Study guide to Reconstruction

Noel Ignatin was asked to draw up a program for studying Reconstruction — the era of Black political power in the South after the Civil War. Familiarity with the Reconstruction era is basic to understanding the subsequent history of the U.S. working class.

The readings were broken down into brief weekly assignments, so that workers and others who don't have a lot of time for reading can easily participate. The suggested readings contain about four fifths of James S. Allen's book, but only about one third of Du Bois'. Obviously this is not intended as an end in itself — hopefully it will provide a framework for further study.

THE MEANING OF RECONSTRUCTION
A Study Guide and Interpretation
By Noel Ignatin

Two sharply contrasting Marxist interpretations of Reconstruction in the South after the Civil War are contained in W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York, 1935) and James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: the Battle for Democracy 1865-1876* (New York, 1937). These are the texts for this study program. The DuBois book is currently available as a paperback, published by Atheneum. Allen's book is a New World Paperback from International Publishers.

There are several additional works from among the Marxist classics which shed light on the Reconstruction period. Some of Marx's and Engels' writings have been collected in a book of their writings on the Civil War— *The Civil War in the United States* by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (New York, 1937 and 1961), available as a New World Paperback from International. Also helpful is Mao Tse-tung's *On New Democracy* (in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung,* Volume 2, Peking, 1965, pages 339-384), which treats some of the same theoretical questions involved in Reconstruction. Perhaps most important is Lenin's *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (in V. J. Lenin, *Collected Works,* Volume 9, Moscow, 1962, pages 15-140), Both Mao and Lenin writings are widely available in pamphlet form. Lenin's pamphlet is well summarized in *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* (New York, 1939), pages 62-77. Everyone should read this summary, at least, in addition to DuBois and Allen. A paperback edition *of History of the CPSU(B)* has been reissued by Proletarian Publishers.

Reconstruction According to Allen and DuBois

The dispute between W. E. B. DuBois' and James S. Allen's interpretations of the Civil War and Reconstruction is, in the most basic sense, identical to the argument which raged between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in Russia from 1903 to 1917.

In the Russian debate, the main point at issue was the role of the proletariat in the coming revolution. The Mensheviks held that the revolution would be of a bourgeois-democratic character; that is, it would bring about the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy and the establishment of bourgeois supremacy. According to this view, the proletariat would (and should) aid the bourgeoisie in the overthrow of tsarism and then form itself into a socialist opposition to the bourgeois government. The Mensheviks expected this period to last through the whole era of capitalist development, as had been the case in various Western European countries.

The Bolsheviks argued, on the contrary, that the period of the great bourgeois-democratic revolutions had ended in Europe, and that the bourgeoisie would, at the first sign of danger from below, rush back into the arms of reaction. From this the Bolsheviks concluded the necessity for the proletariat to stand at the head of the democratic revolution, and to take the lead in "passing over" to the second stage, the socialist revolution. This Bolshevik formula was variously called the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry," the "uninterrupted revolution," and later on in China, the "New Democratic" revolution.

James S. Allen regards the Civil War and Reconstruction as a bourgeois-democratic revolution. Flowing from this conception, Allen dismisses any of DuBois' suggestions that the toiling masses were serious contenders for power, and views the former slaves as "allies of the bourgeoisie." The only labor opposition to bourgeois policy that Allen regards as significant were the socialist forces around William Sylvis and the National Labor Union. Consistent with his view of the period as a bourgeois revolution, he naturally places the responsibility for its defeat on the betrayal by the bourgeoisie in 1877.

Although Allen never explicitly makes the point (and in fact says things which tend in the opposite direction), his book, written in 1937, was used to support the Communist Party's policy of alliance with Roosevelt against the "fascist" forces. In part, the Party was hoping and expecting that Roosevelt could be pressured to take the steps to complete the "unfinished tasks" of Reconstruction.

DuBois sees the Civil War arid Reconstruction, above all, as a labor movement — indeed, "the kernel and meaning of the labor movement in the United States." (page 353) He calls it "one of the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian revolution, had seen." (page 358)

Instead of seeing the former slaves as "allies of Northern capital," DuBois regards them as the main and leading force of a social movement inevitably bound for a collision with capital.

DuBois was not an "orthodox" Marxist, as Allen was. He sometimes uses Marxist terminology in his own way, or uses non-Marxist terms to express Marxist ideas. Consider the following passage from page 367: "Suppose for a moment that Northern labor had stopped the bargain of 1876 and maintained the power of the labor vote in the South; and suppose that the Negro with new and dawning consciousness of the demands of labor as differentiated from the demands of capitalists, had used his vote more specifically for the benefit of white labor, South and North?"

