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League for the Fourth International

The Communist International and Black Liberation



Claude McKay speaking to the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, 1922.

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Materials from the Communist International on Black Liberation

America and the Negro Question

Report to the Second Congress of the Communist International
25 July 1920

By John Reed

Reed: In America there live ten million Negroes who are concentrated mainly in the South. In recent years however many thousands of them have moved to the North. The Negroes in the North are employed in industry while in the South the majority are farm laborers or small farmers. The position of the Negroes is terrible, particularly in the Southern states. Paragraph 16¹ [*sic*] of the Constitution of the United States grants the Negroes full civil rights. Nevertheless most Southern states deny the Negroes these rights. In other states, where by law the Negroes possess the right to vote, they are killed if they dare to exercise this right.

Negroes are not allowed to travel in the same railway carriages as whites, visit the same saloons and restaurants, or live in the same districts. There exist special, and worse, schools for Negroes and similarly special churches. This separation of the Negroes is called the "Jim Crow system," and the clergy in the Southern churches preach about paradise on the "Jim Crow system." Negroes are used as unskilled workers in industry. Until recently they were excluded from most of the unions that belong to the American Federation of Labor. The IWW of course organized the Negroes, the old Socialist Party however undertook no serious attempt to organize them. In some states the Negroes were not accepted into the party at all, in others they were separated off into special sections, and in general the party statutes banned the use of Party resources for propaganda among Negroes.

In the South the Negro has no rights at all and does not even enjoy the protection of the law. Usually one can kill Negroes without being punished. One terrible white institution is the lynching of Negroes. This happens in the following manner: the Negro is covered with oil and strung up on a telegraph pole. The whole of the town, men, women and children, run up to watch the show and take home a piece of the clothing or the skin of the Negro they have tortured to death "as a souvenir."

I have too little time to explain the historical background to the Negro question in the United States. The descendants of the slave population, who were liberated during the Civil War, when politically and economically they were still completely underdeveloped, were later given full political rights in order to unleash a bitter class struggle in the South which was intended to hold up Southern capitalism until the capitalists in the North were able to bring together all the country's resources into their own possession.

Until recently the Negroes did not show any aggressive class consciousness at all. The first awakening of the Negroes took place after the Spanish-American War, in which the black troops had fought with extraordinary courage and from which they returned with the feeling that as men they were equal to the white troops. Until then the only movement that existed among the Negroes was a semi-philanthropic educational association led by Booker T. Washington and supported by the white capitalists. This movement found its expression in the organization of schools in which the Negroes were brought up to be good servants of industry. As intellectual nourishment they were presented with the good advice to resign themselves to the fate of an oppressed people. During the Spanish

¹ This is a transcription error. Reed is referring to the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the result of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, approved following the Civil War, which declares that "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside." This overturned the 1857 Dred Scott Decision by the Supreme Court which held that blacks could not be U.S. citizens. This clause also established that all children born on U.S. soil are citizens, whether or not their parents are legal residents.

War an aggressive reform movement arose among the Negroes which demanded social and political equality with the whites. With the beginning of the European war half a million Negroes who had joined the US Army were sent to France, where they were billeted with French troop detachments and suddenly made the discovery that they were treated as equals socially and in every other respect. The American General Staff approached the French High Command and asked them to forbid Negroes to visit places used by whites and to treat them as second-class people. After the war the Negroes, many of whom had received medals for bravery from the English and French governments, returned to their Southern villages where they were subjected to lynch law because they dared to wear their uniforms and their decorations on the street.

At the same time a strong movement arose among the Negroes who had stayed behind. Thousands of them moved to the North, began to work in the war industries and came into contact with the surging current of the labor movement. High as they were, their wage rates trailed behind the incredible increases in the prices of the most important necessities. Moreover the Negroes were outraged by the way all their strength was sucked out and the terrible exertions demanded by the work much more than were the white workers who had grown used to the terrible exploitation in the course of many years.

The Negroes went on strike alongside the white workers and quickly joined the industrial proletariat. They proved very ready to accept revolutionary propaganda. At that time the newspaper *Messenger* was founded, published by a young Negro, the socialist [A. Philip] Randolph, and pursuing revolutionary propagandist aims. This paper united socialist propaganda with an appeal to the racial consciousness of the Negroes and with the call to organize self-defense against the brutal attacks of the whites. At the same time the paper insisted on the closest links with the white workers, regardless of the fact that the latter often took part in Negro-baiting, and emphasized that the enmity between the white and black races was supported by the capitalists in their own interests.

The return of the army from the front threw many millions of white workers on to the labor market all at once. The result was unemployment, and the demobilized soldiers' impatience took such threatening proportions that the employers were forced to tell the soldiers that their jobs had been taken by Negroes in order thus to incite the whites to massacre the Negroes. The first of these outbreaks took place in Washington, where civil servants from the administration returning from the war found their jobs occupied by Negroes. The civil servants were in the main Southerners. They organized a night attack on the Negro district in order to terrorize the Negroes into giving up their jobs. To everybody's amazement the Negroes came on to the streets fully armed. A fight developed and the Negroes fought so well that for every dead Negro there were three dead whites. Another revolt which lasted several days and left many dead on both sides broke out a few months later in Chicago. Later still a massacre took place in Omaha. In all these fights the Negroes showed for the first time in history that they are armed and splendidly organized and are not at all afraid of the whites. The results of the Negroes' resistance were first of all a belated intervention by the government and secondly the acceptance of Negroes into the unions of the American Federation of Labor.

Racial consciousness grew among the Negroes themselves. At present there is among the Negroes a section which preaches the armed uprising of the Negroes against the whites. The Negroes who returned home from the war have set up associations everywhere for self-defense and to fight against the white supporters of lynch law. The circulation of the *Messenger* is growing constantly. At present it sells 180,000 copies monthly. At the same time, socialist ideas have taken root and are spreading rapidly among the Negroes employed in industry.

If we consider the Negroes as an enslaved and oppressed people, then they pose us with two tasks: on the one hand a strong racial movement and on the other a strong proletarian workers' movement, whose class consciousness is quickly growing. The Negroes do not pose the demand of national independence. A movement that aims for a separate national existence, like for instance the "back to Africa" movement that could be observed a few years ago, is never successful among the Negroes. They hold themselves above all to be Americans, they feel at home in the United States. That simplifies the tasks of the communists considerably.

The only correct policy for the American Communists towards the Negroes is to regard them above all as workers. The agricultural workers and the small farmers of the South pose, despite the backwardness of the Negroes, the same tasks as those we have in respect to the white rural proletariat. Communist propaganda can be carried out among the Negroes who are employed as industrial workers in the North. In both parts of the country

we must strive to organize Negroes in the same unions as the whites. This is the best and quickest way to root out racial prejudice and awaken class solidarity.

The Communists must not stand aloof from the Negro movement which demands their social and political equality and at the moment, at a time of the rapid growth of racial consciousness, is spreading rapidly among Negroes. The Communists must use this movement to expose the lie of bourgeois equality and emphasize the necessity of the social revolution which will not only liberate all workers from servitude but is also the only way to free the enslaved Negro people.

The Racial Issue in The U.S.A.

By Claude McKay

From *International Press Correspondence*, 21 November 1922

The Negro population of America is estimated at between 12 and 15 millions. About 20% of this number is distributed throughout Northern states; the rest live in the South.

Negro workers of the South may be roughly divided into four sections. In the cities they are (1) stevedores, (2) small factory workers and artisans. In the country they are (3) small farmers and (4) cotton plantation workers. The Southern Negroes are largely unorganized, although of late years there has sprung up some movement for organization among the land workers. The Southern whites are also unorganized except in the old craft and railroad unions. The Negro today is not loyal to any party. From the end of the Civil War until the period of the [Theodore] Roosevelt Administration he was fairly loyal to the Republican party as the party of Lincoln who emancipated the slaves. But he is now disillusioned; he has many great grievances against "white" America, such as lynching, disfranchisement and serfdom in the South and social and industrial Discrimination in the North; but in the main he is only race-conscious and rebellious, not revolutionary and class-conscious.

