

# J Sakai's Settlers and Anti-Racist Working-Class Politics

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By Sebastian Lamb (2003)

With racism becoming more intense in the US and the Canadian state, there are signs that some young activists are taking anti-racism more seriously than was the case in the recent past. Searching for analysis that helps us understand racism so we can fight it more effectively is part of this commitment.

In some radical circles, J Sakai's book *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat* (3rd ed., 1989) and the interview with Sakai published as the pamphlet *When Race Burns Class: Settlers Revisited* (2000) have been suggested as valuable resources for anti-capitalist anti-racists.

Unfortunately, the ideas of *Settlers* are so flawed that they are an obstacle to developing the kind of anti-racist working-class politics needed today. Because its ideas have some influence among anti-capitalists, they deserve to be challenged. People committed to a strategy of social change based on the self-organized struggles of workers and oppressed peoples should clearly repudiate the kind of analysis and politics found in Sakai's writings and develop an alternative.

*Settlers* was written as a history of the European-origin working class in the US, as a polemic against other currents on the radical left. Although a systematic evaluation of the book's historical account by someone with a thorough knowledge of the history of the working class and oppressed peoples in the US would be worthwhile, this isn't such a review. My focus is on the book's analysis of racism and the working class (which determines how Sakai interprets the historical evidence) and its political approach.

## 1. The Argument of *Settlers*

### a) Analysis of Racism and the Working Class

The book covers the history of the US from early colonialism to the 1980s. It argues that settler society “was abnormal because it was dependent upon a foundation of conquest, genocide, and enslavement”... It is the absolute characteristic of settler society to be parasitic, dependent upon the super-exploitation of oppressed peoples for its style of life... This is the decisive factor in the consciousness of all classes and strata of white society from 1600 to now” (6).

From the era of slavery, people of African origin were “a complete nation – that is, possessing among its people a complete range of applied sciences, practical crafts and productive labor. Both that colonized nation and the Indian nations were self-sufficient and economically whole, while the Euro-American invasion society was parasitic” (9).

By the mid-1800s, there were many white wage-workers in the US. But they were not a proletariat (working class) but “a labor aristocracy” (25), a “degraded stratum seeking extra-proletarian privileges” (36), which had “instead of a proletarian, revolutionary consciousness, a petit-bourgeois consciousness that was unable to rise above reformism” (25). Their attachment to settler privileges (settlerism) led them to support racism, genocide and imperialism.

The arrival of new waves of immigration from Europe later in the 1800s complicated the situation. They, and poor whites in the US South, were layers below the white labour aristocracy and the white ruling class but above the “colonial proletariats of African, Mexicano, Indian and Asian workers” (54). The struggles of European immigrants for citizenship rights and equality with white settler wage-workers, as Sakai writes about the Irish in the US, were “nothing more nor less than a push to join the oppressor nation, to enlist in the ranks of the Empire” (49).

As a result, the goal of the multiracial and avowedly revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)—through which recent European immigrants and poor whites waged extremely militant struggles in the early 20th century—was to “to control colonial labor for the benefit of white workers” (69).

The same was true of the industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed in the wave of mass struggle of the 1930s. The CIO’s achievement was “the firm positioning of the Euro-American working class in the settler ranks, reestablishing the rights of all Europeans here to share the privileges of the oppressor nation” (84). It resolved the class contradictions among the European-origin population (79). This outcome was due to the decision by the clever modernizing “New Deal” wing of the ruling class to contain the CIO rather

than crush it with repression (as the IWW had been smashed). But in fact there was no need to resort to repression because the “class consciousness of the European immigrant proletarians had gone bad, infected with the settler sickness.” Most workers of European origin wanted “settler unionism, with a privileged relationship to the government and ‘their’ New Deal” (84).

