trade union rights and causing unemployment. In Holland the unions offered no opposition when restrictions on immigration were introduced. The Swedish TUC actively opposes immigration and demands that local labour should have the first option on jobs. One of the major French trade union federations, the CFDT, is happy to sympathise with foreign workers - so long as no support is required. It has not resisted the state's attempts to repatriate North African workers.

In Britain trade union leaders are vehement in their denunciations of the National Front (NF). They are always ready to give sermons on the evils of racialism. Yet when it comes to supporting ethnic minorities against the repressive measures of the state, the official labour movement falls silent. Recently, however, a major trade union bureaucrat broke this silence. Reporting on a building workers' strike, the *Financial Times* quoted George Henderson, national construction secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), as suggesting that 'during periods of industrial disruption or unemployment the Government should adopt a system of sending "guest-workers" home as some EEC countries did' (*Financial Times*, 19 September 1978). 'Send them back' said this trade union official, echoing the very organisation that he and his colleagues condemn.

The fact that an official of Britain's largest union can issue such a blatantly racist statement with impunity reveals the dimensions of the problem. Immigration controls are the respectable face of racism in the British labour movement. Accepting them means accepting the right of the bourgeoisie to foster racial divisions in the working class - to fragment and weaken the struggles of the labour movement. That is why a determined challenge to immigration controls is essential if employers' attacks on the jobs and living standards of the whole working class are to be met with united resistance.

This pamphlet, locates the origins of racial oppression in the social relations of capitalist production. It shows that the pattern of immigration and the terms of the oppression of ethnic minorities are determined by the changing needs of capital accumulation. The Labour Party and the trade unions cannot consistently fight racism. Racism can only be fought by class conscious workers, workers who recognise the political importance of the issue and who see the urgency of a campaign to smash all immigration controls.

The political struggle against immigration controls is an indispensable weapon for winning workers to the defence of the black community. Opposition to legalised racism undermines the ability of individual racists and right-wing organisations to terrorise ethnic minorities. The objective of *Racial oppression: how to fight it* is to aid the defence of the working class against all aspects of racism.

IMPERIALISM AND RACIAL OPPRESSION

Workers' jobs and livelihoods are determined by capital accumulation. The continuation of capitalism depends on the reproduction of a class which owns nothing but its ability to work. Because the working class is forced to sell its labour-power it is dependent on capital. Capital dictates the terms on which labour is employed: 'the labourer does not employ the means of production, but the means of production employ the labourer' (K Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974, p603).

Capitalist society does not provide jobs according to social need; the amount of labour employed depends entirely on the requirements of capital accumulation. When production expands rapidly, capitalism can provide relatively full employment and often experiences labour shortages. In periods of crisis workers are thrown out of their jobs to form a reserve army of unemployed labour. This reserve army is vital for capital. The existence of a pool of unemployed workers puts pressure on those in jobs to accept reduced wages and deteriorating working conditions. The reserve army weakens the working class as a whole.

The expansion of capitalism into a system of world domination - imperialism - has had a profound impact on the working class. As advanced capitalist countries have come to oppress backward ones, divisions have been created in the international working class. Imperialism is not content with enforcing extremely low wages in the nations it oppresses. Workers are imported from these countries to be exploited in the

imperialist nations themselves.

As production in advanced capitalist countries expands, labour shortages arise and lowly paid immigrants are drawn in to supplement the labour market. In times of crisis immigrants are among the first to be made redundant. They act as an important component of the reserve army of labour.

To regulate workers' movements capitalism introduces immigration laws. In periods when capital needs to import labour the state removes restrictions and may even actively recruit foreign workers. But when this supplement to the indigenous labour force is no longer needed, immigration controls are made increasingly restrictive. In the boom which followed the Second World War millions of immigrant workers were brought into Europe. With the recession of the 'seventies every European country has tightened its immigration laws. In the past five years 20 per cent of Europe's migrant workers have been ordered back to their countries of origin.

Immigration legislation ratifies the divisions that imperialism establishes in the international working class. Large-scale immigration into advanced capitalist countries has led to the reproduction of national and racial divisions inside the imperialist nations themselves. Immigration legislation reflects these splits in the working class: it always contains directives which relate to specific nationalities and races. *Immigration laws institutionalise racism.*

JOBS FOR BLACK WORKERS

■ In the 'fifties and early 'sixties the British economy underwent a rapid expansion. The chronic unemployment of the pre-war period virtually disappeared. Between 1954 and 1957 there were more job vacancies than workers unemployed in Britain and employers complained of labour shortages. The solution to this problem was to import black workers. One company manager explained:

'We began employing coloured workers in 1956. You couldn't get a good white worker unless you were prepared to pay over the odds, and good coloured people are better than bad white people. You can't get good white people to do the menial tasks that have to be done in any foundry, not even floating workers like the Irish.' (Cited in Peter Wright, *The coloured worker in British industry*, Oxford University Press, 1968, p42)

In Britain the post-war boom was shorter and more limited than in Germany, Japan or the US. British

capital could barely keep up with its competitors; investment and productivity levels were low and Britain's share of world manufacturing output fell drastically. The growth of the British economy was uneven. Some sectors, such as light engineering, chemicals and the motor industry, expanded rapidly. Others, such as textiles, the nationalised industries and the social services, did not participate in the benefits of the boom. Immigrant workers were mainly recruited into these weaker sectors of the economy, where bad working conditions went alongside low wage levels.

In the more dynamic sectors of British industry workers were able to win back in increased wages a portion of the wealth they created. Relatively full employment strengthened the bargaining position of the trade unions. In the mid 'fifties many workers won pay increases every six months: faced with labour shortages and strong trade unions, employers had to pay up. At the time *The Economist* called this 'the most graphic and disturbing feature of the British economy' ('Wages or prosperity', *The Economist*, 20 August 1955, p595). One of the reasons why wage rises in the advanced sectors of the economy were disturbing to the bourgeoisie was that workers tended to gravitate from the more backward, low wage sectors to better-paid jobs elsewhere. Backward sectors such as metal manufacture, transport and other public services became particularly short of labour. So, as the boom proceeded, employers in these areas were forced to look overseas to fulfil their needs. In fact the continued expansion of capital as a whole depended on the employment of foreign workers.

