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A Brief and Shallow Introduction to the Origins of Racism in the United States:

Racism in the United States is structural. This means racism is a system wide effort to "divide and conquer" the people. Divide and conquer is a very old tactic which was also used in India and sub-Saharan Africa. It means winning by getting your enemies to fight against each other. In the US, white supremacists have played a large role in dividing and conquering the working class, which includes the unemployed, and under-employed.

The first British colonies in North America were set up as corporate-owned trading posts. They bought and sold raw materials and finished goods. At first, labor for the colonies was provided by poor white indentured servants. The servants were forced to work to pay off debts and were set free when the debt was paid. The first Africans that came to the colonies were indentured servants, not slaves. Multi-racial servants lived, worked, and socialized together. They generally got along with each other because they bonded over their shared conditions as members of the working class.

In 1640, three servants ran away from their master in Virginia. They were John Punch (black), James Gregory (white), and a man named Victor (white). All three men were caught and whipped. The two white men were sentenced to an additional four years of servitude. John Punch was ordered to be an indentured servant for the rest of his life. This is the first case we know of in U.S. history where someone was sentenced to servitude for life. This was a major step toward creating racism and slavery in the United States.

The judges and law makers who gave this sentence did not think the the black person deserved a harsher sentence than the white people. They gave the black person a harsher sentence on purpose so that all of the indentured servants would start turning

against each other. We became divided against each other by race so it was easier for the land owners to keep all of us down.

After the case of John Punch, lawmakers built up a social system where all white people ranked above all people of color. More people of color became slaves and poor white people got more privileges, like the right to vote. Many poor whites were deceived by the token privileges and began to practice racism. They thought the privileges made them "better" than people of color. People of color resented the unequal treatment because the poor whites were their peers. They were the same in every way except for skin color. This is how the working class was divided and conquered based on race. Other divisions were created based on culture, religion, gender, age and every other difference they could find.

After the Civil War, the former slave owners, and others, worked to oppose Reconstruction and formed the first Ku Klux Klan in 1865. They worked to build control over the government and establish the Jim Crow laws. By 1925 the KKK had 4 million members. The Southern Poverty Law Center calls the KKK "America's first terrorist organization," and estimates their membership at 5000-8000 today.

So long as any member of the working class is at risk, we are all at risk. So long as racist and fascist organizations like the KKK are promoting racism, the risk to all is increased. We must stand against racism, fascism, and all attempts to divide the working class. Racism in the U.S. did not come about naturally. It was put upon us and we must actively work to eliminate it. Ignoring it does not make it go away.

For more information, read *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend: A Short, Illustrated History of Labor in the United States* by Priscilla Murolo, and watch *Slavery and the Making of America* directed by William R. Grant."