Doesn't the vision of class forces expressed in the above-cited passage coincide with Lenin's view of Russia?

Considering his overall understanding of the period, it is natural that DuBois ascribes the defeat of Reconstruction not to the "betrayal by capital" *which was inevitable*, but to the betrayal by white labor. Thus he states: "When white laborers were convinced that the degradation of Negro labor was more fundamental than the Uplift of white labor, the end was in sight." (page 347)

DuBois' book was not a justification for any alliance with Roosevelt or any other representative of any sector of the bourgeoisie. It was, and remains, a passionate plea for labor unity, and a mighty blow at white supremacy as the chief obstacle to that Unity.

"The unending tragedy of Reconstruction is the utter inability of the American mind to grasp its real significance, its national and world-wide implications. . . . We are still too blind and infatuated to conceive of the emancipation of the laboring class in half the nation as a revolution comparable to the upheavals in France in the past, and in Russia, Spain, India and China today." (page 708)

"And the rebuilding, whether it comes now or a century later, will and must go back to the basic principles of Reconstruction in the United States during 1867-1876 — Land, Light and Leading for slaves black, brown, yellow and white, under a dictatorship of the proletariat." (page 635)

Reading One

DuBois, pages 182-187; 254-314; 325-346
Allen, pages 19-23; 33-40; 81-90

Allen writes: "The bourgeois revolution found its true leader in Stevens." (page 23) DuBois calls Stevens "the greatest and most uncompromising of abolitionist-democrats." (page 187) Is there a difference between Allen and DuBois in their estimate of Stevens? Discuss Thaddeus Stevens and what he represented.

Reading Two

DuBois, pages 17-31; 346-370
Allen, pages 145-180

Allen writes: "The tradition of solidarity between white and Negro labor was established early in the organized labor movement." (page 180) DuBois writes: "This union of black and white labor never got a real start." (page 352) Discuss the program and policies of the white National Labor Union and the Colored National Labor Union. Who was right, Allen or DuBois? Which of the two unions more truly represented the interests of labor?

Allen writes: "The furthest advance in understanding the urgency of the Negro question and its import to the labor movement as a whole was made by the early Socialist groups and sections of the First International." (page 175) DuBois writes: "The internationalist movement . . . took no real root in America. . . . The main activity of the International was in the North; they seemed to have no dream that the place for its most successful rooting was in the new political power of the Southern worker." (page 360) Do you agree with Allen's generally positive estimate of the work of the International? Do you agree with DuBois' criticism and his particular suggestion? With hindsight, do you have any suggestions for the work of the International?

Reading Three

DuBois, pages 237-253; 315-323

In a letter from the International to President Johnson, Marx wrote: ". . . the American people at the inauguration of the new era of the emancipation of labor placed the burden of leadership on the shoulders of two men of labor — Abraham Lincoln, the one, and the other, Andrew Johnson." The second of these two became the embodiment of reaction during the period. What went wrong to make old Andy go sour?

Reading Four

DuBois, pages 381-429
Allen, pages 43-56; 61-68; 91-137

In the editor's foreword to Allen's book, it states: "DuBois' failure to grasp the fundamental bourgeois character of the revolution leads him to the mistaken notion that what was occurring in the South during Reconstruction 'was one of the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian revolution, had seen.' DuBois therefore very naturally falls into the error of characterizing the Reconstruction governments of the epoch as dictatorships of labor (that is, the proletariat) despite the fact that at the time such a dictatorship was out of the question. What was actually established in the South during those years was a bourgeois-democratic dictatorship varying according to specific state conditions and existing for varied lengths of time." (page 11) Discuss Reconstruction in South Carolina in light of the different interpretations given by Allen and DuBois.

Reading Five

DuBois, pages 580-635
Allen, pages 181-206

Allen writes: "The bourgeoisie had bargained away the revolution in step after step until it placed its own seal of approval upon victorious reaction." (page 206) DuBois writes: "When white laborers were convinced that the degradation of Negro labor was more fundamental than the uplift of white labor, the end was in sight." (page 347) Where should Marxists place the responsibility for the defeat of Reconstruction — on the bourgeoisie, or on white labor? Was DuBois justified, by Marxist standards, in using the term "counter-revolution" to describe the process which led to the overturning of the Reconstruction governments in the South? Was Allen justified in using the term?

Reading Six

DuBois, pages 15-16; 700-708; 727-728
Allen, pages 207-215

DuBois writes: "And the rebuilding, whether it comes now or a century later, will and must go back to the basic principles of Reconstruction in the United States during 1867-1876 — Land, Light and Leading for slaves black, brown, yellow and white, under a dictatorship of the proletariat." (page 635) Is DuBois correct? Does a reading of Allen's book lead to another conclusion?