The long economic expansion after World War II “saw the final promotion of the white proletariat. This was an en masse promotion so profound that it eliminated not only consciousness, but the class itself” (136). Today there are still white wage-labourers, but they do not amount to “a separate proletarian class... Just as in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the U.S. oppressor nation is again a non-proletarian society that is purely capitalistic in character” (146).

## **b) Politics**

What politics flow from this analysis? *Settlers* doesn’t argue an overall program, but it does propose a definite political perspective.

The central division within US society is between oppressed nations and the white oppressor nation: “the settleristic and non-proletarian nature of the U.S. oppressor nation is a historic truth, and thereby a key to leading the concrete struggles of today.” As a result, revolutionaries should build mass movements in the oppressed nations for national liberation and socialism “of a specific national character, under the leadership of a communist party” (164).

At one point *Settlers* suggests that the movement against the Vietnam war and the Watergate affair are indications of “class contradictions” (59) inside the white nation. However, what these could be if there is no longer any class struggle between working class and capitalist class in the white nation is unclear (white middle class vs white ruling class?).

The remaining white wage-labourers are a labour aristocracy. *Settlers* is clear about the labour aristocracy: it “is not neutral, but is fighting for its capitalist masters. Therefore, they must be combatted, just like the army or police (who are the military base of the imperialists, while the labor aristocracy is its social base)” (53). Sakai is clearest in *When Race Burns Class*: “radical and democratic change can only come against the wishes of the bribed majority” (17).

Uniting workers through unions can’t bridge the gap between oppressor and oppressed nations. Past attempts to form multiracial unions or alliances between

unions of white wage-workers and those of colonized nations were attempts to control and divide the workers of oppressed nations in the US (*Settlers*, 49).

## **2. What's Wrong With *Settlers*?**

As a history of US workers of European origin, *Settlers* is profoundly flawed. The main problem is how it makes sense of what it documents (the genocidal oppression of indigenous peoples, African slavery, the reactionary actions of white workers etc.). As a result, it paints a misleading picture in which workers of colour who have supported multiracial organizing are dupes, since even the most militant and democratic unions have in the end been tools for white workers to control workers of colour. This kind of analysis simplifies history and leads to dead-end politics.

The roots of the problem are in the book's crude theoretical framework, one of many versions of the Maoist "Marxism-Leninism" that flourished in the "New Communist Movement" (NCM) of the 1960s and 1970s (see my review of Max Elbaum's book *Revolution in the Air* in *New Socialist* 38 [Oct-Nov 2002]). Let's look at two key ideas that underpin the analysis of *Settlers*, and at its politics.

### **a) labour aristocracy?**

A key part of this framework is the concept of labour aristocracy (workers bribed by the profits of imperialism). This concept is used in *Settlers* to argue that the white working class in the US was never really a working class at all and certainly isn't one now. It provides an easy explanation for the reactionary actions of workers of European origin: they were just following their interests as settlers. This concept is one reason Sakai misunderstands the nature of the layer of skilled white workers in the 1800s and their craft unions (which usually excluded all workers who weren't skilled men), the remaking of the working class in the struggles of the 1930s, and changes in the composition of the US working class after World War II.

The theoretical sources of the idea of labour aristocracy, as *Settlers* discusses at one point, are the ideas of Marx's co-thinker Frederick Engels and the Russian revolutionary socialist VI Lenin. Engels proposed the notion of a labour aristocracy to explain why British workers had become less radical than they had been in the 1830s and 1840s. Lenin took it up early in the 20th century to explain the hold of reformist politics in the workers' movements of imperialist countries.

There are all sorts of problems with the idea of a labour aristocracy. First, who does it include? All workers in imperialist countries? Only the best-paid? Union

officials? How are they bribed? Second, why did highly-paid skilled workers (Lenin's "labour aristocracy") play a leading role in the Russian Revolution and the wave of revolutions and intense class struggles that swept across Europe in the years that followed?