It may even be said that Negroes are anti-socialistic, except for a goodly number of young colored intellectuals who have been forced back into the masses by competition and suppression. Since, however, America entered the European War, the Negroes have been ripe for revolutionary propaganda. The Garvey² "Back to Africa" movement has swept American Negroes like a storm. Although the mass of them know that they must remain in America, they responded to the emotional appeal as a relief from their sufferings.

But the future of American Negroes whether they become the pawn of the bourgeoisie in its fight against white labor or whether they become class-conscious, depends on the nature of the propaganda that is conducted among them and the tactics adopted towards their special needs. At present the blacks distrust and hate the whites to such an extent that they, the blacks, are very hostile to the radical propaganda of the whites. They are more partial to the humanitarians.

The blacks are hostile to Communism because they regard it as a "white" working-class movement and they consider the white workers their greatest enemy, who draw the color line against them in factory and office and lynch and burn them at the stake for being colored. Only the best and broadest minded Negro leaders who can combine Communist ideas with a deep sympathy for and understanding of the black man's grievances will reach the masses with revolutionary propaganda. There are few such leaders in America today.

² Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), was born in Jamaica and later emigrated to the United States. After corresponding with Booker T. Washington, the apostle of black "self-improvement" and acceptance of segregation, in 1914 Garvey launched the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which later grew to have a mass following in the U.S. While calling for a black homeland in Africa, he founded a series of "black capitalist" enterprises, including the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation. Garvey approved of and in 1922 met with leaders of the Ku Klux Klan on the grounds that these white nativist fascists and lynchers stood for racial separation.

Report On The Negro Question

Speech to The Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International,
Moscow, 25 November 1922

By Otto Huiswoud (J. Billings)
and Claude McKay

Comrade Billings: In the Negro question we have before us another phase of the race and colonial question to which no attention has been paid heretofore.

Although the Negro problem as such is fundamentally an economic problem, it is aggravated and intensified by the friction which exists between the white and black races. It is a matter of common knowledge that prejudice does play an important part. Whilst it is true that, for instance, in the United States of America the main basis of racial antagonism has been that there is competition of labor in America between black and white, nevertheless, the Negro bears a badge of shame on him which has its origin way back in the time of his slavery.

There are about 150,000,000 Negroes throughout the world. Approximately 25,000,000 of them reside in the New World, and the rest reside in Africa. The Negroes in America and the West Indies are a source of cheap labor supply for the American capitalist, and we find the capitalist class has always used and will always continue to use them as an instrument in order to suppress the white working class in its every-day struggle. They will be the source from which the "white guard" elements will be recruited in the event of a revolutionary uprising anywhere and everywhere.

The capitalist class as a class has recognized the valuable aid that the Negro masses will be to them. Therefore, for years they have made it their business to cultivate a bourgeois ideology in the mind of the Negro populace. This, of course, was done in their own interests and not in those of the Negroes. They have carefully planned out and planted organizations amongst the Negroes to carry agitation in favor of the bourgeoisie as against the white workers. They have what is known as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Urban League. The first organization supplies grants of money to Negro schools; the second is a notorious strike-breaking institution.

Facing this condition, it was inevitable that the Negro population would have some sort of reaction against the oppression and the suppression to which they were subjected throughout the world. Their first reaction was, of course, in the forming of religious institutions, the only forms permitted at certain times for their own enjoyment, but later we find that there has been a continuous development of organizations on the part of the Negroes, which, although purely Negro, are to a certain extent directly or indirectly opposed to capitalism.

The three most important Negro organizations operating today are, firstly, what is known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an organization which is composed of a large proletarian element led by bourgeois intellectuals. It bases its action upon the principle of seeking redress from the capitalist class by means of petitions and what practically amounts to begging that something may be done for them.

Then we come to the other more interesting form of organization which is known as the Garvey Association, an organization that is ultra-nationalist, yet composed of a rebel rank and file element. It is an organization which, in spite of the fact that it has drafted on its program various cheap stock schemes, is influencing the minds of the Negroes against imperialism. This organization came into existence after the [First] World War. Of course it did not take any definite radical form, it was saved in time by its own leader; but notwithstanding this, the race consciousness has been planted and used to a very large extent far into the interior of Africa, where hardly anyone could expect that an organization could be planted which had its origin in America.

The third organization is the African Blood Brotherhood, a radical Negro organization which bases its program upon the abolition of capitalism. It was the one organization which, during the time of a race riot in Tulsa,

Oklahoma [1922], put up a splendid and courageous fight, and the one to which the capitalist class in America is going to turn its attention next.

We have also in Africa certain small organizations which get their direct inspiration from America, the headquarters and center of political thought among Negroes. These organizations are stretching out and developing as far as the Sudan. These can be utilized by Communists if the means of propaganda are carefully, deliberately and intensively used to link up these movements. We see in them a sort of organization which will react against imperialism throughout the world.

There are in the United States about 450 Negro newspapers and magazines, and, while they are mostly strictly racial, they have a great influence upon the Negro masses everywhere. There is, for instance, the *Chicago Defender*, which issues 250,000 copies weekly which are spread out all over the world, wherever there are large groups of Negroes. Then there is the *Crisis*, a monthly magazine which has a circulation of over 600,000. These papers, and especially the *Chicago Defender*, and others with a smaller circulation, have constantly used radical propaganda material that we sent out.

The Negroes feel the impending crisis which will break out in the South between black and white. It was in the South that the seed was sown and the results are bound to come in some way. It will probably take the form of race rioting on a very large scale.

In the United States, of the approximate number of Negroes (12 millions), two millions live in the Northern industrialized part of the country, and the other nine or ten millions in the South, and I supposed that all of you have a picture in your mind of what the South is like. When you enter there it is like Dante's Inferno. Eighty per cent of the Negroes live on the land. They are discriminated against and disenfranchised, and it is there that the class struggle is waged in its most brutal form. The relation between blacks and whites is one of constant conflict and of fighting to the death. The lynching of a Negro is something to be enjoyed in the South as a picture show is enjoyed elsewhere. The white population in the South is so saturated with this idea of white domination over the Negro that this question must engage our attention. At the present time when there are big strikes in the North [of the] United States, the capitalist class and its hirelings hurry to the South in order to draw the Southern Negroes into the Northern districts as strike-breakers. They give them higher wages and better conditions, and so induce them to enter those areas in which strikes are in progress. That is a constant danger to the white workers when on strike. Of course, the responsibility for this must not be placed upon the Negroes. The labor unions in America, and I am speaking of the [indistinct] trade unions, have for the last few years insisted that, although a Negro is a skilled worker, he cannot by virtue of the fact that he is a Negro enter the trade union. It is only recently that the American Federation of Labor has made a weak attempt to try to get Negroes into the regular trade unions. But, even today, such an organization as the Machinists Union still has, if I am not mistaken, the assertion in its program that the qualification of membership is that every white brother shall introduce for membership other white men, or something to that effect. This means that the Negroes are permanently excluded from the unions simply on account of the fact that they are black, and the capitalist class and the reactionary Negro press use this to the fullest extent in order to prejudice the minds of these black workers against the labor unions. When you speak to a Negro about his joining a trade union, or about the necessity of his becoming radical, the first thing he throws at you is the assertion: "Don't preach to me. Preach to the whites. They need it and I do not. I am always ready to fight alongside of them so long as they agree to take me into the trade unions, but as long as they do not, I will scab and, by god, I have a right to scab. I want to protect my own life." That is one of their arguments, and it cannot be ignored. While theoretically we may use all the beautiful phrases that we know, nevertheless these are hard concrete facts in the every-day struggle. The Negro Commission therefore prepared certain definite proposals to which I hope you will agree.

[translated from the German stenographic report]

1. The Fourth Congress recognizes the need to support all forms of the Negro movement that either undercut or weaken capitalism or imperialism, or prevent their further advance.
2. Negro workers should be organized everywhere, and where Negro and white workers exist side by side, every opportunity to build a united front should be used.

3. Work among Negroes should be carried out mainly by Negroes.
4. Steps should be undertaken forthwith to call a general conference or congress of Negroes in Moscow.

