

Technological Revolution And Prospects for Black Liberation in the 21st Century

By Abdul Alkalimat

This talk will focus on two main points. The first point is that in the long run the greatest force for change in history is technology. As such, technological change is a historical force that, more than any other, sets the objective context for consciousness and social movement. In other words, what is usually missing in our celebrations of Black history is a focus on how technological change contributes to the structural basis for Black history. Once we have clarity on this, then it is possible to grasp how ideological positions and social movements did or did not, do or do not, contribute to real historical change.

My second point is to discuss how technological change, when fundamental and systemic, leads to conflicts that get resolved by changing society one way or another. Economic transformation through the polarization of wealth and poverty is usually at the base of these conflicts. This usually leads to the destruction of the old way of doing things and the construction of a new society.

This is the approach that seems most useful in explaining the deepening social crisis that we face today. What is truly unique about the end of the 20th century is that we are undergoing a transformation no less than the 19th century with the rise of the industrial stage of capitalism. We are at the beginning of a new revolutionary transformation, the most important aspect of which is the birth of a new class in history. At the heart of this new class are those Black and immigrant workers tossed into the street and forced to fight to survive.

So, my two points are first the technological revolution and its importance for Black history, second how the current technological revolution is forcing the fundamental restructuring of society, creating a new class which can be the basis for the new society.

Technology and Black History

The entire sweep of Black history needs to be reexamined on the basis of the thesis that technological change creates the main structural context for the grand historical narrative of enslavement and the subsequent freedom struggle. However, for our immediate purposes the main point I want to make can be illustrated as part of the general process of the rise and fall of industrialization, specifically the two cases of the mechanization of cotton production and the electronic transformation of the auto industry. Cotton and auto, as the leading sectors of the US economy-- 19th century agricultural and 20th century industrial production--helped to structure more than 150 years of Black labor. It has been this economic structure of how agriculture and industry have utilized Black labor that has set the stage for all of Black history.

The main point here is to demonstrate that, for both cotton and auto, technological innovation led to increasing the demand for Black labor. Conversely, subsequent technological innovation led to the expulsion of Black labor based on this same motive, the search for greater productivity, competitiveness and hence more profit. First the use of technology that leads to inclusion, and then technology used to exclude.

Cotton

Cotton was grown in India and Egypt as the basis for cloth, but England had first used wool for that purpose. In fact the British woolen manufacturers were so set on maintaining their dominant market share that they got the Calico Act passed in 1721 forbidding the importation of Calico cotton cloth from India. But the political forces whose interests converged on cotton as the cheaper cloth helped get this act repealed by 1774. During these 50 years the British cotton industry developed without foreign competition. When the Calico Act was repealed, however, capital was forced to invest in efforts to invent machines to help the British cotton textile industry become competitive with the cheap, labor intensive, cotton production from the East.

The first new technology of spinning machines was patented in 1738 by John Wyatt. But the factory use of even more developed technology began in the 1770's with the water-powered cotton mills of Richard Arkwright, and in the 1780s with the steam engines of James Watt. In 1761 the cotton industry in England was so undeveloped that it did not employ any workers in Manchester, but by 1774 (just over 10 years later) there were 30,000 people in the industry in or near Manchester. This textile mill technology was imported illegally into the United States by Samuel Slater to set up the first US factory mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1790.

The expansion of slavery in the American colonies was thus a function of the demand for more cotton, especially by the textile industry in England. However, it is to the technological innovation within the US slave labor plantation system that we have to look for the critical turning point.

In 1792, Eli Whitney graduated from Yale University and went off to Georgia to teach school. In an environment of cotton plantations, he was quickly confronted with the major problem in cotton production: how to speed up the process of cleaning cotton in preparation for shipping cotton bales of 1,000 pounds each to the textile mills. There was a cotton gin in use that worked well with the long staple cotton of the sea islands, but that technology would not work with the short-fiber or green seed cotton that was suitable for most soil conditions of the South that had enabled cotton production to spread. It is generally believed that in less than two weeks, Whitney designed a cotton-gin for short-fiber cotton, although the historian Herbert Aptheker reports that this cotton gin developed from the drawing of a slave in Mississippi. (Workers have been ripped off at the suggestion box for a long time!)