For industries reliant on the employment of a low wage workforce, immigrants from British imperialism's 'Commonwealth' provided the perfect source of labour. Blacks entered industries in which the large investments required to increase productivity and maintain competitiveness were not available. Low profitability necessitated low wages. The public services also employed immigrant workers in substantial numbers. Black workers became vital to the running of these wholly unprofitable sectors of the economy.

The textile industry is a good example of a declining sector which has come to depend on immigrant labour. After the Second World War the industry relied for its very survival on state intervention. The strategy of the government was to assist the centralisation of the industry into larger units. In 1959 40 per cent of looms were scrapped; subsequently the textile sector

enjoyed a high level of capital investment as it cut back on its workforce. The restoration of profitable production demanded intensified exploitation. It was here that blacks came in useful to the employers.

Wages have been held down in the textile industry for years. Today rates of pay run at less than 80 per cent of the national average (Unit for Manpower Studies, *The role of immigrants in the labour market*, London, 1978, p50). In addition the high proportion of capital invested in plant and machinery induced mill-owners to keep their plants running continuously. Regular night-shifts are widespread, complete with bonus rates that are only two-thirds of those in comparable industries such as engineering. Today workers are required to operate a larger number of machines at night than on the day-shift - often without safety officers, maintenance men or sweepers. Given these conditions it is no surprise to find that in textile strongholds like Yorkshire and Humberside blacks today make up 18 per cent of the total workforce and 25 per cent of male workers.

In the public sector, and especially in transport and health, large numbers of blacks were recruited during the 'fifties. Here the government vigorously suppressed the wages of its own employees in an effort to hold down state expenditure. As British workers gravitated towards the higher wage sections of the economy, immigrants took their place in the public services. In 1955, for instance, 16 000 workers left the railways, forcing the government to turn to the Six Counties of Ireland and to the West Indies for help. For the ruling class the problem of staff shortages in the state sector became so severe that the government set up agencies in Barbados to sign workers up for London Transport and the National Health Service (NHS). By 1971 immigrants made up 12.7 per cent of the NHS workforce; in London the figure was more than 30 per cent. The maintenance of the NHS depended on the labour of black nurses, many of whom were imported already trained.

Blacks are not only concentrated in the most backward and unproductive sectors of the economy: within these sectors they generally receive the lowest wages and work the longest hours. In many textile factories the permanent night shift is entirely composed of blacks. Courtauld, the largest textile firm in Britain, provides a striking example. Reporting on a strike for equal pay and trade union recognition by black workers at one of Courtauld's subsidiaries, the radical black journal *Race Today* noted how blacks faced the worst conditions:

'While white workers signed a contract of employment that gave a standard 40-hour working week, the Asians were required to sign for a 60-hour week basic. Many in fact put in a 72-hour or even 80-hour working week.' (Race Today, February 1974)

The oppression of black workers is reinforced by their isolation from the organised labour movement. This isolation presents difficulties for trade union organisation and makes black workers particularly vulnerable to attacks from employers and the state.

BLACKS UNDER ATTACK

■ The international crisis of capitalism has had a particularly severe impact on Britain. The decline of British industry on the world market has forced the ruling class to take stringent measures to restore profitability. One of the most vital of these is the launching of a major attack on the trade unions. Capitalism can only be regenerated if working class living standards are forced down.

Until now the bourgeoisie has avoided an all-out confrontation with the labour movement. Instead it prefers to pick off one section of the working class at a time - starting with the weakest. The subordinate position of black workers in Britain ensures that they are the first to feel the effects of the bourgeois assault.

Blacks out of work

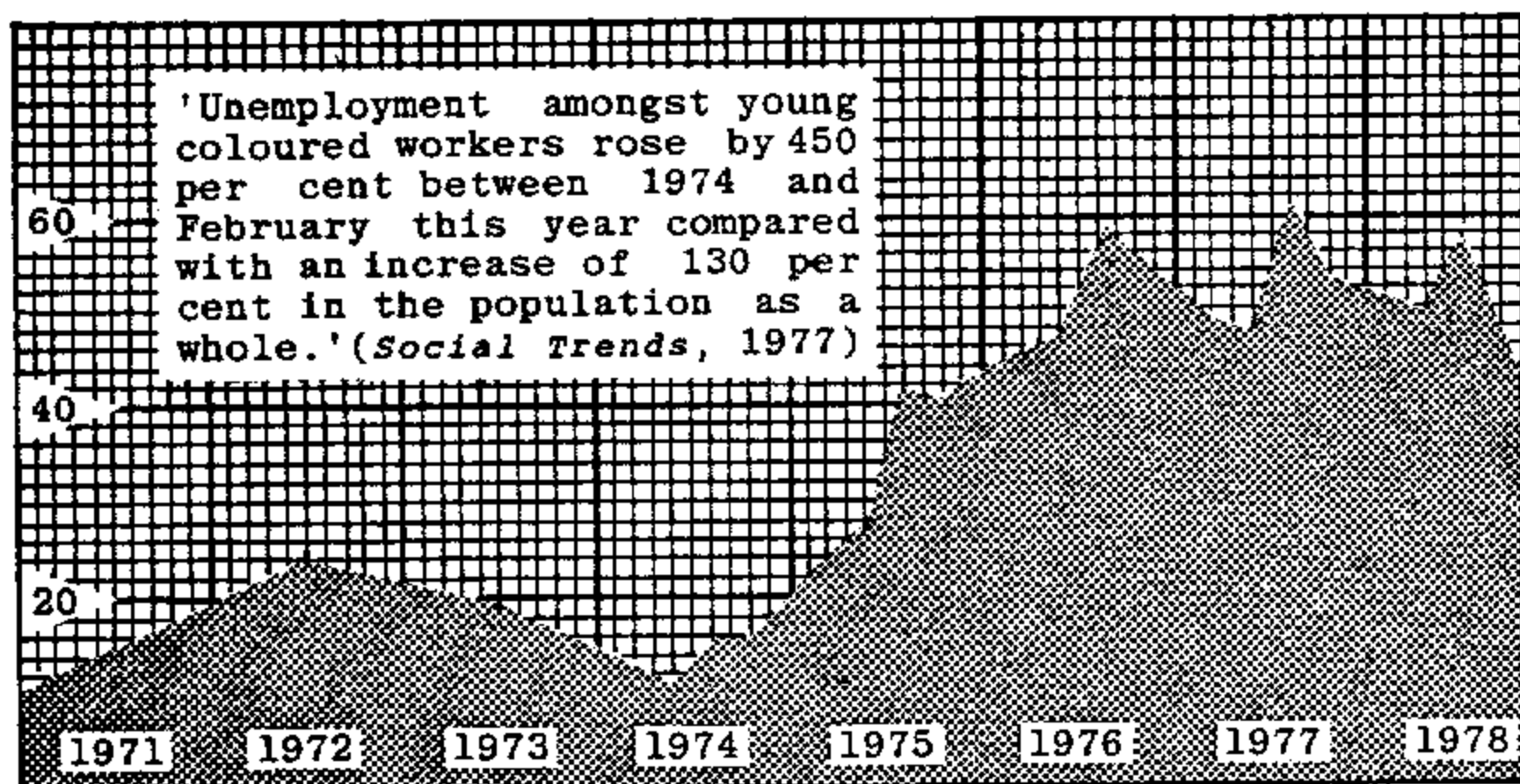
■ The recession of the 'seventies has been accompanied by a massive increase in unemployment. One and a half million people are now out of work - the highest figure since the Second World War. As unemployment has increased, blacks have come to make up a disproportionately large component of the reserve army.

