



*Essay*

## Peoples College: A Black Liberation Project Based at Fisk University, 1970–1975

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### *Abstract*

Peoples College was a Black Liberation organization formed at Fisk University in 1970 that united students, faculty, and community activists.<sup>1</sup> It was a rebirth of a project with the same name founded by Charles Johnson at Fisk University in the 1930s, but qualitatively different. This article will present an overview of its history. Peoples College is one model for implementing the slogan of the National Council for Black Studies, “Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility.” With respect to method, this paper is part memoir; part digging in the archival collection that Peoples College created; and part consultation with those who joined me in this effort. As we, in Peoples College, often said, “A small group united around a correct line can make a big battle.” I hope to explain what those big battles were, and encourage activists today to use what we did and learned.

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## Introduction

Peoples College developed in three important contexts: the historically Black college; the Black Liberation Movement; and Third-World Revolutionary developments.

Institutions of higher education for African Americans mainly developed after the American Civil War. These institutions were set up by people and organizations carrying forward the Abolitionist Movement after the war. Religious organizations and high-ranking officers of the Union Army did much of the work. Fisk University was founded in 1866, and named after Clinton B. Fisk, a Union General and Assistant Commissioner of the Tennessee Freemen's Bureau. Many years later, in 1946, Charles Johnson, a sociologist with a PhD from the University of Chicago, became the university's first African American president. In many ways, Fisk became one of the leading institutions serving African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were initially modeled on the standards of mainstream institutions, with a white faculty and a Eurocentric curriculum anchored in the Greek and Latin languages and literatures. In the 1940s, things began to change. The number of Black faculty increased, and new curriculum and library initiatives began to focus on the Black experience, including Africa and the African Diaspora. Student activism began to make waves against what was perceived as institutional racism.

Most HBCUs had programs that linked them to the community. One manifestation of this was how the music of the enslaved community 'experience' was transformed into concert hall performance masterworks. At Fisk, this was led by three generations of a family holding music professorships (John Wesley Work, Sr.; John Wesley Work, Jr., 1871-1925; and John Wesley Work, III, 1901-1967) and the Fisk student choral group, the Jubilee Singers.<sup>3</sup>

General conditions faced by Black people, especially in the U.S. South, impacted the faculty and students at HBCUs. For the most part, the political climate on each campus was decidedly conservative, with strict rules limiting involvement in political activism. However, there were initiatives that linked the campus to the

community, and academic scholarship to the anti-racist struggle to improve the conditions of the Black community. From 1896 to 1914, W. E. B. DuBois organized a series of conferences that brought community leaders to the campus of Atlanta University. In 1936, the National Negro Congress formed at Howard University. From 1944 to 1956, Charles Johnson ran the Race Relations Institute at Fisk University, each year holding a major national conference.<sup>4</sup>

All of these activities were reacting to the major tendencies in the Black Freedom Movement, especially the diverse thinking of Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and W. E. B. DuBois. The movement went into high gear after the system-changing *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954. Movement advances included the 1960 sit-in movement and the 1963 March on Washington. The big breakthrough was the surge for Black Power in 1966 after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, revolutionary currents were surging in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Revolutions seized power in China (1949), Ghana (1957), and Cuba (1959). Meetings forged Third-World unity before, during, and after these revolutions: the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, UK (1945); the Bandung Conference of representatives from twenty-nine governments of Asian and African nations in Indonesia (1955); and the Tricontinental Conference and subsequent Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (OSPAAAL) in Cuba (1966).

In the context of this general political environment of rising challenges to imperialism, Black activists were moving into higher education, and making innovative moves. I was one of these activists. As a graduate student in Sociology at the University of Chicago (1963-1967), I was active on campus as president of the Society for Social Research, and in the community as chair of the Chicago Area Friends of SNCC and founding chair of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC).<sup>6</sup> Rather than take a position in a mainstream institution, I went to Fisk University. I was well aware of the intellectual focus of DuBois, Oliver Cox, and E. Franklin Frazier, as well as the militancy of Malcolm X.

This essay will describe the origin and development of Peoples College from 1967 to 1975. The group passed through three phases: Origins (1967-1970); Local Struggles (1970-1973); and National Struggles (1973-1975). This account will focus

on four aspects of each stage: organizational development; study programs and ideological development; campaigns of struggle; and for the last phase, international activity. Peoples College in Nashville, Tennessee ended in 1975; but, several of us reestablished it in Chicago in 1976. That period is for another time; this chapter is an HBCU story.

## Origins

My personal strength—and weakness—was that I was not fully socialized into the Black middle class. Only when my working-class parents got divorced did I live with relatives in a middle-class household, and only for a few years. Because of this, I did not feel the respect that Fisk and its traditions were due. Even my several older relatives, who had gone to Fisk, did not sway me on this.<sup>7</sup> I had a love/hate relationship with the school. This was also because many of my heroes had been fired by HBCUs, even while they remained committed to them.

When I got to Fisk in 1967, at age twenty-four, the faculty included such giants as Arna Bontemps and Aaron Douglass, both still teaching, alongside David Driskell, Robert Hayden, Stanlake Samkange, John Oliver Killens, and Carlton Moss. Added to that, a full lineup of scholars, artists, and activists came through campus every semester. Every tendency of what was hip and happening made contact, and, at Fisk, you could get close enough to talk to them, and catch the spirit behind the message being laid down.

In that first year at Fisk, I took a militant Black Power posture when speaking at a faculty forum sponsored by the Fisk chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). In this session, the older faculty were trying to hear what the young voices were saying. I said this:

There are some of us on the faculty with a new spirit, a new thirst for creative ideas, a new kind of willingness to face the ambiguity of experimentation. And while it is a bit raw, the cry of Black people in Lowndes County, Alabama, is most relevant here. This is our cry to those who would serve as obstacles: ‘Move on over, or we’ll move on over you.’<sup>8</sup>

I was a new faculty member, with good intentions, channeling the winds of change blowing around the world—but, more than a little arrogant.