The cotton gin increased productivity in a very dramatic way. When cleaning the cotton by hand, it took one slave a complete day to clean one pound of cotton. The hand-powered cotton gin increased this productivity to 150 pounds per day. With steam power driving the gin, one slave could produce one bale or 1000 pounds per day. So the statistics speak for themselves. Before the cotton gin, in 1790, the US produced 6,000 bales of cotton, by 1810 this was up to 178,000 bales of cotton, and by 1860 four million bales of cotton. By 1820 cotton was more than 50% of all US exports and after 1825, US-produced cotton was 80% of the commercial supply on the entire world market. Cotton had become King, meaning that from 1830 to 1860 more money was invested in land and slaves for cotton production than all the rest of the US economy put together! In 1790 there were 700,000 slaves and by 1860 there were 4 million, of whom more than 70% were in cotton production.

Black people were pulled west by the expansion of the cotton belt, so that after beginning with a concentration in South Carolina, the main concentration of Blacks had moved over to Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama. Moreover, this cotton-based economy persisted even after the Civil War. The Civil War was a war over control of the federal government and the commanding heights of the national economy. But, it was not over a fundamental economic revolution in the South as the tools and techniques for cotton cultivation remained the same. What changed was the form of political power, but most of the basic economic processes remained the same.

In the sharecropping system adopted after the end of slavery, the main change was the social organization of production--from forced group labor to family labor--although the rest basically remained the same. In fact, it was the low cost of labor under both slavery and sharecropping that enabled the US to generate the wealth out of the cotton industry that it did.

But this system also had the effect of forcing the South into stagnation and backwardness. Little industrial investment was encouraged, and social relations were polarized to maintain the elite culture of the plantocracy. Black people lived under a form of virtual fascist rule under slavery and sharecropping, a barbaric politics that served economic interests in the South and the North.

The political change of the Civil War was not equaled by changes in the economic system until World War II. The critical event was again a technological innovation, the mechanical cotton picker. Two brothers named John and Mack Rust had begun testing a machine in 1931. They achieved some success, but their machine was not commercially viable, as it was not structured for mass production.

The breakthrough came with the work of International Harvester, working with a plantation in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Here is how one account sums up the introduction of the first commercially viable version of the mechanical cotton picker:

"An estimated 2,500 to 3,000 people swarmed over the plantation on that one day. 800 to 1,000 automobiles leaving their tracks and scars throughout the property."...The pickers, painted red, drove down the white rows of cotton. Each one had mounted in front a row of spindles, looking like a wide mouth, full of metal teeth, that had been turned vertically. The spindles, about the size of human fingers, rotated in a way that stripped the cotton from the plants; then a vacuum pulled it up into the big wire basket that was mounted on top of a picker. In an hour, a good field hand could pick twenty pounds of cotton; each mechanical picker, in an hour picked as much as a thousand pounds....picking a bale of cotton by machine cost....\$5.25, and picking it by hand cost...\$39.41. Each machine did the work of fifty people...What the mechanical cotton picker did was make obsolete the sharecropping system....

The result of this technological innovation was that the sharecroppers were literally driven off the land in the great migration of Black people out of the rural South into the urban industrial North. From 1910 to 1970, more than six and a half million Black people migrated from the South, but 5 million left after 1940, showing the impact of the mechanical cotton picker. Now only half of the Black community was in the South, and only 25% remained rural. Everything began to change. The historical mass Black experience of cotton, under slavery and sharecropping, was bracketed by two technological innovations: it began with the cotton gin and ended with the mechanical cotton picker.