Even in the relatively prosperous late 'fifties and early 'sixties the vulnerable position of blacks in production meant that they were not immune from unemployment. Commenting on the problems West Indians were having getting jobs in 1957, a government survey of the time noted that 'difficulty was experienced by some of the workers in obtaining employment quickly, particularly in areas where coloured communities had already gathered, mainly because opportunities for unskilled employment were not so plentiful as they had been formerly' (Ministry of Labour and National Service, *Report for the year 1957*, Cmnd 468, July 1958, p36). Part of the reason for high unemployment among

blacks was their concentration in the most backward and unprofitable sectors of the economy. But there was more to it than that: the employing class understood that the insecure legal position of immigrants and their isolation from the labour movement made it that much easier to expel them from production. Today it exploits the vulnerable position of ethnic minorities to make thousands redundant.

Black unemployment 1971-8 (thousands)

Sources: *Social Trends*, *Department of Employment Gazette*



During the present crisis the rate of black unemployment has rocketed. Employers have taken advantage of the seniority rule - 'last in, first out' - to discriminate against ethnic minorities, with the consequence that the disparity between unemployment rates for blacks and those for whites grows monthly. In some areas blacks constitute as much as one tenth of the total out of work. Black youths searching for jobs are turned away by employers in favour of white applicants; youth unemployment among blacks in Lewisham, for example, is three times as high as among whites.

The deterioration of black employment

High unemployment is only one feature of the attacks on the black working class. Compromised by their precarious legal status, many black workers have been forced by the threat of unemployment to accept worsening wages and conditions. Few blacks have much chance of promotion or of finding an alternative job. This is how one black worker at the Ford Motor Company explains how promotion works at his factory:

'In "D" grade it sort of stops for black people. Well white people do work on the line. But mostly it is through choice, or else because you can't get a job anywhere else. But black people find themselves trapped in there. Because it is unskilled work. And not having the experience although you put in 5 days a week there, when you go to get another job the odds are against you getting it.' (Quoted in *Why black people should support the Ford strike*, Black Socialist Alliance, 1978, p1)

Blacks face these sorts of prospects in every industry. Black workers are confined to the lowest paid, most unpleasant jobs - jobs which white workers are reluctant to accept. Employers know how to take advantage of this, as the example of the state-owned British Steel Corporation shows. The problems BSC has in getting white workers to do menial work are so great, a report has noted, that they 'might well lead to the proportion of immigrants in low level jobs increasing' (Unit for Manpower Studies, op cit, p47).

Another sphere in which the working conditions of blacks have been hit by the crisis is the NHS. Already tied to the lowest paid ancillary and nursing jobs, workers from ethnic minorities experience the effects of cuts in state expenditure and 'cash limits' first hand. As scores of hospitals have been closed an increased workload has fallen on those remaining open. Foreign nurses, orderlies and cleaners now fetch and carry more as patients are crowded into cramped wards and annexes. They face longer hours, harder work and mounting chaos as basic facilities decay.

State repression

Today the British state wages nothing less than a war on ethnic minorities. Its immigration laws not only police the movement of migrant workers more and more brutally; by regulating the employment of immigrant workers and restricting their political rights they supply it with a method of internal control.

To govern the supply of labour from the Commonwealth the ruling class introduced the 1962 Immigration Act. Under this Act the entry of blacks into Britain was restricted to those with an employment voucher. Vouchers were issued only to those migrants who had a job lined up or a skill that was in demand. Yet that was not enough. The vice of immigration control was tightened still further as the crisis intensified.

In the late 'sixties, a growing clamour arose from Labour Party politicians for more immigration controls. In 1968 the Labour Government rushed through in one day

legislation specifically directed against Kenyan Asians. This trend towards explicitly racist restrictions on immigration culminated in the 1971 Immigration Act, which changed the status of black immigrants - and black immigrants only - from that of potential settlers to temporary migrants with no right of residence. Today this legislation requires that all new black immigrants have to get their work permits renewed annually at the discretion of the state. Workers no longer needed by capital are refused permits and left with the choice of being thrown out of the country or working illegally.

Apart from being used to expel workers the 1971 Act is employed to ensure behaviour 'conducive to the public good' (1971 Immigration Act, chapter 77, HMSO, 1978, p5). The threat of being deported for opposing the norms of bourgeois society deters many migrants from playing a full role in trade unions. Employers have used it to good effect in areas which depend on low-wage immigrant labour. The denial of trade union recognition at Grunwick's film processing factory and at Garners Steak Houses are just two examples.