In 1959, Charles Johnson's Institute on Race Relations had ended its activities. Then, in 1966, the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries at Fisk University established the Amistad Research Center to house the historical records of the American Missionary Association. This special archival center was a major development, even though it sadly lasted only five years. My first initiative was to join Fisk colleague, Paul Puryear, in forming a research center to study and learn from the urban insurrections that had recently broken out. But, the center ended before it began; the money came with strings. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) explained that as a condition of the funds, we were to give them our field notes with all names and details. The two of us rejected this state surveillance as bad scholarship, and even worse for the movement.

During this time, I was in close communication with Vincent Harding at Spelman College in Atlanta. He and I dreamed up the idea of the Institute of the Black World (IBW), and toward that end, he recruited me to the faculty of Spelman's Department of History and Sociology in 1968. Once there, Kofi Wangara and I co-taught a course called Two Continents of African Revolution. Before the semester ended, our students made a move to seize control of a combined board of trustees meeting of all the colleges that were part of the Atlanta University Center. I joined in along with A. B. Spellman, a brilliant poet and jazz scholar, then on the faculty at Morehouse College. As a result, in 1969, A. B. and I were expelled from the institute, as well as Spelman and Morehouse. After a short interlude, the senior administrators, whom I had talked about so hard, brought me back to Fisk University in 1970. In a sense, they were safeguarding Fisk as a multigenerational project.<sup>9</sup>

In fall 1970, a handful of faculty, students, staff, and community members began to think about the history of Fisk, and what we could find to stand on. Included in this group were two more Black Studies faculty I had recruited to Fisk. Our search led us to the 1930s People's College founded by Charles Johnson. In his words, it was:

A People's College—an experiment in adult education which attempts to work out educational procedures, taking into account cultural factors influencing the learning processes. In addition to a regular schedule at the center, decentralized classes of one or more persons are conducted in various homes in the community.<sup>10</sup>

The original People's College focused on a strategic program of survival for lower-income, Black people, much in the tradition of Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago. Fisk faculty and students taught classes in community settings on literacy, home economics, civics, and skills related to family security and occupational success. While Fisk was breaking a path for students to middle-class success, the 1930s People's College helped community residents gain access to a stable, working-class life.

Forty years later, we wanted to continue serving working-class people in Nashville. We sought a curriculum to link students to a working-class ideological and political orientation for activism in the Black Liberation Movement. As part of the nationwide, and even global, demand for Black Power, we focused first on Black History and Pan-Africanism.

Starting in mid-fall 1970, Peoples College offered Basic College: Saturday sessions at the Pearl Street YWCA from 10:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Our slogan was "Further the Analysis, Heighten the Contradictions." We aimed to study and then engage in practical campaigns of struggle. We began our collective study in the context of the early days of Black Studies, but with a decidedly anti-imperialist orientation. The first People's College had been about reform; we connected the new People's College to a perspective linked more to world revolution. As our brochure said:

The Peoples College is an independent educational program for African communities in the Americas. We are trying to develop an alternative to existing educational programs because they serve the interests of racism, imperialism, and colonialism. Peoples College serves the interests of the people, and the necessity for Black liberation and world revolution.<sup>11</sup>

Faculty included Bobby Sengstacke, artist-in-residence in the Art Department; Phil Royster and Donald Graham from the English Department; and myself from Sociology. Seven students made up the rest of the planning committee. An average of twenty-two people attended the first eight sessions, and then increased to twenty-five for the next series. Each Saturday, we collected funds to compensate the sister who served as the YWCA staff on duty, and who enabled us to hold our event there.

The 1970 curriculum included Black History, Pan-Africanism, local community analysis, and a movie. One student's notes from the time demonstrated how the curriculum was linked to armed struggles for national liberation then

underway in six African countries. While a Fisk student, she was also co-leading the sessions, and she remained involved in the Peoples College throughout her years at Fisk.

#### Session 1: September 4

**Pattern of Sovereignty:** Purpose of the class is to introduce members of the class to Africa by 1: becoming acquainted with names and locations of countries, dates of political independence, and previous sovereignty of countries; 2. Entities and their colonial rulers; 3. Pointing out the countries fighting national liberation struggles and their respective progressive party (ies); 4. Interpreting the political color scheme on the map we will use.

#### Session 2: September 11

**Colonialism, Imperialism, and Neo-colonialism:** Purpose of the class is to give an idea of the continent during the colonial period, and an understanding of the three key terms.<sup>12</sup> To learn the geography of Africa, one exercise used a wall map of Africa and the song “Africa I Will Go” that called out the names of all countries. Peoples College members could, and did, sing that song at the drop of a hat!<sup>13</sup>

### Local Struggles

First initiated by Fisk faculty and students, Basic College attracted local community activists as well as students from Tennessee State University, Vanderbilt University, and Meharry Medical College. Peoples College began an annual project to transform February’s Black History Month public history focus. Another slogan here—Peoples College relied on short formulations to maintain and promote its orientation—was “Left pole, mainstream.” This meant to participate as a left voice in mass political culture in order to impact the collective consciousness of the broad masses of people.