Comrade McKay: Comrades, I feel that I would rather face a lynching stake in civilized America than try to make a speech before the most intellectual and critical audience in the world. I belong to a race of creators but my public speaking has been so bad that I have been told by my own people that I should never try to make speeches, but stick to writing, and laughing. However, when I heard the Negro question was going to be brought up on the floor of the Congress, I felt it would be an eternal shame if I did not say something on behalf of the members of my race. Especially would I be a disgrace to the American Negroes because, since I published a notorious poem in 1919 ["If We Must Die"], I have been pushed forward as one of the spokesmen of Negro radicalism in America to the detriment of my poetical temperament. I feel that my race is honored by this invitation to one of its members to speak at this Fourth Congress of the Third International. My race on this occasion is honored, not because it is different from the white race and the yellow race, but [because it] is especially a race of toilers, hewers of wood and drawers of water, that belongs to the most oppressed, exploited, and suppressed section of the working class of the world. The Third International stands for the emancipation of all the workers of the world, regardless of race or color, and this stand of the Third International is not merely on paper like the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. It is a real thing.

The Negro race in the economic life of the world today occupies a very peculiar position. In every country where the Whites and Blacks must work together the capitalists have set the one against the other. It would seem at the present day that the international bourgeoisie would use the Negro race as their trump card in their fight against the world revolution. Great Britain has her Negro regiments in the colonies and she has demonstrated what she can do with her Negro soldiers by the use that she made of them during the late War. The revolution in England is very far away because of the highly organized exploitation of the subject peoples of the British Empire. In Europe, we find that France had a Negro army of over 300,000 and that to carry out their policy of imperial domination in Europe the French are going to use their Negro minions.

In America we have the same situation. The Northern bourgeoisie knows how well the Negro soldiers fought for their own emancipation, although illiterate and untrained, during the Civil War. They also remember how well the Negro soldiers fought in the Spanish-American War under Theodore Roosevelt. They know that in the last war over 400,000 Negroes who were mobilized gave a very good account of themselves, and that, besides fighting for the capitalists, they also put up a very good fight for themselves on returning to America when they fought the white mobs in Chicago, St. Louis and Washington.

But more than the fact that the American capitalists are using Negro soldiers in their fight against the interests of labor is the fact that the American capitalists are setting out to mobilize the entire black race of America for the purpose of fighting organized labor. The situation in America today is terrible and fraught with grave dangers. It is much uglier and more terrible than was the condition of the peasants and Jews of Russia under the tsar. It is so ugly and terrible that very few people in America are willing to face it. The reformist bourgeoisie have been carrying on the battle against discrimination and racial prejudice in America. The Socialists and Communists have fought very shy of it because there is a great element of prejudice among the Socialists and Communists of America. They are not willing to face the Negro question. In associating with the comrades of America I have found demonstrations of prejudice on the various occasions when the White and Black comrades had to get together: and this is the greatest difficulty that the Communists of America have got to overcome— the fact that they first have got to emancipate themselves from the ideas they entertain towards the Negroes before they can be able to reach the Negroes with any kind of radical propaganda. However, regarding the Negroes themselves, I feel that as the subject races of other nations have come to Moscow to learn how to fight against their exploiters, the Negroes will also come to Moscow. In 1918 when the Third International published its Manifesto and included the part referring to the exploited colonies, there were several groups of Negro radicals in America that sent this propaganda out among their people. When in 1920 the American government started to investigate and to suppress radical propaganda among the Negroes, the small radical groups in America retaliated by publishing the fact that the Socialists stood for the emancipation of the Negroes, and that reformist America could do nothing for them. Then, I think, for the first time in American history, the American Negroes found that Karl Marx had been

interested in their emancipation and had fought valiantly for it. I shall just read this extract that was taken from Karl Marx's writing at the time of the Civil War:

“When an oligarchy of 300,000 slave holders for the first time in the annals of the world, dared to inscribe ‘Slavery’ on the banner of armed revolt, on the very spot where hardly a century ago, the idea of one great democratic republic had first sprung up, whence the first declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century, when on that spot the counter-revolution cynically proclaimed property in man to be ‘the cornerstone of the new edifice’ – then the working class of Europe understood at once that the slaveholders’ rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy war of property against labor, and that (its) hopes of the future, even its past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic.”

Karl Marx who drafted the above resolution is generally known as the father of Scientific Socialism and also of the epoch-making volume popularly known as the socialist bible, *Capital*. During the Civil War he was correspondent of the *New York Tribune*. In the company of Richard Cobden, Charles Bradlaugh, the atheist, and John Bright, he toured England making speeches and so roused up the sentiment of the workers of that country against the Confederacy that Lord Palmerston, [the] Prime Minister, who was about to recognize the South, had to desist.

As Marx fought against chattel slavery in 1861, so are present-day socialists, his intellectual descendants, fighting wage slavery.

If the Workers party in America were really a Workers party that included Negroes it would, for instance, in the South, have to be illegal, and I would inform the American Comrades that there is a branch of the Workers party in the South, in Richmond, Virginia, that is illegal – illegal because it includes colored members. There we have a very small group of white and colored comrades working together, and the fact that they have laws in Virginia and most of the Southern states discriminating against whites and blacks assembling together means that the Workers party in the South must be illegal. To get round these laws of Virginia, the comrades have to meet separately, according to color, and about once a month they assemble behind closed doors.

This is just an indication of the work that will have to be done in the South. The work among the Negroes of the South will have to be carried on by some legal propaganda organized in the North, because we find at the present time in America that the situation in the Southern States (where nine million out of ten million of the Negro population live), is that even the liberal bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie among the Negroes cannot get their own papers of a reformist propaganda type into the South on account of the laws that there discriminate against them.

The fact is that it is really only in the Southern States that there is any real suppression of opinion. No suppression of opinion exists in the Northern states in the way it exists in the South. In the Northern states special laws are made for special occasions – as those against Communists and Socialists during the War – but in the South we find laws that have existed for fifty years, under which the Negroes cannot meet to talk about their grievances. The white people who are interested in their cause cannot go and speak to them. If we send white comrades into the South they are generally ordered out by the Southern oligarchy and if they do not leave they are generally whipped, tarred and feathered; and if we send black comrades into the South they generally won't be able to get out again – they will be lynched and burned at the stake.

I hope that as a symbol that the Negroes of the world will not be used by the international bourgeoisie in the final conflicts against the World Revolution, that as a challenge to the international bourgeoisie, who have an understanding of the Negro question, we shall soon see a few Negro soldiers in the finest, bravest, and cleanest fighting forces in the world – the Red Army and Navy of Russia – fighting not only for their own emancipation, but also for the emancipation of all the working class of the whole world.

The Negro Question

Resolution from the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, 30 November 1922

1 During and after the war a revolutionary movement began to develop among the colonial and semi-colonial peoples and this movement is still successfully challenging the domination of world capital. Therefore, if capitalism is to continue, it must come to terms with the increasingly difficult problem of how to intensify its colonization of the regions inhabited by black people. French capitalism clearly recognizes that the power of pre-war French imperialism can only be maintained by creating a Franco-African empire, welded together by a Trans-Saharan railway. American finance magnates (who already exploit twelve million blacks in their own country) have begun a peaceful invasion of Africa. The extent to which Britain, for its part, fears any threat to its position in Africa is clearly shown by the extreme measures it took to suppress the strikes in South Africa.³ While competition between the imperialist powers in the Pacific has grown into the threat of a new world war, imperialist rivalry in Africa, too, is playing a more and more sinister role. Finally, the war, the Russian revolution, and the powerful anti-imperialist rebellion among the Asiatic and Moslem peoples have awakened the consciousness of millions of blacks who for centuries have been oppressed and humiliated by capitalism, in Africa, and probably to an even greater degree in America.

