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REVIEWS

MALCOLM X, BLACK LIBERATION, AND THE ROAD TO WORKERS POWER

Jack Barnes

Pathfinder Press, \$20, 432 pages

ISBN 978-1-60488-021-2

Review by Jim Altenberg

A PROVOCATIVE NEW LOOK AT THE BLACK STRUGGLE IN THE U.S.

“Don’t start with Blacks as an oppressed nationality,” says Jack Barnes. “Start with the vanguard place of workers who are Black in broad, proletarian-led struggles in the United States. From the Civil War to today, the record is mind-boggling. It’s the strength and resilience, not the oppression, that bowls you over.”

In the provocative book, *Malcolm X, Black Liberation, and the Road to Workers Power*, author Jack Barnes makes the case that only the revolutionary conquest of power by the working class in the United States can open the final battles for Black freedom and pave the way for a world based not on exploitation, violence, and racism, but human solidarity. A socialist world. Barnes, the National Secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, says that workers who are Black will play a disproportionate role, compared to their numbers in the U.S. working class, in leading these battles. Section II of the book, “The Vanguard Record of Blacks in Struggles by Workers and Farmers” reviews the historical record in detail and provides powerful evidence for Barnes’s claim. He shows that African Americans have been in the forefront of every significant social and political struggle in the U.S., from the second American revolution that overthrew slavery and continued in the massive battles of Radical Reconstruction to build a new social order on the ashes of the slave system; to the labor struggles in factories and fields of the 1930s; and the unbroken resistance for over a century by Black farmers, workers, and young people to land-grabbing and lynch-mob terror.

The Black liberation struggle that arose in the mid-1950s, whose roots were in the migration of Blacks from the rural South to cities across the continent, was a working class movement, the author argues. This movement won enormous gains for the entire working class, Black and white, in the United States, and both inspired and drew strength from national liberation movements exploding around the world.

Malcolm X emerged from this rising struggle as its outstanding single leader, Barnes says. Malcolm X insisted that the Black freedom struggle was part of a worldwide revolutionary battle for human rights, part of the inevitable clash “between those who want freedom, justice, and equality, and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation.” Because of this, the author states, Malcolm X was attracted to the Cuban Revolution, as he was to the Chinese Revolution and the anti-colonial rebellions under way in Africa and Asia.

Jim Altenberg is a longtime participant in the labor movement and protests against racism and police brutality, for school desegregation and affirmative action. He has contributed articles and book reviews to the Militant newsweekly. Altenberg is a member of the United Transportation Union in the San Francisco Bay Area.

REVIEWS

“That’s a revolution,” said Malcolm X about Cuba. “They overturned the system.” The Cuban revolutionary government immediately enforced new laws against all forms of race discrimination, and has used its influence and resources to further the efforts of oppressed peoples around the world fighting for freedom.

Barnes interviewed Malcolm X shortly before his assassination. That interview is included in this book, along with several speeches and articles about Malcolm’s political development as a “revolutionary leader of the working class” and the place of his legacy in today’s world of depression conditions and imperialist war. “We need to understand and absorb Malcolm’s political legacy,” Barnes argues, “because it’s a powerful political tool we must have to help make a socialist revolution in the United States.”

The section of the book “The ‘Cosmopolitan Meritocracy’ and the Changing Class Structure of the Black Nationality,” will also generate controversy. Barnes describes the class structure of the Black nationality in the U.S. today. The vast majority of Blacks are in the working class, as has been the case since millions were pushed off the land in the middle years of the twentieth century. The gains won in the 1960s and ‘70s resulted in the emergence of a substantial Black middle class.

Since then, with the credit-driven expansion of the subsequent decades, a large layer of highly paid individuals emerged, Black and white, whose world of foundations, university think tanks, law and government offices is very remote from the world of working people.

Barnes says this social layer is exemplified by Barack Obama today. They claim no continuity with the fighting history of Blacks in this country. On the contrary, they seek to rationalize their position based on alleged talent and intelligence, and hold working people it utmost contempt. “Barack Obama’s class identification—and those of his milieu, regardless of race or sex—is not just a patronizing view of workers who are white” Barnes contends. “When it comes to workers who are Black, Obama’s attitudes, if anything, are even more contemptuous.” This social layer, “a self-designated enlightened meritocracy” is not an ally in the fight for Black liberation nor of working people, says Barnes. It serves as a prop for the capitalist rulers who are the source of their privileged lifestyles. The author argues that the coming battles for Black liberation will have a working class leadership.

This book contains a unique collection of 130 pages of photos and drawings that show the determined and combative face of the Black struggle. These striking visual images present this subject matter described by Barnes in its full sweep.

continued,

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