The cotton gin had pulled Black people into the plantation system of the Deep South, and under the control of fascist terror. While Black people were slaves, the resistance they adopted included a

multitude of private acts of protest, while the public forms of collective protest included the underground railroad and the slave revolt. While sharecroppers, they faced peonage and the lynch rope, but continued to fight back in the form of organizations, from the Southern-based tenants union to the NAACP based in New York. However, it was only after the need for Black labor in the rural South had been eliminated, and Black people had migrated to the urban industrial scene gaining more education and resources of all kinds, did the right mix exist for the powerful civil rights movement to emerge.

The Auto Industry's Critical Role

The driving engine of US capitalism has been its industrial development supported by its agricultural base. The automobile industry is critical as it represents the convergence of steel, glass, and rubber production with petroleum, highway construction, and massive repair and parts support along with a wide diversity of other economic linkages. At its height the auto industry was one of the greatest employers in the economy.

The first commercially viable automobiles date from the late 19th century, when they were produced with highly complex craft techniques. Automobiles used to be produced one at a time. In the 20th century Henry Ford led the revolution that transformed auto technology, from universal standards for exchangeable parts to the moving assembly line initiated in 1913. Because of Ford, General Motors and Chrysler auto companies, Detroit was to auto as the Mississippi delta was to cotton.

The use of the term "technological innovation" should always be thought of as a diverse process of discovery through trial and error, a process of incremental gains that in the end, when successful, eventually produces a big impact. Auto is a good example. The moving assembly line was created in 1913, and it turns out to be the end of a long process of technological innovation. In 1908 auto's were put together by assemblers, people who performed a whole series of tasks, gathering up parts and then fitting them together. The average assembler worked nearly nine hours before they repeated one task a second time. The Ford company led in three kinds of innovations of auto parts and assembly: interchangeability, simplicity, and ease of attachment. Thus, by 1913 the task cycle was limited to one task and took only 2.3 minutes, with each assembler walking from spot to spot where each auto was being put together. The moving assembly line, however, meant that the worker would stand still would move. Each task cycle was thus reduced further to 1.2 minutes less than one year after the moving line was installed.

Ford was clear on what this could mean for his profits. Workers, especially Black workers, could see what it meant for them in wages. In 1917 when agricultural work meant less than one dollar per day in wages in Mississippi, Ford was paying five dollars a day. In 1910 there were 6,000 Black people in Detroit and by 1920 there were 41,000, making Detroit the fastest growing Black community of all major US cities. In 1916 there were 50 Black people working for Ford Motor Company in Detroit, and by 1920 there were 2,500. This means that if people were living in families of four each, then in 1910-16 about 3% of the Detroit Black community was connected to Ford, but by 1920 that was up to 25%.

In each instance advances were not automatic but were accomplished through struggles. Ford was faced with the militancy of a fighting workers' movement. Black people were convenient, so he used them. Ford gained an advantage, but other companies were forced to adopt similar policies in the end.

This auto-based economy continued to expand until the 1950's. By that time General Motors had grown so big that it was the nation's largest employer and by itself accounted for 3% of the entire US

GNP. Detroit led the country in per capita home ownership, and gained worldwide recognition as a center of US corporate genius and secure blue collar communities. Black people, mainly those with their roots in rural Tennessee and Alabama, migrated to Detroit and created an urban culture best represented by Motown Records and its popular icons of Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Marvin Gaye, Stevey Wonder, Martha and the Vandellahs, etc. Generally it was a town of trade unionists, especially UAW Local 600, which was the world's largest trade union local based at the Ford River Rouge Plant. Even as late as the 1960's militant Black workers used to say that it was so good in Detroit that if you got fired at one plant you could get hired at another plant in time for the second shift.

But good things don't always last. The mass production techniques of Ford were challenged and overcome by the lean production system of Toyota, the Japanese auto company. Ford had gotten the idea of the assembly line from the meat packing industry for his endless chain conveyor. Toyota got its idea of lean production from the US supermarket, especially how they handled inventory control and work assignments, and how the supermarket industry maximized economy of time and space. These new management techniques for the social organization of production were linked to the increased use of computers and robots to initiate a new revolutionary transformation of all manufacturing. Once again the auto industry was leading the way for all industrial activity.

What is this "lean production?"