2 The history of the American blacks has prepared them to play a major role in the liberation struggle of the entire African race. 300 years ago the American blacks were torn from their native African soil, transported to America in slave ships and, in indescribably cruel conditions, sold into slavery. For 250 years they were treated like human cattle, under the whip of the American overseer. Their labor cleared the forests, built the roads, picked the cotton, constructed the railroads – on it the Southern aristocracy rested. The reward for their labor was poverty, illiteracy and degradation. The blacks were not docile slaves; their history is full of revolts, uprisings, and an underground struggle for freedom, but all their efforts to free themselves were savagely suppressed. They were tortured into submission, while the bourgeois press and religion justified their slavery. When slavery became an obstacle preventing the full and unhindered development of America towards capitalism, when this slavery came into conflict with the slavery of wage labor, it had to give way. The Civil War, which was not a war for the emancipation of the blacks but a war for the preservation of the industrial hegemony of the North, confronted the blacks with a choice between forced labor in the South and wage slavery in the North. The blood, sweat and tears of the “emancipated” blacks helped to build American capitalism, and when the country, now become a world power, was inevitably pulled into the World War, black Americans gained equal rights with the whites ... to kill and to die for “democracy”. Four hundred thousand colored proletarians were recruited to the American army and organized into special black regiments. These black soldiers had hardly returned from the bloodbath of the war before they came up against racial persecution, lynchings, murders, the denial of rights, discrimination and general contempt. They fought back, but paid dearly for the attempt to assert their human rights. The persecution of blacks became even more widespread than before the war, and the blacks once again learned to “know their place.” The spirit of revolt, inflamed by the post-war violence and persecution, was suppressed, but cases of inhuman cruelty, such as the events in Tulsa,⁴ still cause it to flare up again. This, plus the post-war industrialization of blacks in the North, places the American blacks, particularly those in the North, in the vanguard of the struggle for black liberation.

3 The Communist International is extremely proud to see the exploited black workers resisting the attacks of the exploiters, since the enemy of the black race and the enemy of the white workers is one and the same – capitalism and imperialism. The international struggle of the black race is a struggle against this common enemy. An international black movement based on this struggle must be organized: in America, the center of black culture and black protest; in Africa, with its reserve of human labor for the further development of capitalism; in Central

³ This refers to the 1922 gold miners' strike on the Witwatersrand.

⁴ Tulsa, Oklahoma was the scene of a racist pogrom in 1921 in which over 300 were killed.

America (Costa Rica, Guatemala, Colombia, Nicaragua and the other “independent” republics), where American capitalism rules; in Puerto Rico, Haiti, Santo Domingo and the other Caribbean islands, where the brutal treatment of our black brothers by the American occupation has provoked a world-wide protest from conscious blacks and revolutionary white workers; in South Africa and the Congo, where the growing industrialization of the black population has led to all kinds of uprisings; and in East Africa, where the inroads of world capital have led to the local population starting an active anti-imperialist movement.

4 The Communist International must show the black people that they are not the only ones to suffer capitalist and imperialist oppression; that the workers and peasants of Europe, Asia and America are also victims of imperialism; that the black struggle against imperialism is not the struggle of any one single people, but of all the peoples of the world; that in India and China, in Persia and Turkey, in Egypt and Morocco, the oppressed non-white peoples of the colonies are heroically fighting their imperialist exploiters; that these peoples are rising against the same evils, i.e., against racial oppression, inequality and exploitation, and are fighting for the same ends – political, economic and social emancipation and equality.

The Communist International represents the revolutionary workers and peasants of the entire world in their struggle against the power of imperialism – it is not just an organization of the enslaved white workers of Europe and America, but is as much an organization of the oppressed non-white peoples of the world, and so feels duty-bound to encourage and support the international organizations of the black people in their struggle against the common enemy.

5 The black question has become an integral part of the world revolution. The Third International has already recognised what valuable help the colored Asiatic peoples can give to the proletarian revolution, and it realises that in the semi-capitalist countries the co-operation of our oppressed black brothers is extremely important for the proletarian revolution and for the destruction of capitalist power. Therefore the Fourth Congress gives Communists the special responsibility of closely applying the “Theses on the Colonial Question” to the situation of the blacks.

6 i) The Fourth Congress considers it essential to support all forms of the black movement which aim either to undermine or weaken capitalism and imperialism or to prevent their further expansion.

ii) The Communist International will fight for the racial equality of blacks and whites, for equal wages and equal social and political rights.

iii) The Communist International will do all it can to force the trade unions to admit black workers wherever admittance is legal, and will insist on a special campaign to achieve this end. If this proves unsuccessful, it will organize blacks into their own unions and then make special use of the united front tactic to force the general unions to admit them.

iv) The Communist International will immediately take steps to convene an international black conference or congress in Moscow.

To Comrade McKay

By Leon Trotsky

(from *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 2)

[undated, first published in English, *International Press Correspondence*, 13 March 1923]

Dear Comrade McKay,

1) What practical steps are to be taken to prevent France from employing Negro troops on the European continent?— this is your first question.

The Negroes themselves must offer resistance against being so employed. Their eyes must be opened, so that they realize that when they help French imperialism to subjugate Europe, they are helping to subjugate themselves, in that they are supporting the domination of French capitalism in the African and other colonies.

The working class of Europe, and particularly of France and Germany, must realize that their own most vital interests are involved in this work of enlightening the colored peoples. The day of general resolutions on the right of self-determination of the colonial peoples, on the equality of all human beings regardless of color, is over. The time has come for direct and practical action. Every 10 Negroes who gather around the flag of revolution,— and unite to form a group for practical work among the Negroes, are worth a hundred times more than dozens of the resolutions establishing principles, so generously passed by the Second International. A Communist Party confining itself to mere platonic resolutions in this matter, without exerting its utmost energies towards winning the largest possible number of enlightened Negroes for its ideas, within the shortest possible time, would not be worthy of the name of Communist Party.

2) There is no doubt whatever that the use of colored troops for imperialist war, and at the present time for the occupation of German territory, is a well thought out and carefully executed attempt of European capitalism, especially of French and English capitalism, to raise armed forces outside of Europe, so that capitalism may have mobilized, armed and disciplined African or Asian troops at its disposal, against the revolutionary masses of Europe. In this way the question of the use of colonial reserves for imperialist armies is closely related to the question of European revolution, that is, to the fate of the European working class.

3) There is no doubt whatever that the employment of the economically and culturally backward colonial masses for the world conflicts of imperialism, and still more in the class conflicts of Europe, is an exceedingly risky experiment, from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie itself. The Negroes, and indeed the natives of all the colonies, retain their conservatism and mental rigidity only insofar as they continue to live under their accustomed economic conditions. But when the hand of capital, or even sooner— the hand of militarism, tears them mechanically from their customary environment, and forces them to stake their lives for the sake of new and complicated questions and conflicts (conflicts between the bourgeoisie of different nations, conflicts between the classes of one and the same nation), then their spiritual conservatism gives way abruptly, and revolutionary ideas find rapid access to a consciousness thrown off its balance.

4) Therefore it is of the utmost importance, today, immediately, to have a number of enlightened, young, self-sacrificing Negroes, however small their number, filled with enthusiasm for the raising of the material and moral level of the great mass of Negroes, and at the same time mentally capable of grasping the identity of interests and destiny of the Negro masses, with those of the masses of the whole world, and in the first place with the destiny of the European working class.

The education of Negro propagandists is an exceedingly urgent and important revolutionary task at the present juncture.

5) In North America the matter is further complicated by the abominable obtuseness and caste presumption of the privileged upper strata of the working class itself, who refuse to recognize fellow workers and fighting comrades in the Negroes. Gompers⁵ policy is founded on the exploitation of such despicable prejudices, and is at the present time the most effective guarantee for the successful subjugation of white and colored workers alike. The fight against this policy must be taken up from different sides, and conducted on various lines. One of the most important branches of this conflict consists in enlightening the proletarian consciousness by awakening the feeling of human dignity, and of revolutionary protest, among the Negro slaves of American capitalism. As stated above, this work can only be carried out by self-sacrificing and politically educated revolutionary Negroes.

Needless to say, the work is not to be carried on in a spirit of Negro chauvinism, which would then merely form a counterpart of white chauvinism,— but in a spirit of solidarity of all exploited without consideration of color.

What forms of organization are most suitable for the movement among the American Negroes, it is difficult for me to say, as I am insufficiently informed regarding the concrete conditions and possibilities. But the forms of organization will be found, as soon as there is sufficient will to action.