In 1978 more than 5000 men and women arriving at Heathrow airport were held at Harmondsworth detention centre. A further 1700 were stopped at Gatwick airport. Yet 'immigration' laws are not just used against people coming into Britain, but against blacks who have been here for years. Since 1972 Britain has had a special unit, based at Scotland Yard, which collects information on 'suspected illegal immigrants'. This merely provides the pretext for raids and the use of other forms of terror against the black community.

To be black is to be under suspicion. The state gives short shrift to blacks notifying it of racist assaults: 'In a number of cases, including even the murder investigation following the recent death of Altab Ali, the question of possible illegal immigration was immediately raised with witnesses trying to report evidence of racial attacks to the Police' (*Blood on the streets*, report by Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council on racial attacks in East London, 19 September 1978, p8). Although almost half the black people in Britain were born here, until proved otherwise all are illegal immigrants.

The state goes to any lengths in its systematic campaign against blacks. It has used new forms of surveillance, such as the video cameras which provided the only evidence against the 'Lewisham 23' last year. It has disinterred the 1824 Vagrancy Act to arrest blacks 'on suspicion of loitering with intent to

commit an arrestable offence' and to convict them on the evidence of two police officers. In 1977 and 1978 some 40 per cent of those held under this, the notorious 'Sus' law, were black. Blacks were made the official target by the racist outcry against 'mugging' that was orchestrated by the state.

State oppression of blacks is mediated both by Race Relations legislation and by institutions such as the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE). This aspect of the state's offensive is designed to eliminate the more extreme manifestations of racism in order to endow everyday oppression with respectability. In this way a small section of blacks has been integrated into the state apparatus itself.

Most blacks have rightly put little faith in the ability of these measures to defend their interests. They have found that turning to institutions such as the CRE only reinforces their oppression in a more subtle way. Earlier this year a group of Bangladeshi workers at British Steel, Scunthorpe, were refused re-employment on their return from holiday because they failed a newly introduced language test. But the CRE secured them a settlement; instead of redundancy, management offered them jobs - at a lower grade, of course. As always the 'neutral' stance of the CRE only aided the capitalist class. Even the most liberal arms of the state apparatus can offer blacks nothing more than an apology for their oppression.

TRADE UNIONISM AND DIVISIONS IN THE WORKING CLASS

'That immediate steps be taken to abolish all underpaid Asiatic labour in the mercantile marine, and that preference of employment be given, first to British white, and secondly to British coloured, in preference to Chinamen.' (Resolution passed unanimously at the 1919 TUC. Cited in *The Seaman*, 19 September 1919, p1)

Trade unions and the capitalist labour market

Trade unions are defensive organisations of the working class. They arise spontaneously from the conflicts generated by the conditions of employment in capitalist society. Trade unions aim to unite workers to defend themselves against their employers: their function is to mitigate the effects of capitalist exploitation by seeking the best possible terms for the sale of their members' labour-power.

The capacity of the trade unions to protect workers' living standards depends on the stability of the capitalist labour market - a stability which is continually undermined by the process of capital accumulation itself. While the capitalist system unites workers in production, it always divides them along industrial, sexual, national and racial lines. As a result workers compete against each other on the labour market.

It is for this reason that the unity provided by trade unions is only a partial one. Trade unions organise workers only in relation to a particular group of employers - they cannot unite the working class as a whole against capital. To any particular union, workers in other trades and workers on the streets are at best of no concern and at worst a threat. That is why organised workers often see those who are unorganised - the unemployed, women and immigrants - as endangering their jobs. The isolation of the weaker sections of the working class from the trade unions hinders the working class in its struggle.

British trade unions have always been wary of potential competitors on the labour market. A generation after the TUC's scurrilous attack on foreign seamen the attitude of the official trade union movement to immigrant workers remained unchanged. In the post-war TUC's first debate on Commonwealth immigrants, a delegate could only see West Indians as a menace to jobs. He evoked the bitterness of the 'thirties: 'When unemployment ravaged this country and unemployed people desperate for work flooded into those more fortunate parts of the country where there was some work, they were received with uneasiness, suspicion and some hostility' (*TUC annual conference report*, 1955, p456). Immigrants, like the unemployed, were seen not as fellow workers but as a threat to the organised labour movement.

Even in a period of rising wages the unions could not overcome the divisions in the working class created by capital. In times of crisis they often act to reinforce these divisions.

Imperialism and social-chauvinism

■ The growth of the trade unions in the wake of imperialist expansion has given a particular significance to national and racial divisions in the working class. The rapid rise of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century created a gulf between the workers of advanced and backward capitalist countries.

In the advanced capitalist countries a privileged layer of the working class emerged which identified its interests with imperialism. Politically this section came to dominate the institutions of the labour movement; it played an important role in fostering pro-imperialist ideology in the working class. Today the response of the official labour movement to the entry of foreign workers still bears the stamp of this aristocracy of labour.

Lenin explained the affinity between the labour aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in terms of their common interest in plundering the colonies. Referring to what he characterised as the 'parasitism' of rich imperialist countries, he argued that oppressor nations were obliged to 'bribe a part of their workers with higher wages while shamelessly and unrestrainedly exploiting the labour of "cheap" foreign workers' (V I Lenin, *Collected Works (CW)*, Vol 26, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972, p168). The identification of the labour aristocracy with imperialist expansion led it to look upon migrants from the colonies with contempt.

Embracing the interests of the labour aristocracy, the leaders of the British working class tried to reconcile workers to imperialism. Unlike the ruling class, they did not advocate a policy of naked imperialist expansion but instead presented something more subtle: a colonial policy couched in socialist rhetoric - a positive colonial policy. Rather than opposing the oppression of the colonies as such, they sought to moderate the effects of imperialism. Dreaming of a 'Socialist Empire', the labour leadership destroyed the anti-imperialist potential of the working class.

In 1875 the TUC proposed enlightened British legislation for India: the Government was requested to protect Indian workers against rogue employers by a Factory Act modelled on British lines. By offering the workers of oppressed nations the possibility of 'progressive' imperialist reforms, the TUC came to pursue a policy of *social-chauvinism* - socialism in words, chauvinism in deeds. It served as a justification for colonial domination.