For Black History Month, we relied on another early community scholar/activist. Carter G. Woodson, who had started Negro History Week in 1916, and then it became Black History Month in the 1960s. We posed the question “History for What?” and answered, “Liberation!” Thus, we called the Peoples College program Black Liberation Month. This included publishing a February calendar every year with three entries for each day: an historical event pertaining to the freedom struggle; an event happening in the local community that year; and the activities of

Peoples College. We promoted history, unity with mass action, and our left pole activities.<sup>14</sup>

During this three-academic-year period, 1970–1973, Peoples College grew into a local cadre organization anchored in the study of Marxist theory.<sup>15</sup> By cadre, we meant people who had committed to a high level of organizational discipline. You could count on them to carry out agreed-upon tasks, and they would serve as a staff to carry out a plan of action. Members and those interested participated in one or more of six study groups, each studying different material: high school, freshman, college, community, professional, and cadre (professional here meant faculty in supporting roles as compared to faculty who were cadre). The study groups took various names; Yoruba at Tennessee State was particularly active. In spring 1971, the cadre study group read the following, each accompanied with a detailed study guide:

- March 2 Mao Tse-Tung, *Four Essays on Philosophy* (“On Practice,” “On Contradiction”)
- March 9 Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*
- March 13 Yuri Popov, *Political Economy, and African Reality*
- March 23 E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*
- March 30 Kwame Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa*
- April 6 V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Last Stage of Capitalism*
- April 13 Robert Allen, *Dialectics of Black Power*  
James Boggs, *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*  
Black Workers Congress, “Manifesto”
- April 20 Amilcar Cabral, *The Struggle in Guinea* Sekou Toure, “A Dialectical Approach to Culture”  
Tanzania African National Union, *Arusha Declaration*

To have a public face and recruit people into our study group processes, we identified three targets—students, workers, and community members. For students, Peoples College initiated a Black Student United Front bringing together students from different campuses. Once we had a base among college students at Fisk and Tennessee State, we turned to high school students. Peoples College helped the Black Student United Front publish a mimeographed weekly newsletter called the *Black Student Voice*. Leaflet teams hit local high schools after school—Cameron, Pearl,



North, East, and Cumberland—as well as college campuses—Fisk, Tennessee State, and Meharry Medical College. As the April 26, 1971, issue explained:

During the past two weeks the Black Student United Front of Nashville has mobilized some 500 to 600 students to march against oppression and in support of the Black Community Conference call for a city-wide boycott of white business interests in Nashville...The student body presidents of Meharry and Vanderbilt have come out in support of the BCC [Black Community Conference] and the people's struggle in Nashville. Reuben Warren, president of the Meharry Medical College Pre-Alumni Council and Leighton 'Lil Rock' Brown, president of the sophomore class of Fisk University are both members of the Black Student United Front.<sup>16</sup>

After a successful spring and summer of organizing, the Black Student United Front, along with Peoples College, sent a delegation to the National Convention of the National Association of Black Students (NABS) in Chicago held on August 2, 1971. Later, as a result of this connection, Peoples College was able to send a member on a NABS delegation to a revolutionary tour of China.

Meanwhile, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit was putting forward a Manifesto of the International Black Workers Congress. The draft was to be considered at a national meeting also held in August 1971, but in Detroit. They stated their mission:

The International Black Workers Congress is an organization of Black workers and students who have joined together to further the revolutionary struggle in the United States and other parts of the world, to consolidate many existing organizations, and to build unity among the revolutionary third world forces.<sup>17</sup>

This helped to guide us to the emerging workers movement in Nashville, and to establish relations with Black workers organizing at the Avco Corporation. Being marginalized by the existing (and racist) union, the Black workers in the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Local 735 formed a Black rank-and-file organization, and laid out six objectives: “(1) Equal representation; (2) equal punishment for equal violations; (3) equal employment opportunities; (4) courteous

and respectful treatment; (5) opportunities for advancement; and (6) a voice in all decisions governing Black workers.”<sup>18</sup>

A Peoples College coalition of workers and students began collaborating on political education. For broad community work, Peoples College began to operate a weekly car wash on the corner of 18th and Jefferson, across the street from Fisk, on a major street leading to Tennessee State past Meharry. The car wash recruited people to participate and join Peoples College. It raised money, and it made Peoples College more visible in the community. The car wash was a remarkable collective effort where faculty, students, and workers all got down scrubbing cars while also talking with the waiting drivers about our work and political realities.

Out of the spring 1971 study and outreach, a core group formed what we named the New World Summer Collective. First, they met daily for a month to talk it over. Then, nine people decided to live and work communally for the summer. Some people did take time out to visit family, and several participated in international study trips to West and East Africa. But, the collective functioned all summer.

The nine people, and, to an extent, all of Peoples College members, fully explored the meaning of the phrase “the personal is political.” Keeping self and space clean moved beyond the personal and fostered collective discipline. Food was a big issue, again, respect for personal needs, and also for collective agreements. One decision recorded in the Collective’s notes was “No snacking on leftovers that are needed for the next meal.”

Led by events in the Summer Collective, Peoples College began using criticism sessions to solve problems. We used Mao’s “Combat Liberalism” as our guide. Another egalitarian practice, like the car wash, was what we called ideological exercise: up at 5:30 a.m. for thirty minutes of exercise followed by a two-mile run. Often, those who ran their mouths the most came in last on the run, for example, this author.

Even with all of these collective-building efforts in place, conflicts emerged. In a struggle over Coltrane versus Sly and the Family Stone, no LPs were broken; but, time sharing was negotiated. More profoundly, one member of the collective got a local Peoples College member pregnant. In that case, I remember there was too much shame and confusion to resolve the conflict with a balance of openness and respect. Unfortunately, Peoples College was not at the cutting edge of every awakening of that time. Over the entire lifespan of Peoples College, the group was small enough that

marriages—there were three—buoyed and grounded us; but, breakups or divorces polarized and demoralized us.

At the end of summer 1971, Peoples College had enough resources and energy to open a bookstore. Timbuktu: The Market of New Africa soon became one of the only bookstores in the U.S. South with a combined focus on Black Liberation and World Revolutionary Theory. One room became an art gallery; the first exhibit focused on Malcolm X. Timbuktu asked movements across the country to let us distribute their material. We asked college faculty to integrate Timbuktu offerings into their curriculum. The bookstore became an oasis where all kinds of social movements and radical individuals could connect with Peoples College and the relevant literature.