With Communist greetings,

L. Trotsky

⁵ Samuel Gompers was the long-time leader of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), who stood for narrow “craft” union organization of the skilled trades and was responsible for the racist exclusion of black workers from the unions. He was also a virulent racist opponent of Chinese labor, supporting the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and calling to “exclude the inferior Asiatics, by law, or, if necessary, by force of arms.” The revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), in contrast, organized black and immigrant workers (including Mexican miners and Asian agricultural workers) as well as women. It was not until the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1935 that large numbers of black workers in the mass production industries entered the unions.

Early Communist Work Among Blacks

The following two articles are taken from a series on "Black Oppression and Proletarian Revolution," published by the Spartacist League at a time when it stood for revolutionary Trotskyism. This article is reprinted from Young Spartacus No. 21, January-February 1974.

World War I, which set the stage for the collapse of the Second International, paved the way for the struggle for the Third International, and gave additional stimulus to the national movements of colonial peoples, also marked the transformation of the black question in the U.S. from primarily an agrarian question left unsolved by the defeat of Reconstruction to a question in which the utilization of blacks as an industrial reserve army was fast becoming its dominant character. As Lenin remarked in his *Capitalism and Agriculture in the United States of America*, written at the beginning of WWI while he was preparing his work on imperialism and elaborating his positions on the national question;

"To show what the South is like, it is essential to add that its population is fleeing to other capitalist areas and to the towns just as the peasantry in Russia is fleeing from the most backward *gubernias* [provinces in the tsarist empire], where the survivals of serfdom have been greatly preserved.... to those areas of Russia which have a higher level of capitalist development, to the metropolitan cities, the industrial *gubernias* and the South....

"The Negroes are in full flight from the two Southern divisions where there is no homesteading: in the ten years between the last two censuses these two divisions provided other parts of the country with almost 600,000 'black' people."

—*Collected Works*, Vol. 22, pp. 26-27

Lenin's figure of 600,000 is for the period 1900 to 1910; between 1910 and 1920 the flight of blacks from the countryside to the cities increased to 1-1/2 million. From 1910 to 1920 the Negro farm population declined from 5.3 million to 2.5 million. In 1910, 27 percent of the Negro male work force were farmers; by 1920, 16.5 percent were farming. During this period, blacks went to the cities often as strikebreakers and later to replace conscripted white labor and to provide the industrial reserve in the expansion of war-related industries. The return to civilian life, i.e., the job market, of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, both black and white, combined with the prior mass migration of blacks to the cities and the post-WWI economic downturn, set the stage for the 1919 race riots.

U.S. Communists' Economism on Black Question Countered by Russian CP

It was within this context that the supporters of the Russian Revolution in the U.S. attempted to crystallize an American section of the Communist International (CI). The early American Communist movement was shot through with factionalism, doctrinairism and those sectarian vices against which Lenin polemicized in *Left-Wing Communism*. Further, it was in the main a movement of foreign-language federations composed of immigrant workers who were somewhat distant from the mainstream of American life; they were unfamiliar with the black question and, given the tension between blacks and immigrants, were sometimes hostile to the special needs and problems of blacks.

These language federations had their origins in the Socialist Party where they composed the left wing, and insofar as they were familiar with the black question at all they were at best schooled in the Debsian attitude that the black question was simply an economic question. Thus the founding program of the Communist Party of America stated:

"The Negro problem is a political and economic problem. The racial oppression of the Negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression, each intensifying the other. This complicates the Negro problem, but does not alter its proletarian character."

—*Manifesto and Program*, 1919, p. 18

The Communist Labor Party's founding program simply ignored the black question. Just as it took the direct intervention through the CI of the party which led and embodied the experience of the Russian Revolution for the American Communists to transcend their politically unjustified factionalism and sectarianism, so it took the direct intervention of the Bolsheviks for the American Communist movement to transcend its partial, insensitive and economist understanding of the black question. The classical anti-communist view of this Bolshevik influence upon the American Communists was expressed most clearly by Theodore Draper in *American Communism and Soviet Russia*. James P. Cannon characterized Draper's view in the following way:

"... the trouble with the American Communist Party began at the beginning when it tied itself to the Russian Revolution and the Russian leaders, and this initial mistake – the party's original sin so to speak – led it inexorably from one calamity to another, and to eventual defeat and disgrace."

–*The First Ten Years of American Communism*

But as Cannon points out in his splendid essay, "The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement":

"The American communists in the early days, under the influence and pressure of the Russians in the Comintern, were slowly and painfully learning to change their *attitude*; to assimilate the new theory of the Negro question as a *special* question of doubly exploited second-class citizens, requiring a program of special demands as part of the over-all program – and to start doing something about it....

"The influence of Lenin and the Russian Revolution, even debased and distorted as it later was by Stalin, and then filtered through the activities of the Communist Party in the United States, contributed *more than any other influence from any other source* to the recognition, and more or less general acceptance, of the Negro question as a *special* problem of American society – a problem which cannot be simply subsumed under the general heading of the conflict between capital and labor, as it was in the pre-communist radical movement."

–*The First Ten Years of American Communism*, pp. 232-34

This essay, along with the letters Cannon wrote to Draper for the latter's historical research and which make up the bulk of Cannon's *First Ten Years of American Communism*, constitutes a revolutionary reaffirmation of the heritage of internationalism that was to be found in the early years of the CI. And this work is made more significant by the fact that it was written in the midst of the Cold War and the McCarthy witchhunt when faint-hearted liberals and renegade ex-radicals were trying to put as much distance as possible between themselves and all things associated with the Russian Revolution.

Further, Cannon himself had been badly scarred by the bureaucratic perversions of internationalism contained in the Stalinized CI and the Pabloist International Secretariat. Thus, while Cannon's *First Ten Years* has as its dominating thesis the need for a revolutionary movement, especially in its formative period, to be linked to a democratic centralist international, yet Cannon's fight and break with Pablo and the International Secretariat in 1953 led him to draw into question the legitimacy of international democratic centralism in the absence of a section with the authority of Lenin's Bolshevik Party. Nonetheless, Cannon's thesis was correct that it was the Russian Revolution and the CI which gave the initial impetus to the recognition of the special oppression of the American black, and has shaped to this day the struggle against that special oppression.

John Reed on Black Question at Second CI Congress

The first full discussion of the black question from a Communist viewpoint took place not in the U.S. but in Moscow, in 1920 at the Second Congress of the CI. In the beginning of his draft theses on the national and colonial question, Lenin asked the delegates their opinions on 16 questions, the 14th of which was the "Negroes in America." John Reed was the main reporter on the black question at the Congress. Perhaps responding to the subsuming of the black question under the national and colonial question, Reed reported (as quoted in *The Second Congress of the Communist International, Proceedings*, 17 July, 19 July - 7 August 1920, Publishing Office of the Communist International, Moscow, 1920):

“Considered as an oppressed and subjugated people, the Negroes present a twofold problem: that of a strong racial and social movement and of a proletarian labor movement advancing very fast in class consciousness. The Negroes have no demands for national independence. All movements aiming at a separate national existence for Negroes fail, as did the “back to Africa movement” of a few years ago. They consider themselves first of all Americans at home in the United States.”

He made the following interesting observations about the black movement, which are made particularly timely in light of recent developments in the black movement:

“Among the Negroes themselves a great racial consciousness arose. There was and is among Negroes now a section which advocates armed insurrection against the whites. Defense societies were organized everywhere by the returned Negro soldiers for resistance to white lynchers. But while Communists should energetically support the Negro defense movement, they should discourage all ideas of a separate armed insurrection of the Negroes. Many people think that a Negro rising would be the signal for the general revolution in America. We know that without the co-operation of the white proletariat, it would be the signal for the counterrevolution....”

Reed concluded his report by setting out, albeit in rather abstract fashion, the tasks for the American Communist Party in regard to the black question:

“The policy of the American Communists toward Negroes should be primarily to consider the Negroes as workers... every effort must be made to organize them in the labor unions with the white workers as the best and quickest means of breaking down race prejudice and developing class solidarity. But the Communists must not stand aloof from the Negro movement for social and political equality, which in the present growth of racial consciousness enlists the Negro masses. The Communists must use this movement to point out the futility of bourgeois equality and the necessity of the Socialist Revolution, not only to free all workers from servitude, but also as the only means of freeing the Negroes as a subject people.”