In practice, the labour leadership's acquiescence to imperialism meant the subordination of independent working class politics to an all-class national consensus. This development was not confined to Britain. All over Europe the parties of the working class abandoned workers' interests in favour of the nation. The acceptance that these organisations gave

to imperialism led to their support for the First World War. Workers fought one another in the name of the nation; millions died. Today as competition on the world market threatens to turn into military conflict the chauvinism of the Labour leadership continues to tie British workers to their own national bourgeoisie.

Immigration and the labour movement

■ 'The reformists' attempt to win working class support for imperialism was inevitably divisive. Workers' anger was diverted from the bourgeoisie and directed against foreigners. In 1907, at the Congress of the reformist Second International in Stuttgart, a delegate from Australia argued:

'The problem of immigration is greater for Australia than for most of the other countries represented here, because there the wages of the indigenous workers are higher than those of the others. The capitalists therefore attempt to import Asian workers as scabs. White immigrant workers organise in trade unions and do not depress Australian workers' wages. The Australian workers' party therefore wants to keep out all those workers who cannot be expected to adopt the customs of the whites. Obviously those are the Asians.... Certainly we all want a general brotherhood of men, but until we achieve it we must protect our indigenous workers, so that they do not become easy prey for the capitalists.'
(Cited in P Grohmann et al, eds, *The international socialist congress at Stuttgart, 1907*, published in German, Stuttgart, 1977, pp113-14)

While they championed the 'general brotherhood of men' the social-chauvinists clamoured for state curbs on immigration. For workers from the colonies brotherhood would have to wait.

By condoning racism the social-chauvinist leaders of the British working class ensured that immigrants became isolated from the trade union movement. At the turn of the century trade union reaction to Jewish immigrants helped to consign them to savage exploitation in the sweat shops of East London. Ben Tillett, who was in the vanguard of organising unskilled workers in Britain, had an attitude to Jewish immigrants which was typical of the nationalist prejudices which imbued the labour movement. He is reputed to have greeted a group of Jewish refugees in the port of London with the words 'Yes, you are our brothers and we will do our duty by you. But we wish you had not come' (cited in W J Fishman, *East End Jewish radicals 1875-1914*, Duckworth, London, 1975, p78).

With attitudes like these prevalent in the unions the reactionary leadership of the labour movement had no

qualms about backing Britain's first immigration legislation - the Aliens Act of 1905. The history of the British trade unions has shown again and again that militancy is quite compatible with chauvinist support for immigration control. When, following the Second World War, the Labour Government imported Italians and Poles to alleviate labour shortages in the coal industry, the miners - one of the most combative sections of the working class - protested. Championing the chauvinist cause in the House of Commons, Communist Party MP Willie Gallacher said he was 'prepared to use all his power and authority to put the Poles back in their own country' (*The Times*, 13 February 1947). Referring to those who favoured recruiting immigrants to the pits, his party colleague Arthur Horner, general secretary of the National Union of Miners, was reported to have told government leaders that 'Britain depended for its coal upon the goodwill of the miners and if anything was done to defeat the purpose of the miners then they might get Poles or displaced persons but not coal' ('Mr A Horner opposed to foreigners', *The Times*, 24 February 1947). As always, chauvinism damaged British workers just as it did immigrants. In return for restrictions on the rights of Polish workers, the NUM accepted productivity increases, closures and declining wages in the coalfields.

Trade unions are of vital importance to the defence of the working class, for they help to preserve workers' living standards. But the narrow political scope of trade unions, together with the strength of nationalism in the labour movement ensures that immigrants are often greeted with hostility and state controls on their movements are endorsed. Trade unions are therefore unable to lead an offensive against the system that divides workers along national lines. A united working class defence against capitalism demands revolutionary politics.

RACISM: THE LABOUR MOVEMENT'S RESPONSE

National solutions to the crisis

■ The reformist leadership of the working class has won considerable support for its strategy to solve Britain's crisis. This strategy does not challenge capitalism; it seeks a way out of the crisis which leaves the existing relations of production intact. The crisis of capitalism is presented by the Labour Party as a problem facing British society as a whole. According to this approach all sections of society have a common interest - the national interest - in resolving it.

By equating the interests of the exploiter with those of the exploited, the Labour Party helps to mobilise the working class behind the interests of the bourgeoisie. The result of the acceptance of Labour's arguments by the trade unions has been that the Government's attack on jobs and wages has gone largely unchallenged. Over the last five years Labour's nationalism has had a debilitating effect on the struggles of the British working class.

The view that the problems facing British workers are caused not by the capitalist system but by foreign competition is influential in the official trade union movement. Yet once unions make common cause with the capitalists and share their aim of restoring the competitiveness of British industry they cannot defend workers against the measures that are required to achieve this. The way trade union officials tried to combat the proposal to close the Dunlop plant at Speke reveals the reactionary consequences of national solutions to the crisis. John Miller, national secretary of the TGWU, tried to defend the Speke workers like this:

'We accept that we are in a recession and that there is a need to streamline the industry....It may not be possible to save every one of the 2,400 jobs at Speke but we believe there is a viable alternative to closing the factory.' (*Financial Times*, 20 February 1979)

Instead of fighting for the independent interests of the working class, the leadership of the TGWU wanted to 'streamline' British capitalism. The 'viable alternative' put forward by the trade unions was not unequivocal opposition to redundancy but...a plea to the Government to restrict tyre imports.

The widespread demand for import controls reveals how the unions want to save British industry and British jobs - whatever the cost to workers abroad. This is shown by the TGWU's recent move to block the import of Japanese trucks. Remarking on the threat to jobs posed by 'the Japanese', Tom Searle, secretary of Bridgewater and Taunton branch, stated 'By making our position absolutely clear at this earliest possible stage we hope to stop them doing with trucks as they have done with cars - selling them at the expense of British workmen's jobs' (quoted in *The Times*, 12 May 1978). Blaming 'them' for the effects of British capital's decline in the world economy, trade union officials like Searle not only divert workers from resistance to home-grown British capitalism but launch chauvinist attacks on foreign workers. Controls on imports from another country jeopardise the jobs of

workers in that country. The call for import controls exemplifies how the Labour Party's nationalist economic strategy exacerbates divisions in the proletariat and strengthens the hold of imperialism over the international working class.