Peoples College wrote *Handbooks of Struggle* to guide members in carrying out campaigns. One of the first was a twelve pager for Black Liberation Month 1972 which read in part:

This is a general ideological formulation for Black Liberation Month (BLM). This document is the basis for all members of the staff of BLM, so that everybody who gets involved will have a full understanding of what it is we are doing and why...BLM is a mass action...In a mass action everyone on the staff must be fully able to give a ten-minute rap on Peoples College and BLM at a moment's notice.<sup>19</sup>

This level of preparation helped Peoples College hold four weekend conferences (aiming for 150 people each) during Black Liberation Month 1972: (1) Culture, February 4-6; (2) Youth, February 11-13; (3) Labor, February 18-20; and (4) Politics, February 25-27. These conferences served three functions: They helped develop leadership as different cadre stepped forward to speak and play key organizing roles. They pulled in many new contacts, and expanded our ability to connect with a mass base. Most important of all, Peoples College did, in fact, plant a left pole in community-level public discourse. We showed that it makes sense to develop a critical and public opposition to all kinds of exploitation and oppression.

Peoples College began a transition from local to national engagement with two major events dealing with the Black Student Movement. The first involved the murder of two students at Southern University in Louisiana. I went to Louisiana to investigate, and, subsequently, Peoples College published a pamphlet of student protest

documents, as well as a general analysis of the struggle. Here is what happened: at 4:00 a.m. on November 16 (1972), four more student leaders were arrested. Shortly thereafter, Sheriff Amiss is quoted to have said in a phone conversation that he was out to get the students, and if they harmed a deputy, he would “be on their ass for years.” Later, at about 9:00 a.m., a group of students went to President Netterville’s office to ask him to find out why the four students had been arrested, and what he could do to free them. Five students entered the building peacefully to wait for him to go downtown. About twenty other students were inside the building, and several hundred were outside. The offices were functioning normally.

At 10:30 a.m., state police, sheriff’s deputies, helicopters, and even an armored tank appeared on Southern’s campus. Suddenly, the students inside the building were blasted with tear gas cannisters. A few cannisters were thrown back at the police. Then, just as suddenly, bullets claimed the lives of Denver Smith and Leonard Brown. The remaining students were driven off campus, and the university was shut down.<sup>20</sup>

Several students were expelled, but several progressive faculty members helped them transfer to other HBCUs. Peoples College helped one student get admitted to Fisk. There were four investigations after the murders, but no formal charges. The killing officers went free without penalty.

The second event was Peoples College connecting with the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU) based in North Carolina. They had a “Save and Change Black Institutions” campaign, and called for a national conference. Peoples College wrote a fifty-six-page history of Nashville HBCUs including Fisk, Tennessee State, and Meharry. Copies were made to distribute at the conference. This was an important hook-up as the young activists of Peoples College were meeting their peers, and could better understand the broader movement that we were part of.<sup>21</sup>

During this same time, 1972 and 1973, Peoples College took up campaigns to support the workers at Fisk. Two locals were involved, Distributive Workers of America Local 19A (clerical workers) and Local 1410 (maintenance workers). In spring 1971, Fisk maintenance workers had begun a drive to eliminate depressed wages, lousy working conditions, and, most importantly, to gain the right to collectively bargain for, and negotiate, a contract. Similar circumstances developed when Fisk clerical workers struggled for similar rights and against similar conditions in the following fall. One of our slogans was “A raise in pay for 19A, Say it again for 1410!”

There was more: “‘Let the workers have a say’ was the rallying cry of Locals 19A and 1410 on October 24 and 25 doing demonstrations outside the Board of Trustees meetings, the workers called for more pay and representation. 19A is asking for a 10 percent increase with a cost-of-living clause. 1410 is asking for 55c per hour increase while both unions are asking for representation on the Board of Trustees.”<sup>22</sup> Peoples College made buttons and leaflets, and organized students to march on campus. Local 19A won a contract, and set off similar struggles at Meharry Medical College and Vanderbilt University.

Peoples College took its political education activities into the formal Fisk classroom by developing a two-semester course: *Modern Culture and Black People*. This course was jointly taught by Abdul Alkalimat, Joseph Seward, and Ronald Bailey, and assisted by Sister Ayanna, who was employed as staff in Afro-American Studies. She had been a student at Fisk for several years and was a Peoples College cadre; she attended team meetings and sometimes classes. The first semester was organized around weekly topics specifically:

1. What’s it all about? (Introduction)
2. What was Africa like before the Europeans came? (Colonization)
3. What was slavery all about? (Slavery)
4. What is modern? (Capitalism)
5. Are all Black people the same? (Social Class)
6. Can Black people get a “piece of the American pie”? (Political Economy)
7. What kind of political power do Black people have in the USA? (Government and the Power of the State)
8. Why is religion so strong in the Black community? (Church as a Social Institution)
9. Has education paid off for Black people? (The School as an Agent of Social Change)
10. How and why do we spend our money? (The Consumption of Popular

Culture)

11. What was the struggle in the 1960s all about? (Civil Rights Struggle for Democratic Rights)
12. What are the basic ideas of an integrationist? (Theory of Assimilation)
13. What are the basic ideas of a nationalist? (Theory of Nationalism)
14. What are the basic ideas of a revolutionary? (Theory of Internationalism)

The team met at 7 a.m. on Monday mornings to hear and react to a run-through by the person giving the lecture for that week. Criticisms frequently led to changes and improvements in the week's lecture and what was asked of students. The team coped with crisis when one of the team members, suffering from substance abuse, had to drop out. But, the course kept going. However, the assignments hit the students hard, and they organized a formal protest. Weekly four-page papers were deemed too extreme. We loved the fact that they protested. We wanted them to learn to protest whenever they felt they were being treated unfairly. We held meetings, and, eventually, won them over. They began to meet the challenge, and felt empowered by their weekly achievement.