With the exception of Serrati⁶ who tried to cut off debate on the national and colonial questions complaining that “one comrade [Reed] spoke here for ten minutes on the question of the colored people in Chicago,” Reed’s report was apparently well received, even though he made it quite clear that he did not consider the black question in the U.S. to be a national question.

Initial CP Writings on Black Question

The first extensive literary discussion of the black question in the U.S. took place in the political organ of the Communist Party of America, *The Communist* (Vol. I, No. 4-5) in 1921, with a two-part article by J.P. Collins (Joseph Zack) and “John Bruce” entitled “The Party and the Negro Struggle.” But it was precisely in regard to the relationship of the party to the Negro struggle that the article was at its vaguest. The article did recapitulate the following widely held fear at that time:

“The Negro, then, is in danger of becoming the backbone of a vicious White Guard system. We need to reflect for a moment on the fact that the backbone of the reactionary French government today is represented by colored colonial troops.... The situation confronting us today in the United States is replete with no less awful possibilities.”

These articles overestimated the potential of the class-collaborationist policies inspired by Booker T. Washington and put into practice by the Urban League to train and recruit an industrially skilled black professional strike-breaking force which in the context of the deep racial polarization of the period could lead straight to race war. The Communists felt that the development of the pro-capitalist and anti-union Garvey movement was particularly ominous within this context.

⁶ Giacinto Menotti Serrati (1872-1926), left-wing member of Italian Socialist Party known for his opposition to Lenin’s Theses on the National and Colonial Question at the Second Congress of the Communist International (1920).

However, the article did take note of another kind of black nationalist organization:

“The African Blood Brotherhood headed by Briggs is more militant than any of the others. Its slogan is ‘Immediate protection and ultimate liberation for the Negroes everywhere.’ It preaches co-operation with white radical forces. It is an organization of defense against ‘lynching and terrorism’.”

The article concludes with a vague call for the unity of all militant Negro organizations, presumably those like the African Blood Brotherhood.

Need for a Black Communist Cadre

The abstractness of Communist perspectives and propaganda in this period was partially due to its lack of a black cadre. The U.S. Communist Party’s (CP) first black members came from the left-wing social-democratic black publication, *The Messenger*, and included Otto E. Huiswoud, a native of Dutch Guyana, a union printer and a member of the Harlem branch of the Socialist Party before he went over to the Communists.

The CP’s real breakthrough in black recruitment came from the African Blood Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was organized by a West Indian black, Cyril Briggs, who was the active editor of the *Amsterdam News* during WWI. He was forced to resign because of his opposition to the war and he went on to launch *The Crusader* in September 1918. The Crusader was both pro-Socialist and black nationalist, stating;

“The surest and quickest way, then, in our opinion, to achieve the salvation of the Negro is to combine the two most likely and feasible propositions, viz., salvation for all Negroes through the establishment of a strong, stable, independent Negro state (along the lines of our own race genius) in Africa and elsewhere; and salvation for all Negroes (as well as other oppressed people) through the establishment of a Universal Socialist Co-operative Commonwealth.”

–*The Crusader*, April 1921, p. 9

The African Blood Brotherhood was organized in December 1919 by Briggs and, by 1921, Joseph Zack, the CP section organizer for Harlem and Yorkville, was in contact with the organization. Within a year the CP was to recruit a majority of the Brotherhood’s leading body, its Supreme Council.

4th CI Congress: “Theses on the Negro Question”

The Fourth Congress of the CI in 1922 appointed a Negro Commission which was charged with drafting “Theses on the Negro Question,” The “Theses” briefly referred to the relationship of the Negro question to the domestic class struggle and in particular advocated the following:

“The CI will use every instrument within its control to compel the trade unions to admit Negro workers to membership ... Failing in this it will organize the Negroes into unions of their own and specifically apply the United Front tactic to compel admission to the unions of white workers.”

– Fourth Congress of the Communist International, *Resolutions and Theses* (Communist Party of Great Britain, 1922)

But most of the document was devoted to placing the American Negro question within the context of the “world Negro movement” stating: “The history of the Negro in America fits him for an important role in the liberation struggle of the entire African race.” Thus the defining characteristic of the “Theses” was a variety of Pan-Africanism in which American Negroes were seen as the vanguard of the world Negro movement. At least one of the American delegates, Billings, still adhered to the even more grossly inaccurate theory of some sort of black fascism:

“The Negro in the New World will be the source from which the “white guard” elements will be recruited in the event of revolutionary uprisings anywhere and everywhere.”

–*Abridged Report of Meetings Held at Petrograd and Moscow, 7 November/3 December 1922* (Communist Party of Great Britain, 1922)

The “Theses” also stated:

“The 4th Congress accordingly declares it to be a special duty of the Communists to apply the ‘Theses on the Colonial Question’ to the Negro problem.”

–4th CI Congress, *Resolutions and Theses*

The “Theses on the Negro Question” (which also called for a CI-sponsored world Negro Congress which was never called) thus proved to be disorienting to the American CP. While William F. Dunne was asserting in *The Workers Monthly* (April 1925) that “American Communist Negroes are the historical leaders of their comrades in Africa,” the 1923 CP convention passed resolutions which stated:

“The Workers [Communist] Party will oppose all movements looking to the surrender of the Negroes’ rights in this country, such as the ‘Back to Africa’ movement, which is only an evasion of the real struggle and an excuse to surrender the Negroes’ rights in their native land, America. The United States is the home of the American Negro, and the Workers Party champions his full, free and equal partnership with his white brothers in the future society.”

–*American Communism and Soviet Russia*, p. 328

CP’s Flip-flops on Garvey

Another example of the CP’s disorientation on the black question was its shifting attitude on the Garvey movement. The factors which were the prelude to the 1919 race riots – the war-induced expansion of industry, labor shortage and mass migration of rural blacks to the cities, followed by demobilization, recession and unemployment – also provided the stimulus for the growth of militant black nationalist movements, the most important of which was Garvey’s “Back to Africa” Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

The UNIA was the only black nationalist organization to have a genuinely mass base. While Reed wrote off the UNIA and Garvey in his report to the 2nd CI Congress, nonetheless the Garvey movement reached the height of its influence just as the fledgling American CP attempted to crystallize a black cadre.

Cyril Briggs in the early days of the African Blood Brotherhood had already crossed swords with Garvey. When Briggs proposed a united front with Garvey in 1919, Garvey attacked the light-complexioned Briggs as a white trying to pass himself off as a Negro.

While the initial CP response was to write off the Garvey movement, under the inspiration of the Pan-African bent of the 4th CI Congress “Theses on the Negro Question,” the American CP made an accommodationist approach to the UNIA which, perhaps luckily for the reputation of early American Communism, was rejected by Garvey. Robert Minor in the *Liberator* (March 1924) characterized the Garvey movement as the “spontaneous classic cry of the Black Spartacus” and in editorials dated 29 and 30 July 1924, the *Daily Worker* sent effusive greetings to the 4th Congress of the UNIA.

According to *American Communism and Soviet Russia* the CP even considered inviting Garvey to the 5th CI Congress, an invitation that if actually sent would have been a stupid betrayal comparable in kind if not in scale to making Chiang Kai-shek an honorary member of the CI Executive Committee. Rebuffed by Garvey and unable to woo away Garvey’s mass base the CP finally returned to its previous position:

“The dramatics of Marcus Garvey, under the cover of which he sabotages the struggle against the Ku Klux Klan, while he builds up a petty bourgeois circle of ‘leaders’ with a vested interest in subduing the class struggle in America with the opiate of emancipation through running away from this continent, are another form of the exploitation of the Negro.”

–*Daily Worker*, 9 August 1924

Several years later, during the CP's "third period," it was to characterize the UNIA, as well as the NAACP and all other black movements not directly under CP control, as "social fascist." However, during the years when the CP was still a revolutionary party, its inability to penetrate the ranks of the Garvey movement, compared to its success with the African Blood Brotherhood, must essentially be laid to the differences between the two black movements.