From demanding restrictions on the import of foreign goods it is but a short step to demand restrictions on the entry of foreign workers. The British trade union movement has never questioned immigration controls; indeed, it has been a consistent supporter of them.

Immigration controls and the labour movement

Trade union leaders regularly declare their opposition to racism. In a statement issued in the summer of 1978, Len Murray, general secretary of the TUC, and Bill Keys, chairman of the TUC Equal Rights Committee, proclaimed their outrage at the violent attacks suffered by the Bengali community in East London:

'We in the TUC will do all in our power to support those who are working for peace, tolerance and fairness. The trade union Movement is united in looking after the interests of working people - all working people; and we oppose all forms of discrimination.' (*Race relations in East London*, TUC leaflet, 1978)

But what was the TUC's practical contribution to the defence of ethnic minorities? At the 1978 TUC congress, the General Council report noted that its Hotel and Catering Committee had met Merlyn Rees, the Home Secretary, to discuss the problem of migrant workers. This was its record of the proceedings:

'For their part, the Committee recognised that on the one hand there was a problem of unauthorised employment of visitors from overseas which undermined the development of collective bargaining and the terms and conditions of employment within the industry. On the other hand, effective ways of prevention and detection had to be found which would not increase racial tension or the opportunity for racial discrimination.' (*TUC General Council Report*, 1978, p341)

For the TUC the appalling conditions and wages faced by workers in hotels and restaurants are not a consequence of capitalism but the fault of 'unauthorised' foreign employees. As soon as the official labour movement is confronted with the reality of the crisis its outrage at racism disappears. The leadership of the trade unions encourages British workers to line up against ethnic minorities. Though the number of work permits issued for the catering trade has been cut by more than 4000 since 1975, the TUC's Committee is still not

satisfied: it calls on the bourgeois state to find 'effective ways of prevention and detection'.

But matters go further. The Hotel and Catering Industry Committee also agreed that 'the police, the Immigration Service Intelligence Unit and other authorities should be afforded substantially more resources to trace over-stayers and to tackle all aspects of illegal immigration' (ibid). Far from fighting to defend foreign workers, the TUC asks the Government to spend more on their repression. The TUC will back any and every means to hunt them down:

'IT WAS THEREFORE AGREED to inform the Home Secretary that his proposal for using the NI (National Insurance,ed) scheme to identify those workers who need authority to work was worthy of further consideration, and that more resources should be provided to improve enforcement.' (TUC Hotel and Catering Industry Committee, *Minutes*, meeting of 19 July 1978, p24)

The chauvinist response of the TUC leadership places foreign workers outside the protection afforded by basic trade unionism. When immigrant workers are attacked the TUC looks the other way. In August 1978, 16 Indian seamen were imprisoned under the immigration laws after going on strike aboard a ship in Tilbury docks. The TUC refused to provide these workers with any support. Isolated from the assistance of the British working class, the seamen became victims of yet another state attack on the labour movement.

The bourgeoisie has taken full advantage of the TUC's acquiescence to racial oppression. Why else did the police feel free to concentrate their attention on Asian pickets during last year's bakery workers' strike, if not because of the official labour movement's accommodation to racism? The police beat Asians up, secure in the knowledge that there would be little public outcry. And the official labour movement's routine appeals for a 'public inquiry' into this disgusting episode were simply attempts to disguise its failure to defend black workers from state attacks.

The trade union leadership accepts the right of the state to interfere in the affairs of the working class. The defeat of the bakery workers' struggle shows the labour movement the consequences of its refusal to oppose immigration controls and of its inability to provide a clear working class defence of ethnic minorities.

The left face of social-chauvinism

■ The left wing of the Labour Party purports to offer an alternative to the Labour Government's policies on race. In their speeches and in their newspaper *Tribune*, Labour Party left-wingers denounce racism and call for more humane policies towards ethnic minorities. However, their eulogies to international brotherhood are made meaningless by their nationalist politics. Their 'opposition' to racism is just a radical form of nationalism. All the while it bleats about the immorality of racism, the Labour left adapts to the more explicit chauvinism of other sections of British society.

Though the Labour left deplores the virginity tests at Heathrow and the splitting up of immigrant families it still supports immigration controls. To justify this compromise with racism *Tribune* claims that a reformed system of immigration controls would not be racist: 'Socialists who see the need for economic and social planning cannot be expected to argue for free movement of labour in a capitalist international economy, and to be condemned as racist if they refuse to do so' (*Tribune*, 26 May 1978). *Tribune*, which wants to use 'social planning' to solve the crisis of world imperialism, 'cannot be expected' to fight for workers' elementary rights. The working class has no alternative but to condemn 'socialists' who approve the national and racial divisions imposed by imperialism.

Following his resignation - in a storm of protest - from the Labour Government over the harshness of immigration controls, Alex Lyon has become the Labour left's main spokesman on immigration. His concern for 'good race relations' amounts to a desire to rationalise immigration legislation. Alex Lyon puts Britons first. He writes:

'In a future world where living standards are similar we hope all barriers to free movement will disappear. But there are substantial differences in the standard of living throughout the world and considerable pressure to emigrate. In consequence every country has immigration control. When poor Botswana finds it necessary, we think it unrealistic to believe that Britain can do without.' (Labour Party National Executive Committee, Home Policy Committee, *NEC statement on immigration and citizenship*, January 1979, p4)

Lyon may not know it, but 'substantial differences in the standard of living throughout the world' are not the will of God or the outcome of geographical peculiarities. They are the product of imperialism. 'Pressure to emigrate' results not from migrants' love for imperialist nations but from the needs of capital.

Waiting for 'a future world' in which these problems would not exist, Lyon and the Labour Party NEC 'think it unrealistic' to fight racist immigration controls. Instead Lyon wants a system of controls based on economic rationality - capitalist rationality, that is.