The first semester was a more of a survey course with students reading chapters and articles. The second semester involved a deep reading of full books. We called them the Black Classics: W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*; Charles Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*; Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Black Worker*; St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis, Volume One*; Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*; and Malcolm X, *Autobiography*. Through this work, Fisk's academic curriculum was absorbing the Peoples College Movement reading list.

## National Struggles

As the organization grew roots, structure, and influence, Peoples College was able to form connections with others across the county. Its work became not only local, but national. In fact, this began with an international focus—for, as already apparent, Peoples College always attended to global realities and struggles.

First, came Africa and the African Diaspora. In 1973, we connected with the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC), a group that took shape after the historic 1972 African Liberation Day demonstration held in Washington, DC.<sup>23</sup> This consolidated Peoples College's working relationship with SOBU as that organization changed its name to Youth Organization for Black Unity (YOBU).

Peoples College emerged in the ALSC organizational process in three ways: First, we constituted an official local chapter of ALSC. Second, we proposed a draft for the ALSC Statement of Principles, which, along with drafts proposed by comrades in North Carolina and California, served as the basis for the final document. This was the first major contribution that linked Peoples College to a national organizational development.

This happened because Peoples College had transitioned into a cadre-formed collective united on the basis of its understanding and application of Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, comrades in YOBU and Malcolm X Liberation University (MXLU) were going through the same process.<sup>24</sup> The unity of these two collectives, along with a few others, served as the revolutionary network that collaborated to build ALSC. Leading comrades from YOBU and MXLU traveled to Nashville to meet with Peoples College and created principles of unity. Over three days of discussions, we summarized experiences; shared views on key questions; negotiated eight major points of unity; and signed a unity statement.<sup>25</sup>

The third way that Peoples College emerged in ALSC, and thus, on the national scene, was that a comrade in Peoples College (this author) was elected to the National Executive Committee to head ALSC's research and development. To accomplish this, and to continue to build Peoples College, the group took this as a collective assignment. We adopted the basic methodology developed in the local Nashville work. Every campaign was led by a handbook of struggle developed by Peoples College, with staff functioning as the research and development committee.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps, because of this approach, this national engagement did not deter Peoples College from being active in local struggles.<sup>27</sup> This became critical when Ronald Lee Joyce, a student at Tennessee State University, was murdered by police on November 23, 1973. This brought forth anger and outrage from the community. His family was well-known, with an extensive network of relatives and friends. Peoples College immediately took the lead in organizing the Nashville Coalition Against Police

Repression on November 28, pulling together thirty organizations to formulate demands for justice. Two major demands were developed:

1. That the 4 policemen involved in the murder of Ronald Lee Joyce be suspended immediately without pay until there is a full investigation by a citizens committee; and
2. That this citizens committee be formed to select the next chief of police and to investigate police brutality in general. The committee should have at least 50% Black membership selected by the Coalition Against Police Repression.<sup>28</sup>

A broad-based campaign to publicize the case, and mobilize people to get involved in backing the two demands began with a rally at TSU on December 3, 1973. Peoples College speakers included Malik Kambon, Walter Searcy, Craig Edwards, Ricki Stevenson, and myself. The campaign plan was intense: (1) Dec 5: Black Workers Unity Rally; (2) Dec 6: Student Strike Day; (3) Dec 7: Black Button Day; (4) Dec 9: Black Sunday; and (5) Holidays: Selective buying and banking campaign: Cain-Sloan, Harvey's, and Third National Bank. Although the officers were not convicted of any crime, the Metro Nashville Police Chief Hugh Mott was forced to resign under public pressure. A newspaper reported his comment: "In a letter of resignation read by the mayor, Mott said he was taking the action 'because some leaders of our community and some elements of the news media have expressed a lack of confidence in my leadership of the police department.'"<sup>29</sup> The coalition was a major victory for building a local united front process.

Also, during this period, Peoples College began to practice and experience class defection by cadre moving from middle-class jobs and student roles into working-class jobs. This was a national trend: radicalization grounded in proletarianization. Students and faculty left their positions and went to work in a shoe factory, Genesco. This company was, at one time, among Tennessee's largest employers. At its peak in the 1960s, it had shoe factories all over the state including Nashville, Gallatin, Tullahoma, Waynesboro, Hohenwald, Lewisburg, Pulaski, Cowan, Centerville, McMinnville, Camden, and Smithville.

Genesco's stock was, for nearly forty years, one of the most reliable and profitable investments in America. Many Nashville families built wealth from 1930



through 1970 by owning shares of it. Genesco was so big that it acquired other firms engaged in everything from making clothing and perfume to running variety stores. In fact, when the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's* came out, Genesco owned Tiffany's!<sup>30</sup>

The process of sinking roots in the working class also involved confronting behaviors that were neither healthy nor morally sustainable. Workers in the factory had a cultural practice of using drugs and alcohol during and after work. This meant Peoples College cadre in the workforce had to negotiate a social invitation to smoke and drink with the brothers and sisters.

Even more important was political practice. One example was how to prepare a leaflet. Our comrades prepared more than one leaflet that got no worker take-up. But, one day, comrade Aysha went to eat lunch in a restaurant that specialized in fish sandwiches. She got to talking with the sister-owner who used to work at Genesco. She took the leaflet, shared it with some of her friends, and they rewrote it. Instantly, it became a leaflet that worked, and got the interest of workers. The lesson was clear: the workers had to lead their own struggle, and intellectuals (students and faculty) had to back their play.

Beyond ALSC, the international situation became the critical focus for Peoples College: 1973, on the Caribbean and Cuba; 1974, China; and 1975, the Middle East. Each focus included a program of study, the organizing of a national conference, and international travel. These activities were sometimes part of the Fisk University Afro-American Studies Program; but, were always directed by activists in Peoples College and the ALSC.