Precisely because it so accurately caught the disillusionment and demoralization that leads to both anger and escapism, following the defeat of the postwar strike wave and the 1919 race riots, the Garvey perspective of race war instead of class war was for a time able to capture the mood of the black masses (parallel to the growth today of Pan-Africanism following the failures of the civil rights movement and destruction of the early Panthers).

At the same time, Briggs, beginning from a similar perspective of race pride and black self-organization was led by his uncompromising hostility to the imperialist-capitalist establishment to embrace a class-struggle outlook. A similar comparison could be made between the Black Muslims of the late fifties and the Black Panthers of the late Sixties. The African Blood Brotherhood was able to find the road to revolutionary Marxism while, in marked contrast, the precious cadre of the Panthers were either dissipated in wasted terrorism or liquidated into the Democratic Party. This is a fitting commentary on the transformation that the CP, which played a major role in developments in both black organizations, has undergone in the last 40 years.

CP Launches American Negro Labor Congress

In 1925 the CP attempted to launch a transitional black organization called the American Negro Labor Congress. The transitional organization grew out of the recognition of the need for special organizational forms to draw into the revolutionary movement strata and sections of the working masses with special problems and demands. The experience of the socialist and communist movements has demonstrated the need for special organizations to reach minority races, women, youth, foreign language workers, and other specially oppressed groups.

As codified by the Leninist Communist International, such special organizations are part of the revolutionary movement and participate in the overall class struggle. They are not substitutes for the vanguard party, but are linked to the party both programmatically and through their most conscious cadres. The original conception of the American Negro Labor Congress was in this tradition:

"The fundamental aim in calling the American Negro Labor Congress is to establish in the life of the American Negro working classes an organization which may serve as a medium through which the American Communist Party may reach and influence the Negro working class and at the same time constitute something of a recruiting ground for the party."

— Lovett Fort Whiteman, "American Negro Labor Congress," *International Press Correspondence*, 27 August 1925

The founding convention of the Congress was held in Chicago during October 1925 and was attended by 40 delegates. A newspaper was launched, the *Negro Champion*, which appeared only sporadically. The Congress was launched without sufficient black communist cadre rooted in the working class with leadership authority. As late as 1928 the CP had only 50 black members.

Further, the CP was torn between the American Negro Labor Congress and the Trade Union Educational League, the Party's trade-union organization in the labor movement, in carrying out work among the black section of the proletariat. This conflict was only resolved in the "third period" when the successor to the Congress, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, was linked directly to the successor of the TUEL, the Trade Union Unity League. Nonetheless, the American Negro Labor Congress is the earliest effort in the communist movement to find the organizational forms to reach the black working masses. ■

“Negro Self-Determination in the Black Belt”: Reactionary/Utopian Theory for Black Liberation

–reprinted from *Young Spartacus* No. 23, May-June 1974

Lenin’s crucial influence on the American left’s recognition of the black question as a “special problem of American society” was noted by James P. Cannon in 1959 at the height of the civil rights movement (see “Early Communist Black Work,” *Young Spartacus* No. 21, January-February 1974). In addition, Cannon paid tribute to the American Communist Party (CP) black work of the early 1930’s:

“It was the Communist Party and no other that made the Herndon and Scottsboro cases national and world-wide issues, and put Dixiecrat legal lynch mobs on the defensive for the first time since the collapse of Reconstruction. Party activists led the fights and demonstrations to gain consideration for the unemployed Negroes at the relief offices, and to put the furniture of evicted Negroes back into their empty apartments. It was the Communist Party that demonstratively nominated a Negro for Vice President in 1932, something that no other radical or socialist party had ever thought about doing....

“The policy and agitation of the Communist Party at the time did more, ten times over, than any other to help the Negro workers rise to a new status of at least semi-citizenship in the new labor movement created in the thirties under the banner of the CIO.”

–*The First Ten Years of American Communism*

Thus, even though this work was dominated by Stalinist “third period” ultra-radicalism “with all the crooked demagoguery, exaggerations and distortions which are peculiar to them and inseparable from them” (*First Ten Years...*), nonetheless this period was beyond a doubt the high point of militant mass struggle for black emancipation in this country.

“Negro Self-Determination In the Black Belt”

CP black work during the Great Depression is often identified with the slogan, “Negro self-determination in the Black Belt,” which was defined as that part of the South which had a black majority and was most closely associated with plantation agriculture and sharecropping. Needless to say, the formation of an independent black state in this area has never had any appeal for the black masses, either in the South or in the North. Instead this area has always been seen by blacks as a prison from which to escape to large cities both in the North and South.

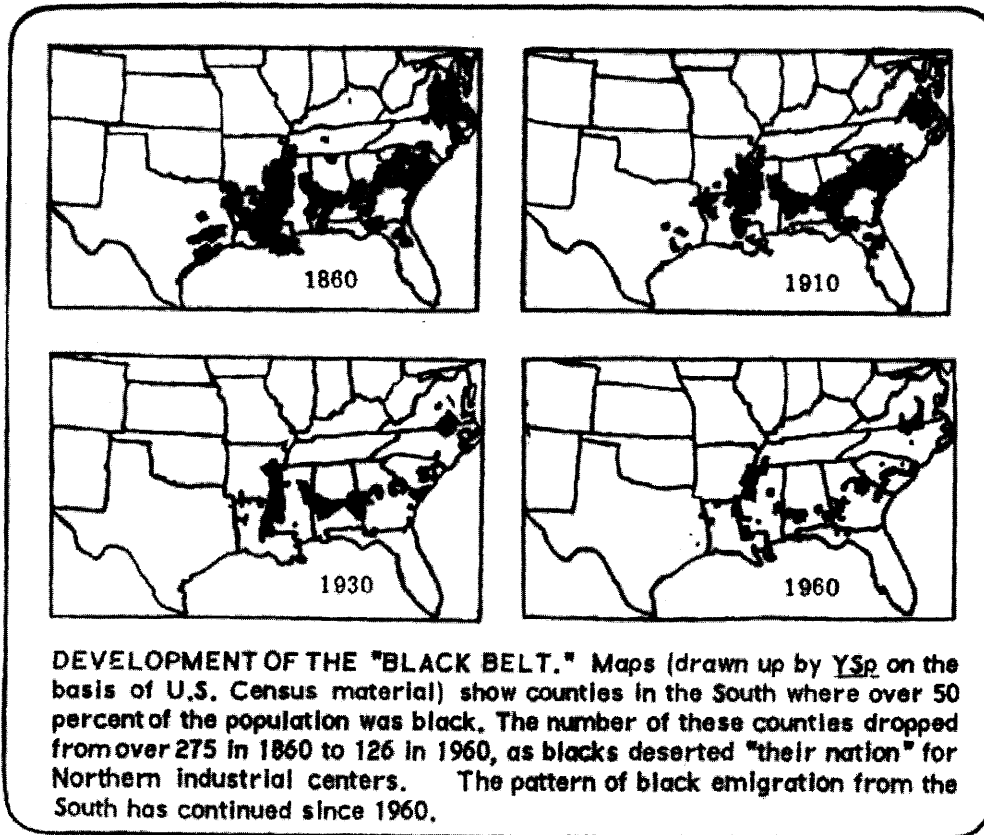
Insofar as CP black work in the thirties was successful, it was successful in spite of this slogan, for which the CP never found the means for concrete implementation and around which it never raised any struggles. None of the very important, very courageous struggles it did wage in the South – the Scottsboro and Herndon defense cases, the Sharecroppers Union, Gastonia textile work, organization of the coal fields and steel mills around Birmingham, struggles for relief and veterans’ rights – were ever concretely linked to the struggle for “Negro self-determination in the Black Belt.” Nonetheless, certain Maoist-Stalinist groups, such as the October League and the Communist League, who have looked back to this period for inspiration, have chosen what was most tangential to black work during the Depression: the Black Belt theory.

What was the “Third Period”?

The black work and overall strategy of the CP and Communist International (CI) during the early thirties is closely identified with what was called the “third period.” It was the “third period” perspective which facilitated the fascist conquest of power in Germany, to cite just the worst example.