Lyon admires the system of immigration established by Canadian imperialism:

'In a country like Canada it is clear who is a Canadian citizen and who is not. If Canada wishes to accept immigrants it does so according to well defined tests of the needs of Canada for new immigrants.' (Hansard, 15 July 1975, Col 1466)

The Labour left's realism is the realism of capitalism: through 'well defined tests' - tests which can only be drawn up by the bourgeois state - each imperialist nation must regulate workers' movements according to the dictates of capital accumulation. For the Labour left Britain's needs always come before those of the international working class. Its proposals for a new nationality act along the lines of the Canadian system merely represent a desire to tone down the 'excessive' brutality that characterises existing legislation.

The Labour left promises to wipe racism off the statute book. In fact the technocratic criteria by which it aims to control the lives of foreign workers are nothing more than an apology for the perpetuation of legalised racism. The racist character of immigration laws does not stem from the irrational decisions of politicians, civil servants and lawyers. It stems from the needs of capital accumulation. The Labour left accepts capitalism and it accepts the right of the state to regulate the movements of the working class. Its opposition to racism is completely fraudulent. Calling for 'non-racist' immigration controls legitimises the existing laws - laws which result in the outright repression of the working class.

DEFEND BLACK WORKERS - SMASH ALL IMMIGRATION CONTROLS

■ The migration of foreign workers, and the racial oppression they experience, result from the imperatives of capital accumulation. In today's capitalist recession black workers are among the first to be attacked by the bourgeoisie. Defence of blacks against racial violence and resistance to immigration controls and police harassment are thus integral to the struggle of the working class against capital.

The strength of the labour movement rests on its capacity to approach all political issues from the point of view of the entire working class. How far workers have gone to distance themselves from the politics of the bourgeoisie is indicated by the extent to which they resist all forms of oppression in society - whether of women, gays or blacks and other ethnic minorities. However, the political independence of the working class does not emerge in a simple, spontaneous way from the day to day struggles of the labour movement; as we have seen even the most militant trade unionism cannot overcome the divisions in the working class that are fostered by capital. This means that effective resistance to the state's offensive on blacks requires a political strategy that can demonstrate the need for independent working class politics in relation to all instances of political oppression.

The limits to moralism

■ To fight racial oppression it is necessary to relate the specific attacks on blacks to the bourgeois assault on the working class as a whole. Racism is not based on some irrational prejudice; it is continuously fostered and reinforced by capitalist society itself. That is why racism can only be fought through a struggle against capitalism. The only force in society that can overcome this, like every other aspect of capitalist domination, is the working class.

Today the main obstacle to the defence of blacks is the national-reformist tradition represented by the left wing of the Labour Party and the Communist Party. These organisations separate racism from capital's everyday domination over the working class and treat the problem as something external to capitalist society. They focus on the most extreme forms of racism: the NF and the excesses of the police. Their obsession with fascism and moral outrage against incidents of racist violence simply divert attention from the racism that blacks suffer all the time - at work, in the street, everywhere. This ordinary, mundane racism is the real political problem, for it is accepted as a legitimate feature of British life today.

The substitution of moral condemnation for working class politics underpins the anti-racism of the reformists. *Tribune* asked the Government to expose the NF by distributing 'millions of leaflets to every household explaining what these sordid organisations are about and how they use lies and blatant

distortions to gain support' (Tribune, 19 August 1977). For the Labour left racism is a complex of evil ideas and reactionary attitudes which can be combatted with 'the facts'.

The Communist Party (CP) shares the Labour left's conviction that racism is a pernicious outlook that is above class considerations. Thus its national organiser appeals to 'all those who can be won to oppose the advocacy of racism, as a threat to democracy' (D Cook, *A knife at the throat of us all*, CP, 1978, p19). The CP tries to unite all classes in society to defend 'democracy' against racism. But far from being a threat to bourgeois democracy racism is an inseparable part of bourgeois society. Because it does not confront the class relations that lie at the root of racial oppression the moralism of the Labour left and the CP can do nothing to overcome it.

Once racial oppression is reduced to a general problem of democracy, Sunday school sermons can replace anti-capitalist politics. The evil NF becomes the target of a torrent of verbal and written abuse; the left points to the NF's extreme racism as a deviation from the norms of bourgeois democracy. This 'anti-fascism' can be pursued by an all-class alliance because it does not challenge capitalism. The CP extends open arms to people from all walks of life:

'following the recent anti-National Front statements by the TUC and the Labour Party, Liberals, Young Conservatives, the British Council of Churches, the frontier for building on this issue the sort of unity which the Communist Party programme *The British Road to Socialism* describes as the broad democratic alliance has been widened in every locality.' (D Cook, *op cit*, p18)

A 'broad democratic alliance' is an appropriate bandwagon on which to unite the British nation against an evil menace. For a campaign against the racial oppression which is intrinsic to capitalist society it is worse than useless. It denounces the extreme forms of racism only to legitimise British nationalism. Every British liberal will express distaste for the NF - only class-conscious workers will oppose the immigration controls imposed by the bourgeois state.

The 'anti-fascism' of the Labour Party and the CP is entirely consistent with the promotion of British chauvinism. The CP is always ready to add radical patriotism to its moral outbursts against the NF:

'What an utter disgrace that the police should allow the NF to take over Whitehall and desecrate the Cenotaph with their obscene presence. Those who died during World War II gave

their lives to rid the world of the vile scourge of fascism which the NF now represents. We who live because of the supreme sacrifice they made must ensure that this insult to their memory will never happen again.' (*Morning Star*, 13 November 1978)

The CP resents the NF's attempts to appropriate the mantle of British patriotism. It tries to turn the same chauvinist sentiments it used to shepherd workers into the imperialist slaughter of the Second World War against today's extreme nationalists in the NF. But the CP's defence of the Cenotaph can provide no defence for ethnic minorities. The CP's national chauvinism unites the British against all foreigners; it is an accommodation to racism.