Most important, this notion rests on an assumption with a long history on the far left: the working class is somehow inherently revolutionary, and so its non-revolutionary behaviour and reformist politics are somehow deviations from a supposed revolutionary proletarian essence that need to be explained (by, for example, the role of the labour aristocracy). This assumption is mistaken and should be rejected.

Working classes have the potential power to overthrow capitalism because capitalism depends on workers' labour. But classes are made and remade in history through complex processes of struggle and subordination. These processes give rise to forms of activity and consciousness that for most workers, most of the time, aren't revolutionary. These are what we need to understand, so we can better contribute to the development of working-class struggle against capitalism and the many forms of oppression that are intertwined with class exploitation. The faulty concept of labour aristocracy can only hinder us here.

## **b) internally-colonized nations**

Another key aspect of *Settlers* is the idea that indigenous people, Blacks, Chicanos, and people of Asian origin are nations that are internal colonies within the US. Recall that it even argues that African slaves in early colonial society were a "complete nation."

This approach simplifies the character of these peoples. In the 1600s, African slaves were no more a nation than the residents of New France at the time were a Quebec nation; the belief that they were is a classic example of nationalist myth-making. But the course of historical development has indeed led to the oppression of racially-oppressed groups in the US (each of which requires its own concrete study) taking a dual form: racial and national (though whether the oppression of Asian-Americans is national oppression is less certain, to me at least).

To be clearer, these groups of people are not only racially oppressed. They have, to varying degrees, historically come to constitute oppressed nations. Their claims to national self-determination (up to and including the right to form their own states if they so choose) have been denied.

Yet at the same time, as residents of a capitalist democracy, Blacks, Chicanos, indigenous people and Asian-Americans have often fought for inclusion as equal citizens in US society and for a large degree of autonomy within it (either in a capitalist society cleansed from racism or in a transformed US), rather than for national rights.

*Settlers* flattens out this still-evolving complexity with a simple formula of nations engaged in national liberation struggles, similar to those waged in Vietnam, China, Puerto Rico etc.

### **c) socialism from above**

According to *Settlers*, the key social struggles in the US are the national liberation struggles of the oppressed nations against the white oppressor nation (which has no working class). The white labour aristocracy is as much the enemy as the police and the military. Individual whites may be won to anti-imperialist support of the national liberation struggles, but recall that “radical and democratic change can only come against the wishes of the bribed majority.”

The political conclusion that follows from this is not hard to see: the oppressed nations (or perhaps only those in them who are workers) must fight wars of national liberation against the US ruling class and the “bribed majority” to establish a new social order.

What kind of politics is this?

Socialism from below is revolutionary-democratic working-class socialism: “The heart of the theory is this proposition: that there is a social majority which has the interest and motivation to change the system, and that the aim of socialism can be the education and mobilization of this mass-majority. This is the exploited class, the working class, from which comes the eventual motive-force of revolution. Hence a Socialism-from-Below is possible, on the basis of a theory which sees the revolutionary potentialities in the broad masses, even if they seem backward at a given time and place.” The role of revolutionary minorities is not to substitute themselves for the majority, but “to impel the mass-majority to fit themselves to take power in their own name, through their own struggles.” (Hal Draper, “The Two Souls of Socialism”). (In the “3rd World” the potentially revolutionary “mass-majority” for socialism from below is a social bloc of workers and peasants, not the working class alone.)

The politics of *Settlers* have nothing in common with socialism from below. Sakai denounces what he calls “the obsession with needing a social majority” as “bourgeois and defeatist thinking” (*When Race Burns Class*, 17). In fact, this “obsession” is key to the possibility of a revolutionary transformation of society that does not replace one minority ruling class with another. For Sakai, this isn’t a problem. His politics are one of many kinds of socialism from above.

To be specific, the politics of *Settlers* are a variety of Maoism that points radicals towards engaging in guerilla warfare against the US state and white workers – a reactionary path taken by desperate fragments of the NCM in the 1970s (for example, the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army).