Lean production...is 'lean' because it uses less of everything compared with mass production - half the human effort in the factory, half the manufacturing space, half the investment in tools, half the engineering hours to develop a new product in half the time. Also, it requires keeping far less than half the needed inventory on site, results in many fewer defects, and produces a greater and ever growing variety of products.
(Machine that changed the world, p 13)

At a GM plant in the 1980's one car was build in 31 hours, in a little more than 8 square feet, with an average of 1.3 defects per car. At this same time Toyota built a car in 16 hours, in less than 5 square feet, with an average of 0.45 defects per car. Lean production began in the 1950's and by the 1970's and 80's has transformed standards for the auto industry on a global level. Here is one account of what happened to Ford during the 1980's:

Ford...carried out...investing \$28 billion to automate production and to eliminate excess capacity. The company's global work force was cut from 506,500 to 390,000. Most of the cuts were in the United States. Over a nine-year period, the number of robots in the North American plants rose from 236 to 1,300, and more than 80,000 hourly workers and 16,000 salaried white-collar workers were discharged. The number of hourly workers fell by 47 percent and productivity increased by 57%....Computer driven machines to weld, stamp out parts, and schedule, control, and monitor production were introduced into Ford plants in Europe as well as in North America. Ford also adopted "just in time" production, enabling the company to reduce its inventories from three weeks to one week.... (Global Dreams, p. 268)

The overall picture is quite clear. Total US auto production in 1994 was 12.2 million cars, the highest since 1978 when 12.8 million cars were produced. The main point is that this was done in 1994 with 50% of the workforce they had in 1978. For Ford during this period, their US workforce was reduced

from 200,000 to 101,000. The Ford Company has now abandoned all workers, including Black people, as a new plant announcement makes clear. The first new Ford plant since 1980 is being built in the US to forge steel crankshafts. In 1980 they would have hired 1500 workers. In this new plant on 103 acres at a cost of \$50 million they will employ 65 people in two shifts.

Detroit was yanked out of its economic security to become the nation's leading example of deindustrialization and urban decay. The entire period had not been without violent eruptions over the emergence of such a strong Black proletariat. There was a major rebellion in 1943 (4 days, 34 dead - 25 Black) and in 1967 (6 days, 43 dead - 34 Black). But the most profound destruction is the death dance of permanent unemployment that came so abruptly to all too many people.

Technology and Social Transformation

The main argument in this paper is that the most profound historical changes are linked to changes in technology. The examples we have documented here are the production of cotton and auto. This is not an argument for technological determinism, but an argument for the origin of classes and the structural basis for class conflict. Technology is created by people, used by people, and impacts people on the basis of definite historical interests for gain, for profit. In each instance this determines who benefits and reveals the motive behind how production is organized.

What is critical to understand is how the technological dialectic--first the inclusion, then the exclusion of labor--first created one kind of transformation after sharecropping was ended, and then created something vastly different on the other side of mass production. When the sharecropping system was destroyed by the new technology, there was another labor system crying out for the newly created surplus labor. These industrial centers became magnets for the newly freed workers, and they swarmed there leaving their old rural shacks abandoned as testaments to a past fading into memory. The journey of northern migration was a progressive movement to a higher quality of social life, to an economic position of greater security.

However, the transformation we are currently going through is quite different, in fact rather the opposite. The current social transformation is expelling people from work and in this process is destroying the society built to serve the industrial system. The schools, hospitals, public transportation, affordable housing, and other institutions that used to make up society were designed to feed, clothe, house and care for factory workers to come to work, and care for their families as the source for the next generation of workers. Things are quite different now.

Five Revolutionary Processes

The overall complex process can be schematically summed up by discussing five features of revolutionary transformation: technological, economic, social, political, and spiritual. Each is important and has its own logic, and yet each is conditioned by the others with the fundamental logic of change resting on the technological and economic.