The liberal moralising which constitutes the staple of CP politics percolates through to the radical left. The International Marxist Group (IMG) has no problem in supporting an all-class approach because it sees racism as 'autonomous' from capitalist society (*Socialist Challenge*, 16 November 1978). If racism has no basis in real life then the metaphysics of *Socialist Challenge* makes sense. All good citizens can unite to purge the Nazis from society. The IMG can then join the CP in chorus, calling for the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) to 'extend the non-exclusive character of its carnivals to its organisation at the base' (*Socialist Challenge*, 12 September 1978). The 'non-exclusive' approach of the reformist and radical left alike is the wrong strategy directed against the wrong problem. In 1979 they prefer to shadow box with the memory of Hitler rather than win the British working class to the defence of ethnic minorities.

A class response to racist oppression

■ Racism cannot be fought in the abstract.
■ Resistance against all aspects of racial oppression - discrimination in housing, social services, jobs as well as against physical assaults - is of vital importance. However, the central means of fighting racism is through mobilising in the labour movement around those issues which most clearly reveal the class character of racial oppression. Today these issues are immigration controls and workers' defence.

We have seen how the Labour left objects to immigration controls as unfair legislation. The CP also makes a plea for 'non-racist' immigration laws. But opposition to laws which reflect the fundamental relations of imperialism cannot be conducted through campaigns to reform particular pieces of legislation. Rejection of immigration controls is one aspect of the struggle of the working class against the world

domination of capital. The adaptation of the reformists to the institutionalised racism of bourgeois society is an obstacle to this struggle.

The radical left has a scandalous record of opposition to immigration controls; in the last five years it has failed to launch a single initiative on this issue. The rhetorical rejection of immigration controls by the Socialist Workers' Party is always subject to the requirements of its classless politics. With the support of the SWP, the ANL declared opposition to immigration controls an optional extra for its members:

'The conference declaration was of unity against the Nazis. Though the conference voted overwhelmingly its opposition to immigration controls, it was decided not to make agreement on this point binding on ANL members.' (*Socialist Worker*, 15 July 1978)

The same theme runs through the whole spectrum of reformist and radical politics. The SWP rejects class struggle against racial oppression in favour of a popular campaign against 'the Nazis'.

The defence of ethnic minorities against attacks demands an immediate working class response. It is necessary to provide physical defence against racist attacks from whatever source they come. The SWP response to this offensive is the slogan 'Self defence is no offence', which has become popular with other radical left groups. But the day to day struggles of blacks have shown that this slogan is both dangerous and apologetic.

The four Virk brothers defended themselves when they were attacked in Newham, East London, an area notorious for racial violence. They found out that self defence is an offence - and received vicious sentences of up to seven years to emphasise the point. Like many other blacks who have fought back against their assailants, the Virk brothers were immediately confronted by the bourgeois state. The radical left has espoused non-violence in order to win the widest possible unity for its broad based campaigns. But as the experience of the Virk brothers shows the slogan 'Self defence is no offence' is simply a cynical attempt to reconcile liberal pacifism with the practical needs of the black community. The SWP is happy for blacks to learn judo and karate because that relieves it of the onerous task of winning the support of the labour movement for the defence of the black community.

With its courts, its police and its race relations

officials, the state underwrites every aspect of racial oppression. Every real act of defence represents a challenge to the bourgeois state. Resistance to immigration regulations or to police harassment is an offence. If the existing means of repression are found wanting, old laws are always available to justify new measures. As far as the state is concerned every black youth is a potential mugger and every foreign striker a possible illegal immigrant.

The defence of ethnic minorities is a political question that demands an unequivocal attitude towards the capitalist state. The best defence that the working class can offer the black community is its class opposition to all forms of immigration control. So long as workers accept the right of the state to control the movement of the working class they will not be able to oppose legalised racist violence. Workers will remain vulnerable as a class and subordinate their interests to the dictates of the bourgeois state.

The Revolutionary Communist Tendency is committed to the struggle against all immigration controls. This is vital to the fight to win the working class to the defence of the black community. An effective response to racism can only develop if revolutionaries demonstrate the class nature of racial oppression. Immigration controls express this most clearly. They indicate that workers' movements, jobs and lives are determined by the cyclical movement of capital. Immigration controls reveal 'Western civilisation' for what it is: they show that, despite all its pretensions, it treats workers as nothing more than wage slaves - to be disposed of when no longer required. The existence of immigration laws underlines the fact that capitalism is incapable of granting basic democratic rights to the international working class.

Workers' defence of ethnic minorities will be won through class politics and not through moral slogans. The anti-racist sentiments that exist in sections of the working class must not be dissipated in futile confrontations with the NF. Workers must be won to an understanding of the need to discredit chauvinist politics in the labour movement itself. As long as there is no serious class opposition to the racist politics of the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy support for ethnic minorities will be partial and inadequate. In today's conditions all-class 'anti-fascist' politics simply let the reformist leadership of the working class off the hook.

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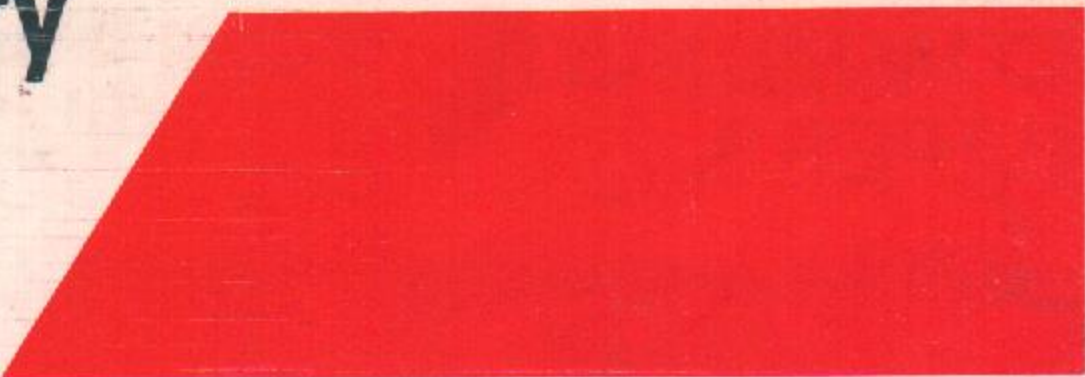
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