This politics cannot help develop anti-racist class politics today. It rejects the struggles of the really-existing multiracial working class in the US. In writing off white workers as a reactionary mass, it absolves white radicals of our very difficult responsibility to mobilize white workers against racism in multiracial struggles and in support of the autonomous movements of people of colour.

### **3. Sketch of an Alternative**

A better way of explaining why white workers in the US have so often not joined with racially-oppressed people in working-class struggle and why when they have done so this has not dissolved racism is to analyze the development of capitalist society and classes in the US on the basis of social relations of white supremacy/racial oppression.

A number of people have written about this in ways that are much more useful than *Settlers*. These include WEB DuBois, CLR James, Angela Davis, Alexander Saxton, George Rawick, Theodore Allen, David Roediger, Robin Kelley, Noel Ignatiev, George Lipsitz and Mike Goldfield (unfortunately, their kind of studies have yet to be done about Canadian history, though the work of Howard Adams, Himani Bannerji, Enakshi Dua and others is important).

What follows is just the barest sketch of an alternative approach to what’s argued by *Settlers*, informed by these and other sources.

Where racial oppression/white supremacy exists, workers who are socially recognized as white have some degree of privilege because they belong to the dominant racial group (exactly how much varies depending on the time and place) at the same time as they are exploited as workers. White privilege gives white

workers certain advantages relative to workers of colour (today, these include better wages, housing, schooling and less repressive policing).

Defending this privilege (or trying to expand it at the expense of people of colour) is often appealing to white workers, especially when working and living conditions are getting worse. This kind of reactionary response is encouraged by the ruling class (for example, anti-immigrant politics and attacks on affirmative action). It's easier for white workers to do this than it is to get involved in collective action against employers, landlords, governments etc., especially when workers' movements are weak.

The material and ideological reality of white supremacy and privilege helps us understand why it is hard to get large numbers of white workers to consistently support the specific demands and struggles of people of colour, and why the organizations, actions and ideas of white workers entering into struggle have all kinds of limitations from an anti-racist perspective.

It's easy to see that this reality also has the effect of dividing the working class. Because it does this, racism weakens workers' collective power in the unceasing class struggle. White workers suffer less from the weakness of their class than workers of colour do, but they are still affected by it in countless ways.

We can see this in the US, where the intensity of racism is directly related to many well-known features of US society and the weakness of the US working class (bad jobs, low pay, low level of unionization, the dominance of bureaucratic business unionism, no mass workers' party organizationally independent of the ruling class, almost no public health care or welfare, the influence of patriotic nationalism and narrow individualism etc.). The intensification of racism in the Canadian state in recent decades points in the same direction.

The fact that racism divides and weakens the working class means that fighting racism is actually in the class interest of white workers, whether or not they understand it. They are more likely to begin to see this when a) there is a level of multiracial working-class struggle that shows in practice that it can win changes, and b) the autonomous self-organization of people of colour is strong enough to visibly challenge white supremacy, including white privilege within the working class.

These conditions don't make racial oppression disappear—that requires the transformation of capitalist society. And, even in these conditions, only small

numbers of white workers will find their way to a consistent anti-racist class politics on their own.

But—as the history of the movements of people of colour, white workers and students in the US from roughly 1965 to 1975 suggests – these conditions do create tremendously important openings for activists with anti-racist class struggle politics to help white workers to reach the conclusion that they need to actively fight white supremacy, in solidarity with the autonomous movements of people of colour.

The historical experience in the US should also remind us of why it's crucial for radicals today to try to rebuild a layer of activists with anti-racist class struggle politics in the working class, since in the 1965-1975 era conditions a) and b) were present, but there was no such layer of worker activists, only individuals and scattered grouplets.

So, following the Trinidadian-born revolutionary socialist CLR James, we can see that the independent movements and struggles of people of colour not only have their own “vitality and validity” but also make a “great contribution” to the development of the working class as a whole and are “a constituent part of the struggle for socialism.”