1. Decline of Industrial Jobs. The first point is that this new technological revolution is creating the end of work as we have known it in the industrial system. In the 1950's 33% of the workforce was in manufacturing, while today less than 17% is engaged in such work. "From 1979 to 1992, productivity increased by 35% in the manufacturing sector while the workforce shrank by 15%." The service sector

is restructuring, McDonalds testing its McRobots, or the banking and insurance industry which estimates that it will eliminate 700,000 jobs by the year 2000. In the last 5 years the wholesale sector has lost 240,000 to direct computer/telecommunications links between retailers and manufacturers. Employment in retail is threatened by computerized and televised shopping.

In *The End of Work*, Jeremy Rifkin estimates that only 20% of the current labor force will survive with wealth creating jobs, as productivity will rise very rapidly due to the new technology. >From 1953 to 1962 there were 1.6 million manufacturing jobs lost, and Black unemployment went from a previous high of 8.5% up to 12.4%. Since then, Black unemployment has been twice that of whites. Tom Kahn is quoted by Rifkin: "It is as if racism, having put the Negro in his economic place, stepped aside to watch technology destroy that place." US Steel had 120,000 workers in 1980. Ten years later, computer-based engineering and the new mini-mills allowed US Steel to leave the urban areas and Black workers residing there to make more product than ever with a work force of only 20,000.

It is common to hear that in fact the new economy is growing jobs. In 1992, however, 2 out of every 3 new private sector jobs were temporary or part time. Today overall more than 25% of all US jobs are temporary (a high figure, but not as high as in England where the figure is 40%). However, 40% of all faculty in post secondary education in the US are part time. The largest employer in the US is now Manpower, whose 1992 figure was 560,000. This is now a supranational corporation with headquarters in London, and offices in 35 countries. So part time, temporary or contingent workers are what we're getting. These workers get less pay, and less security, not only on the job but over the long run. About 50% of full time workers get pensions, while for part time workers it is less than 20%. Technological innovation so far has meant forcing people onto a "slippery slope" whereby they descend into economic oblivion.

2. Growing Inequality. The second point is that this technological impact is producing a growing polarization of wealth. The number of poor people is growing faster than the overall population, and the rich are getting richer.

"We can measure rising inequality by comparing family incomes. Between 1980 and 1992 - for the bottom 25 per cent of all US families in terms of average incomes -- their share of the total national income fell from 7.6 percent to 6.5 percent. Real average incomes for the bottom 25 percent, adjusted by inflation, fell sharply from \$12,359 in 1980 to \$11,530 12 years later.

By sharp contrast, for the upper 25 percent of all US families, their share of the total national income rose between 1980 and 1992 from 48.2 percent to 51.3 percent. Their real average family incomes increased from \$78,844 to \$91,368. (Marable)

>From 1980 to 1994, factory wages rose 75% while executive pay on average rose 360%! The differences between Black and whites are even more stark. Overall, the net worth of the American households declined between 1988 and 1991-- the drop was 12%, an average of \$5,000 per household. The median wealth for a white household was \$44,408, while for Black people it was \$4,608 and for Latinos \$5,345. Within the Black community there has been polarization. From 1967 to 1990, Black families making less than \$5,000 a year increased from 8% to 12%, while those making more than \$50,000 increased from 7% to 15%.

3. Social Breakdown. The third point is that this economic polarization has led to a destruction of the social fabric of society. This is the focus of the underclass literature, examining the concentration of

social ills on the poorest sections of society and the breakdown of all conventional social institutions. This point is in plain view for all to see. Who can argue that any social institution is stronger, more democratic and inclusive, and more legitimate in the eyes of the American people. No. The situation is quite the opposite. Since the school to work link has been broken, the schools don't seem to have the ability to teach any more. And, as Jonathan Kozol points out in his book *Savage Inequality*, education is going on is for the rich and secure suburban communities. The family is transforming as more people get married than divorced, and an unprecedented number of people, including parents, never get married. Today a majority of the countries children live in poverty. The same di can be repeated in health, housing, nutrition, etc.