The November 1973 Conference was “The Caribbean in the 1970s: Crisis, Conflict, and Change.” The conference call included this:

Afro-Americans must link up throughout the Americas—Canada, U.S.A., Caribbean, Central and South American countries. We have planned this conference to include academic intellectuals and movement activists. Specifically involving folks from Fisk, Vanderbilt, Meharry, Tennessee State University and the University of the West Indies, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and the African Liberation Support Committee. We are holding this conference because we are committed to both scientifically understanding the world, and organizing progressive forces to do something about it. We hope

everyone who participates will join us in walking on the two legs of analysis and action, theory and practice.<sup>31</sup>

Five panels and keynotes featured nineteen speakers, including twelve from the Caribbean countries of Antigua, Barbados, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. Three members of the ALSC Executive Committee spoke at the conference, not counting this author: Gene Locke (chair), Tim Hector (Caribbean Region), and Owusu Sadaukai (Southern Region).

Peoples College practiced a method of summing up the conference while it took place. At the end of each day, conference staff would work all night with tapes and notes to prepare a detailed report on the day's discussion. This would be mimeographed and distributed the next morning. This made sure that the conference would have its memory intact, and used as it proceeded through its scheduled program. People took this as respect for their contribution. We infused in the conference itself a confidence that the record of the event would be secured and would spread.<sup>32</sup>

Two Peoples College speakers were focused on Cuba: "On Ending Underdevelopment in the Caribbean: The Cuban Model," and "Racism and the National Question: The Cuban Case for Socialism." The conference also featured a large poster display called "Expo Cuba" that celebrated the Cuban Revolution.<sup>33</sup>

This followed from the first direct contact between Cuba and Peoples College: a September 1972 trip to Havana where I presented a paper "Black Liberation and Class Struggle: The Student Movement" at a seminar on Student Movements in Cuba, Vietnam, and the U.S.A.<sup>34</sup> The next direct organizational connection was with the Venceremos Brigade:

The Venceremos Brigade (VB) is an anti-imperialist project of political education and voluntary labor in solidarity with Cuba. We are an intergenerational, multi-racial, multi-cultural, gender-expansive/-inclusive collective of volunteers committed to changing US policy toward Cuba and strengthening the relationships between the Cuban Revolution and movements for justice in the US.<sup>35</sup>

Peoples College member, Walter Searcy, was invited to join the national committee of the Venceremos Brigade. Later, two other members joined a group of volunteers who went and worked in Cuba. Throughout this, we always made the speeches of Fidel and Che part of our study process.

The year 1974 involved a focus on China. Of course, Peoples College had always been students of Marxism through the works of Mao, and the lessons of the Chinese Revolution. But, our first direct contact was on a NABS delegation when a pregnant member of Peoples College was selected to go. The Chinese hosts thoroughly and graciously cared for her during the trip. The group met with Premier Zhou Enlai, and the Politburo and Central Cultural Revolution Group member, Jiang Qing. We, in Nashville, were proud to learn that Zhou Enlai addressed his first question to our comrade. He asked, “How could Peoples College be both Black and Marxist?” She answered that the principal contradiction in society was the class polarity of workers and capitalists. Peoples College was taking that position into the Black Liberation Movement based on the need to unite all against the capitalist ploy of racism to mislead white workers. She further explained that People’s College upheld Mao’s position:

I call on the workers, peasants, revolutionary intellectuals, enlightened elements of the bourgeoisie and other enlightened persons of all colors in the world, whether white, black, yellow or brown, to unite to oppose the racial discrimination practiced by U.S. imperialism and support the American Negroes in their struggle against racial discrimination. In the final analysis, national struggle is a matter of class struggle.<sup>36</sup>

I was then invited to join a 1975 touring delegation from the U.S. South. From my tapes and travel diary, I edited a book-length volume that was, in effect, a transcript of what the Chinese comrades had said. This document was the result of a study tour organized by the US-China Peoples Friendship Association. After several years of local developments, the association had its first national founding convention on the Labor Day weekend of 1974. At that time, there were only three local associations in the Southern region (Birmingham, Atlanta, and Tallahassee). Through several discussions, a trip was organized of people in the South who were interested in working

to build friendship between the people of the USA and the people of China. People were selected from five states—Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. Of the sixteen people in the delegation, three were Black; three had grown up in rural communities; and four had worked in factories in the South.<sup>37</sup>

The trip featured extensive discussions with party cadre in many factories and areas of production, education, and community life. Central Institute of Nationalities cadre told us:

There are many Marxist-Leninist works on the national question. The basic stand of Marxists is that the national struggle in the final analysis is a matter of class struggle. The very reason for the existence of national oppression is because there existed the class oppression and class exploitation. Only when the system of exploitation and oppression is abolished can the national question be solved. As to the concrete forms of solutions to the national question, this can only be chosen by the people of different countries in accordance with the concrete conditions by the people of different countries, by the people themselves based on the concrete conditions of each country.<sup>38</sup>

Timbuktu was a major distribution center for publications of Foreign Language Press of China. The critical awareness that we have to develop our own application of theory is something Peoples College got from both China and Cuba.

Our final international initiative had to do with the Middle East. A conference was organized for May 2-3, 1975, “World Crisis and the Middle East.” The conference call laid out the basic political line:

Our concern is based on the current exploitation and oppression of the masses of people in the Middle East. We stand totally opposed to the role of imperialism, sub-imperialism, and Zionism in all forms, especially the striving for hegemony by Israel. We believe that countries want independence, nations want liberation, and people want revolution. Therefore, this conference is dedicated to the masses of people in the Middle East, especially the masses of disposed people of Palestine.

