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# ON THE NEGROES AND THE RIGHT OF SELF-DETERMINATION

BY EARL BROWDER

I WANT to say a few words about the problem of the self-determination of the Negro people. I think that the theoretical aspects of this question have been adequately presented to you. It has seemed, however, to the members of our Political Committee, that it is necessary for us to bring this question up to date, in its practical political aspects.

It is, of course, known to you that the Negro people, after the Civil War, decided that their future lay in integrating themselves into the American nation as a whole. They expected to achieve this through the Republican Party, but they were sorely disappointed in this expectation. The Republican Party capitalized on the Negro vote by appearing in the historic role of liberator of the slaves. But it betrayed the Negro people after Lincoln's death. The Democratic Party, which had been the historic party of slavery, crushed the aspirations of the Negroes in the South with the connivance of the Republican Party.

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\* Excerpts from the remarks of Earl Browder on November 19, 1943, to the final session of the two-weeks full-time morning school on the Negro People and the War, organized by the Workers School, New York.

In the late 20's and early 30's, it became clear that the whole world was heading toward a major crisis, the greatest of all history. It simultaneously became clear that the question of the future of the Negro people would be up for re-examination. It was in view of the gathering world crisis that we Communists at that time—in the early 30's—raised the issue of self-determination. At that time we necessarily faced the possibility that the Negro people, disappointed in their aspiration for full integration into the American nation, might find their only alternative in separation and in the establishment of their own state in the Black Belt, in the territory in which they are a majority. We raised this as one of the rights of the Negro people, in case the Negro people found this was the only way to satisfy their aspirations.

Now we are in the midst of this world crisis, anticipated in the beginning of the 30's. It has already taken shape, very definitely, to the point that we can foresee the outcome of it and the alignment of forces which determine that outcome. In this world crisis the solution of the question has become clear now, without any manner of

doubt. The crisis of history has taken a turn of such character that the Negro people in the United States have found it possible to make their decision once and for all. Their decision is for their complete integration into the American nation as a whole, and not for separation.

This decision has been taking shape for several years. I think it is only comparatively recently that we can say it has taken a definite form, which no foreseeable development could now change. It began when the Democratic Administration, under Roosevelt, began to interest itself particularly in the fate of the Negro people, and when it carried the W.P.A. into the South. This was the beginning of a deep-going change, a shaking up of the whole semi-feudal system of oppression of the Negroes, and the opening up of the vista of a progressive establishment of Negro equality.

After this beginning came the penetration of the South by the C.I.O., and the organization of labor, black and white, in one united labor movement in the very heart of the oppression of the Negroes, the home of the most extreme forms of Jim-Crowism. It was followed by the establishment of the President's Fair Employment Practices Committee.

And as part of this whole development, and the marked growth of unity of action of the Negro people and the progressive labor movement, we witness the drive for the abolition of the poll tax, the major instrument of disfranchisement of

Negroes and poor whites in the South.

Then, we should also mention such symptomatic manifestations of this major progressive tendency as the recent elections, when Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., was elected to the New York City Council by a combined vote of Negroes, trade unionists and progressive white people.

We have seen also that the Negro people, despite all mistreatment, which continues and which has been especially severe in the armed forces, have been among the most determined in demanding their place in the war effort. Far from demanding separate military units, they have conducted a fight for the abolition of Jim-Crowism in the army and the joint participation of Negroes and whites in the units of the armed forces.

The decision of the Negro people is, therefore, already made. It is that the Negro people do see the opportunity, not as a pious aspiration for an indefinite future, but as an immediate political task under the present system, of approximating the position of equal citizens in America. This is in itself an exercise of the right of self-determination by the Negro people. By their attitude, the Negro people have exercised their historical right of self-determination.

We have today to establish the guarantees that there will not be a disappointment such as was administered by the Republican Party after the Civil War.

Therefore we see now, sharply and clearly, the right of the Negroes

as a people to the determination of their own destiny. It is just as much an inviolable right as it ever was; and that right is being exercised today in the form of a decision by the Negro people themselves, without any pressure from special interests, to choose the path of the integration of the Negroes into the whole American nation as one united nation.

It is this choice which gives the possibility in this period of integrating the Negro people into the general democracy of our country, on the basis of complete and unconditional equality, of solving this question now, and of no longer postponing it. The immediate achievement in this period, under the present American system, of complete equality for the Negroes, has been made possible by the war crisis, and by the character of this war as a people's war of national liberation. In the process of solving the greater problem of the whole world, we can and we must find the solution of full and equal citizenship for American Negroes in this country.

I think that we can expect clarity on this question to increase, with the unity of all progressive forces in America. America can expect in the new few years to achieve an approximation of the full aim in this respect.

I won't promise that, ten years from now we shall be able to say of

the United States what someone, in one of the panels of the recent Congress of American - Soviet Friendship, said in introducing a prominent speaker—that in the Soviet Union there is no problem of national minorities any more. Perhaps that complete and unconditional achievement is possible only under socialism. But I think we can say that an approximation of that achievement is within our reach today under capitalism, under the existing American system, under the changing relationship of forces, in which labor and the people exert an ever increasing political role and influence.

It is achievable because America, after a long period of flirting with the fascist and Nazi forces of the world, has finally taken the path of unification of all progressive forces in the world for the destruction of fascism. When America confirmed that course, in the Moscow Agreements of a few weeks ago, it decided for a whole period of history the question of the possibility of national unity in the United States. It determined the possibility of eliminating all the gross inequalities as they manifest themselves in the oppression of the Negro people in this country.

All the decisive forces of history are now working for Negro equality, and we Communists must strengthen our collaboration with these progressive forces of which we are a vital part.