This rapid social decay is plunging healthy communities so far down that they have become forbidden zones, areas that are stigmatized and avoided. This is obvious for inner city areas of Black and Latinos, but this includes the prisons, the Indian reservations, small town and rural areas where white poverty remains relatively invisible. The center piece of this is the way in which tv (legal) and crack (illegal) have captured the time of the poor and transformed many of their activities into anti-social and increasingly violent orgies. The mainstream media tends to place the blame on the moral degeneracy and lack of leadership within the communities suffering from poverty, rather than place these developments in a causal chain that starts with the liquidation of the economic structures that have enabled people to lead safe and secure lives.

4. Destroying the Safety Net. The political response to this crisis has been an attack on the poor and economically insecure. This is the fourth point. Both Clinton and Gingrich agree that the budget should be balanced in 7 years, that big government should be cut down to size, that people should be forced off of welfare, etc., etc. They argue about how fast this should happen, and how soft the process should be. The big point is their agreement, that the role of government is not to insure the economic security of the population. The Republicans are driving the national debate, moving it further and further to the right. One example of this is the current debate over taxes. >From 1954 to 1963, if you were single with kids you paid a tax rate of 78% of all the money you earned over \$75,000. Today the overall rate for these people is 31%. The plan for a so called flat tax, proposed by the super rich conservative Steve Forbes, would reduce this rate down to 17%. If we went back to the 196 could get rid of the deficit with little difficulty. They say its more difficult than that, but that's only because they want poor people to pay for the debt.

The Peoples Tribune carried an article by Bruce Parry that sums this budget crisis up very clearly as an attack on poor people:

The real questions about the budget are not over whether it can be balanced. They are about who is going to pay. The rulers of this country -- from Clinton and Gingrich on down -- are planning to make those with less -- ordinary people -- pay more. And they want those with more -- rich and business owners -- to pay less. That's just as backward as everything else they do! Cutting housing means people are freezing to death on the streets. Cutting public assistance means children are starving. Cutting Medicare and Medicaid means people are dying who could be saved. Cutting education means our kids are graduating illiterate and dropping out of what they consider useless schools because they see no future. So we must hold these people responsible.

Perhaps the most devastating transformation of the political culture is the criminalization of the poor. If poor people can't meet a middle class standard in terms of raising their children, they risk arrest, imprisonment and the loss of custody of their children. You do more time in prison for crack

possession than stealing a great deal of money. There are now over 5 million people behind bars. Further Blacks gets the worst end of this as well as nearly 7 percent of Black males are incarcerated. As drug offenders now account for 60% of prisoners, it is important to note the severity of sentences for crack which is clearly a class based attack. Black people make up 13% of the population and about that same level of drug use. But they are 35% of those arrested for drug use, 55% of those convicted, and 74% of those serving time as a result of this so called drug war.

5. Spiritual Crisis. Finally, the fifth point is that this crisis is sapping the idealism from the American spirit robbing people of their idealism, expectations of social progress, and belief in the American way of life. People are spiritually impoverished.

A New Class, A New Hope

This portrayal should not, however, produce depression and the dread of defeat. There is a basis for hope and optimism. The key and historically most significant point of all is that these revolutionary developments are revolutionary mainly because they are bringing a new class into existence. This new class has both the necessity and possibility for transforming society. This is good news indeed.

A flower can be called a weed, and if we believe that it is, we will treat it as such. We will kill it and be content in our ignorance that we have done good. But if we study the situation and find out that this is not a weed but a sweet and beautiful flower, then we will nurture it and help it develop so that it reaches its full potential. Gingrich and Clinton call the new class a bunch of criminals, weeds in their garden. But, we are suggesting that members of the new class are the flowers destined to make the gardens of the world beautiful and sweet smelling in the 21st century. We are the gardeners, and we must plan for what has to be done.

A class is an aggregate of people forced into existence by a structural change in the economy, who are socially molded into a historical force destined to vie for power and control of the society. The concept of class is always associated with class struggle. Class struggle is not just the sum of every issue, little or big. This is about which class rules society, and how the economic wealth of the society is distributed.