We sent invitations to all the region's embassies or consulates requesting information, including Israel. Many replied, but not Israel. Shortly before the conference, a delegation from a leading Nashville synagogue approached the Fisk administration, which then called a meeting to discuss the conference with Rabbi Falk and a trustee from The Temple; two women from the Jewish Federation of Nashville; and a Fisk dean and vice president. Peoples College sent me to parley, and Ayanna to take notes.

Summing up from those notes, the community representatives equated anti-Zionism with antisemitism. We rejected that, and invited them to come and join the conference so that the truth could emerge from discussion and debate. They asked about the campus, and we explained that Fisk President James Lawson had taken a trip to Israel; but, we were not aware of his position, or if he had shared his impressions of Israel with the campus. Views were expressed against the conference and its call; but, academic freedom carried the day. No action was taken against the planned event.

Along with Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, its dealings with apartheid South Africa were also an issue for Peoples College. Israel sold guns and ran the diamond trade for South Africa. We stood with the African Liberation struggles. Therefore, these international situations were full of political issues foundational for the policy of Peoples College.

Finally, there were two high points for Peoples College in the national Black Liberation Movement: a debate within ALSC, and a conference we organized in Nashville. In 1974, ALSC was focused on class struggle. The ALSC Statement of Principles had launched a national debate between nationalists and Marxists that stimulated an explosion of study groups. The critical juncture of this debate was during an African Liberation Month 1974 conference held at Howard University. There were two major panels, and several workshops. At the panels, each person had a full forty-five minutes to speak. This was not a shortcut to debate; this was time to lay out full positions.<sup>39</sup>

Peoples College took the lead in presenting the Marxist position. Even Amiri Baraka saw the direction this debate was heading in:

Stokely Carmichael, Owusu, Muhammad Ahmed of the African People's Party, Kwadwo Akpan from PAC of Detroit (a Pan-Africanist cultural nationalist organization), Abdul Alkalimat from People's College, and myself, representing

CAP, all made presentations...Owusu's presentation was met with a standing ovation. Alkalimat's was the presentation that was the most clearly based on Marxist theory, and as such it was the most orderly presentation, with the most reference to consistent scientific analysis. This also was well received, because many of us in that audience were leaning heavily in that direction.<sup>40</sup>

Our Marxist position helped us to understand that building a united front was a strategic task. Peoples College sought the political transformation of Black intellectuals, and to link them with the Black Liberation Movement as a critical battlefield. In 1975, we took this focus and organized a National Planning Conference for the Year to Pull the Covers Off Imperialism Project.

Participants in the conference came from California, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas. Among the colleges and universities represented were Atlanta University, Cornell, Fisk, Meharry, North Carolina Central, North Carolina A & T, Northern Illinois University, Spelman, Stanford, State University of New York (Albany and Old Westbury), Tennessee State, and Wayne State University.

Conference participants represented many organizations: February First Movement, Black Economic Research Center, African Information Service, Association of Black Psychologists, African Heritage Studies Association, National Conference of Black Political Scientists, ALSC, A. Philip Randolph Institute, African Association for Black Studies, and the Association for the Study of Behavioral Sciences. Journalists from *African World*, *The Black Scholar*, *Review of Black Political Economy*, National Black Network, and the *St. Petersburg Times* also attended.<sup>41</sup>

The final declaration was unanimously adopted. Its final words spelled out the main tasks:

Therefore, we Black intellectuals must organize ourselves and forge unity around the historical condition of the people, and around the intellectual, moral, and political imperatives of our work.

**We Declare** that a primary task of Black intellectuals today is to study the character and historical development of U.S. imperialism, especially its impact

on Black people, and to promote this study throughout schools, publications, conferences, and organizations;

**We Declare** that the main objective of our study must be to expose the essence of imperialism and provide the intellectual tools necessary for combating every imperialist assault on the people;

**We Declare** that our immediate goal is to establish a new unity between Black intellectuals and the Black liberation movement in which intellectuals function to serve the interests of the people with humility based on compassion, strength base on science, and a revolutionary optimism that the people will triumph over all enemies and prosper.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, Peoples College evolved between 1970 to 1975 from a local collective of college students to an influential collective active at the national and international level fighting jointly for Socialism and Black Liberation. Our roots and base remained in Black Studies. But, within this history, there were struggles. Some students wanted to remain in local campus activities like student government. Some workers remained in the reform struggle for union rights and immediate reforms in the workplace. Realities of everyday life pulled people away from Peoples College. The collective in Nashville ceased to exist, but the struggle continued. Comrades continued to engage in social justice activities as lawyers, health workers, human relations professionals, book publishers, community center activists with youth, and as teachers. Within that, Peoples College reorganized in Chicago in 1977, which is a story for another time.

## Lessons and Legacy

It is both a joy and a challenge to sum up the lessons and legacy of Peoples College. This is how Peoples College can continue to live in the current movement. The most important lesson is how Peoples College made efforts to keep the dialectical unity of theory and practice. Intense study was never postponed; it was always a path to practice. The key was always summing up the practice, and using that summation to prepare to improve and make more impactful all subsequent programs of action.

Documents were collected, including individual notes. An archive was built, and this essay is a direct result of this practice.

Peoples College also used Mao's essay "Combat Liberalism" to guide criticism/self-criticism sessions. Mostly, certainly not always, people were open to self-criticism. Our concern was not to let errors be covered up, and serve to degenerate our process. This even happened when comrades brought forth their own sexual transgressions. We grasped our errors, healed, and grew stronger.

Another lesson was self-determination since we decided to rely on ourselves. The best example of this were comrades Aysha and Akindele who took responsibility for producing movement materials. Peoples College bought an A.B. Dick 360 offset printing press, and produced all of our own publications and more. We bought a button-making machine to make our own campaign buttons. One of those buttons is now on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Our policy went beyond just abstract thinking to be a guide to concrete application in our practice and in our struggle.