The industrial system emerged with both the capitalists and the workers uniting to defeat the feudal powers. But the conditions of their relationship put the capitalists in control. The capitalists owned the means of production and forced the workers to sell their labor power because there was no other way to survive. In fact, it was the social organization of production, especially the factory system, that imposed a discipline upon the workers. Otherwise, the role of the police was to make sure that discipline was maintained.

The workers in turn fought the bosses and the police to achieve certain standards for their lives, especially in wages and benefits, hours of work, conditions of work, etc. This general set of terms can be summed up as the social contract. This can be summed up as the terms of class peace between the workers and the capitalists.

Now we have a new proletariat. They are people who not only have no means of earning a living other than going to work for somebody, but now they are useless labor in an economy run by smart machines. They are outside of the existing social contract. This is forcing the emergence of a police state, because there is no other way to impose discipline on these permanently unemployed workers.

The illegal ploy is the spread of drugs and gangs for the youth, so the legal state can rise to the dangers and throw folks in jail.

There are at least four approaches to this problem, where both scholars and theoreticians joined with politicians in developing policy.

1. Jeremy Rifkin understands that people will be permanently unemployed and calls for a new renaissance of benevolence, sort of like George Bush and his 1000 points of light in a kinder more gentle America.
2. Alvin and Heidi Toffler join with Gingrich and project a hi-tech future in which the knowledge workers join with the capitalists, while the rest are written off. This is a sort of 21st century Social Darwinism, the survival of the fittest.
3. Robert Reich joins with Clinton and sees a resurgence of jobs in the new hi-tech future. This is the "we can win if we give it the old college try" model.
4. Finally, we have the analysis put forth by Nelson Peery and the League of Revolutionaries for a New America. This position argues that we are in a revolutionary process of transformation, and thus far are heading fast toward the end of work and a police state. This is not because these people in power are bad or they have bad ideas, but because they are forced to do this in order to preserve their capitalist rule. This position argues for a revolutionary motion in the opposite direction toward rebuilding the US with a new vision, a new American Dream, one that is worth fighting for.

What all of this means for Black people is quite clear. The leading political leadership for the Black community has been the middle class, first at the head of a people driven by their condition in the rural South, and then by the urban workers. The 1960's was the end of the unity between the Black middle class leaders and the masses of Black poor and working people. Now, there is a political split, and the Black middle class has parted company with the Blacks in the new proletariat because they are relatively secure and the others are not.

In fact, the vision of the Black middle class will be promoted in campaign after campaign. But that vision will fail because it does not address the fundamental reality of the new class. The best two examples I can think of have to do with the two most important political events in the last few years for Black people in the USA--the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion and the Million Man March. Both events reflected great commitment and mobilization, but neither had a political program. Now each has attempted to define a political program--the outline of a plan for economic development attributed to the Cripps and the Bloods, as well as the general plan developed by the Summit of Black leadership after the MMM. Both of these efforts tried to argue that a program of Black capitalism under the leadership of the Black middle class would work.

This is a misunderstanding of history and the issues we have been discussing here. At the end of the 19th century, this program of Black capitalism was undertaken by Booker T Washington and others to consolidate the Black middle class as a leadership. This was a useful strategy, as there was room to maneuver in a segregated society based on an expanding industrial economy. Today, based on the five revolutionary processes, no such Black capitalist program makes any real sense at all. This is fantasy, pure and simple. The main character of the Black middle class is not Black business, but professional jobs in government and corporate settings. The masses of Black people are on their own.

By Way of Conclusion

If this is the end of work as we've known it, then our discussions are not a luxury but a necessity. Placing history on an objective basis is the key to understanding historical necessity. Will we do what is necessary? I think so. As Nelson Peery stated in our recent conference: "Humanity has never failed to make reality from the possibilities created by each great advance in the means of production. This time there is no alternative to stepping across that nodal line and seizing tomorrow."

Now is a great time to be alive. Its time to seize the time, brothers and sisters, its time to seize the time. Phone 312-536-0374; Fax 312-538-1128; Email alkalimat@aol.com