We were firm believers in the Frantz Fanon maxim, "Each generation has a mission; it can fulfill it or betray it." One of the great initiatives was the awakening of a section of Black intellectuals to reconnect with the Black Liberation Movement. Peoples College was part of that, and I am very grateful for the input on this chapter from alumni. As one alumna put simply, "Peoples College formed my world view." This was true for members and others we acted with, and there were many.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Benson, “Black Power, Education, and the History of the Peoples College,” *African American Intellectual History Society* (blog), May 17, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/black-power-education-and-the-history-of-the-peoples-college/>.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Martin Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley Work, *Folk Songs of the American Negro* (Nashville: Press of Fisk University, 1915); John Wesley Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940).

<sup>4</sup> “Atlanta University Studies” by W.E.B. DuBois, n.d., WEBDuBois.Org, <http://www.webdubois.org/wdb-AtlUniv.html>; Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow the National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Patrick J. Gilpin, “Charles S. Johnson and the Race Relations Institute at Fisk University,” *Phylon* 41, no. 3 (1980): 300–11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274793>.

<sup>5</sup> Les Payne and Tamara Payne, *The Dead are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, Rebecca Zorach, and Romi Crawford, eds., *The Wall of Respect: Public Art and Black Liberation in 1960s Chicago* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Two aunts of mine attended Fisk: Thelma Elise McWorter Kirkpatrick Wheaton and Ellen McWorter Yates.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald A. McWorter, “Where Is the Fisk Faculty Going?: On Assessment of Group Responsibility,” Fisk University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors Faculty Forum, (university talk, Fisk University, Nashville, TN, October 24, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, “Documents from the History of the Institute of the Black World,” Alkalimat.org, 2021, <https://www.alkalimat.org/ibw/>.

<sup>10</sup> Afro-American Studies Program, *Conference Bulletin: The Caribbean in the 1970s, Crisis, Conflict, and Change* (Nashville: Fisk University, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> Afro-American Studies Program, *Conference Bulletin: The Caribbean in the 1970s, Crisis, Conflict, and Change* (Nashville: Fisk University, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Ayanna, “Notes on Pan-Africanism Class of Basic College,” People’s College (lecture notes, Fisk University, Nashville, TN, 1970).

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<sup>13</sup> Ayanna, “Notes on Pan-Africanism Class of Basic College.” This quote references Kwame Nkrumah's “Africa I Will Go.”

<sup>14</sup> Peoples College, *Black Liberation Calendar* (February 1971, February 1972, and February 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Peoples College, *Peoples College Handbook* (March 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Black Student United Front, *Black Student Voice*, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> *Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism Online*, “Draft Proposal: Manifesto of the International Black Workers Congress 1970,” <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/bwc-manifesto.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Warner McCreary, “Cause-Find Commission,” 1970.

<sup>19</sup> Peoples College, *Black Liberation Month 1972 Handbook* (January 1, 1972).

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, “Tragedy at Southern University: Accident or Political Assassination?,” *Educentric*, 1973.

<sup>21</sup> Peoples College, “Documents of Struggle in Tennessee for the Save Black Schools Conference,” April 1973.

<sup>22</sup> Malik Kambon, “Workers Outline Demands,” *Fisk Forum X*, no. 3 (November 1974).

<sup>23</sup> Peoples College, *Selected Documentary History of People’s College in the African Liberation Support Committee* (Chicago: Peoples College Press, 1973).

<sup>24</sup> Howard Fuller and Lisa Frazier Page, *No Struggle, No Progress: A Warrior’s Life from Black Power to Education Reform* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014); Roderick D. Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and the Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Abdul Alkalimat. *Dialectics of Liberation: The African Liberation Support Committee* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2022), 148–50.

<sup>26</sup> Alkalimat, *Dialectics*, 154–55.

<sup>27</sup> Peoples College, “Nashville Coalition Against Police Repression: *December Offensive*” (November 1973).

<sup>28</sup> Peoples College, “Nashville Coalition,” 2–3.

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- <sup>29</sup> Larry Brinton and Allen Green, "Metro Police Chief Hugh Mott Resigns," *Nashville Banner*, November 28, 1973.
- <sup>30</sup> Bill Carey, "Genesco," *The Tennessee Magazine*, January 2018, <https://www.tnmagazine.org/genesco/>.
- <sup>31</sup> Afro-American Studies Program, Conference on *The Caribbean in the 1970s, Crisis, Conflict, and Change* (Nashville: Fisk University, 1973).
- <sup>32</sup> Afro-American Studies Program, *Conference Bulletin: The Caribbean in the 1970s, Crisis, Conflict, and Change* (Nashville: Fisk University, 1973).
- <sup>33</sup> Lincoln Cushing, *Revolucion!: Cuban Poster Art* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003).
- <sup>34</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, "Black Liberation and Class Struggle: The Student Movement," (lecture notes, Havana, Cuba, 1972.)
- <sup>35</sup> "VB Points of Unity," Venceremos Brigade, 1972, <https://vb4cuba.com/vb-points-of-unity/>.
- <sup>36</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, "Calling Upon the People of the World to Unite to Oppose Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialism and Support the American Negroes in Their Struggle Against Racial Discrimination," *Peking Review* no.3, August 16, 1963.
- <sup>37</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, *Notes on New China* (Nashville: Peoples College Press, 1974), i.
- <sup>38</sup> Alkalimat, *Notes*, A4.
- <sup>39</sup> Alkalimat, *Dialectics of Liberation*, 156–70.
- <sup>40</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 307–8.
- <sup>41</sup> Alkalimat, Abdul, "Report From National Planning Conference: Year To Pull The Covers Off Imperialism Project," *The Black Scholar* 6, no. 5 (February 1975): 54.
- <sup>42</sup> Alkalimat, "Report From National Planning Conference," 56.

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