In January 1928 in the Soviet Union there occurred the “bloodless uprising” of the kulaks (rich peasants) who refused to hand over their hoarded grain stocks at state prices. This threatened the urban proletariat with famine and was a direct challenge to the survival of the workers state. Stalin’s policy of appeasing the rich peasantry and

building “socialism at a snail’s pace” opened the road for capitalist restoration. The “bloodless uprising” followed a series of severe defeats for the CI internationally, the most notorious of which was the crushing of the 1927 Chinese revolution by Chiang Kai-shek, whom Stalin had made an honorary member of the CI’s Executive Committee. The Trotskyist Left Opposition in the Russian CP had tried to forewarn the CI of the danger of Stalin’s policies only to be further persecuted and crushed each time its unheeded warnings were vindicated.



Since the kulak “strike” hit at the very economic foundation of the Stalinist bureaucracy – nationalized property forms – it was forced to borrow the slogans and demands of the Left Opposition: “The main danger is from the right.” It would be necessary to liquidate the kulaks, encourage the collectivization of agriculture and the building of heavy industry, and implement careful economic planning.

But the bureaucracy had to present this change in line in such a way so as not to concede the Left Opposition had ever been right or the bureaucracy ever wrong. Above all, the “infallibility” of the Stalinist faction had to be upheld. So Stalin’s ideological apologists came up with the theory of the “third period”: the first period corresponded to the revolutionary upsurge following WWI, the second period covered the stabilization of capitalism and decline of the revolutionary wave after 1921, and the new “third period” of capitalist decline presumably issued in a period of “final crisis” and “imminent revolution.”

Under the blows of the “third period,” yesterday’s “allies” like Chiang Kai-shek and social-democratic reformists like Purcell of the Anglo-Russian Committee were transformed into “social fascists”; therefore there could be no united fronts “from above” but only “from below.” Inside the Soviet Union the “third period” meant that the Stalinist bureaucracy would pursue a reckless breakneck policy that was even a caricature of its own caricature of the Left Opposition as “anti-peasant” and “super-industrializers.” And with its transcendental theory of “periods,” the bureaucracy was able to claim that appeasing the rich peasantry or social democrats was

appropriate for the “second period” while forced collectivization and characterizations of the KMT⁷ and social democracy as “social fascists” were appropriate for the “third period.”

This ultra-left turn took place, however, entirely within the framework of the two-stage revolution theory, in which the first stage, the “national-democratic revolution,” is led by a two-class party which then presumably goes on to the next stage – the national-socialist revolution, or “socialism in one country.”

Sixth CI Congress and the “Black Belt” Slogan

Prior to the Sixth Congress of the CI in mid-1928, “Negro self-determination” had never been discussed or even conceived of in the American CP. The party shared the view expressed by John Reed at the 2nd CI Congress that the Negroes have no demands for national independence.”

There was, however, an insensitivity to the Negro question as a special question and a sense, expressed in CPer Billings’ report to the Fourth CI Congress, that Negroes would “be the source from which the ‘white guard’ elements will be recruited in the event of revolutionary risings anywhere and everywhere” (see “Early Communist Black Work,” *YSp* No. 21).

Lovestone, for example, held the position that the land-bound blacks on the Southern plantations were a “reserve of capitalist reaction” which could only be liquidated through migration, industrialization and the integration of the black tenant farmer and sharecropper into the proletariat. This position, which was also shared by John Pepper prior to the Sixth Congress, was attacked in “The Right Danger in the American Party,” the Cannon-Foster document submitted to the Congress, for writing off any perspective for work among the “Negro peasantry” in the South and for not mentioning the necessity for an antiwhite chauvinism campaign in the party. There was general recognition that the American Negro Labor Congress, a transitional black organization launched by the CP in 1925, had not been successful, but only vague alternatives had been suggested, e.g., Pepper’s call for a “Negro Race Congress” and Cannon-Foster’s proposal for a “revolutionary race movement led by the Negro proletariat.”

The discussion on the black question at the Sixth Congress took place primarily in a special “Negro Commission.” Of the 32 members of the commission five were blacks from the U.S., including Harry Haywood, Otto Hall and James Ford. The position on “Negro self-determination in the Black Belt” was presented to the Commission in a document co-signed by Haywood and Nasanov, a Russian youth leader who was the Communist Youth International representative to the Commission.

Haywood had been recruited to the African Blood Brotherhood in 1922, to the CP youth league in 1923, and to the CP in 1925. He had spent the two years prior to the Sixth Congress studying in the Soviet Union and it was there, in collaboration with Nasanov and with the approval of the Stalinist leadership that the Black Belt theory was cooked up.

When first presented to the Congress, it ran up against the resistance of the rest of the American black delegation, with both Ford and Hall speaking against it. Ford stated:

“It seems that any nationalist movement on the part of Negroes does nothing but play into the hands of the bourgeoisie by arresting the revolutionary class movement of the Negro masses and further widening the gulf between the white and similarly oppressed groups.”

—quoted in Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*

Opposition to “Negro self-determination” was put even more strongly by Hall:

⁷ Kuomintang, the Chinese bourgeois nationalist party founded by Sun Yat-sen and led by Chiang Kai-shek, who carried out the 1927 Shanghai Massacre that killed tens of thousands of Chinese communists and militant workers.

“The historical development of the American Negro has tended to create in him the desire to be considered a part of the American nation. There are no tendencies to become a separate national minority within the American nation.”

—quoted in Draper, *op. cit.*

Pepper, who had made his political career by keeping one step ahead of and then carrying to an illogical extreme the zigzags of the Stalinist bureaucracy, caught the direction of the wind on the Negro question at the Sixth Congress and completely reversed his previous position that the black question was a race question and now claimed that the “Black Belt” was an “internal colony” which could only be freed by a Communist-led “Negro Soviet Republic” (*The Communist*, June 1928).

After the Sixth CI Congress, resistance to the Black Belt theory continued. At first the theory was not even mentioned in the CP press. The CI codified its position in a resolution issued by its Political Secretariat on 26 October 1928 and a debate ensued in both the pages of *The Communist* and *The Communist International*, the theoretical organs, respectively, of the American CP and the CI.

Otto E. Huiswoud, who was the first black to join the CP, coming over from the Messenger group in the Socialist Party in 1920, published an article entitled “World Aspects of the Negro Question” in the February 1930 *Communist*. While recognizing that “the Negro race is everywhere a subject race and there exists a common bond of interest based on racial oppression,” Huiswoud wrote:

“It is essential that we distinguish the situation of the Negro masses in the colonies – Africa and the West Indies, the semi-colonies of Haiti and Liberia, who suffer from colonial exploitation, from that of the Negro in America, a racial minority, subject to racial persecution and exploitation. We must take into consideration the national-colonial character of the Negro question in Africa and the West Indies and the racial character of the question in the U.S.”

In the former, Negroes had:

“1) a majority of the population and organized communities, 2) a common language and culture. In contrast to this the Negro in America has a) no distinct language and culture from the dominant race, b) it is a minority of the population, c) its only distinguishing feature is its racial origin.”

Huiswoud was answered by Haywood in his “Against Bourgeois Distortions on the Negro Question in the U.S.” (*The Communist*, 1930). The article opened with the following “comradely” criticism: “The fact that there exists a practical alliance between the chauvinist elements and some of our Negro comrades should not be the occasion for wonder.” Haywood’s polemic against Huiswoud reduced to the following syllogism: 1) Huiswoud asserts that oppression of the Negroes in the U.S. is racial and not national; 2) but reactionary and racist theories also assert that the Negro is unequal because of his race; 3) therefore, Huiswoud’s position is racist and reactionary. Thus Haywood writes:

“... concretely it would be tantamount to reducing the Negro question, a social question, to a question of racial ideology, i.e., to slur over the economic and social roots of the question and finally to capitulate to bourgeois race theories.”

Haywood conceded that the national characteristics of the Negro are weak and it is for that reason that the bourgeoisie singles out race as the only factor against which they “can erect a hostile ideology ... towards inflaming the ‘national mind’ against them.” Haywood also accepts the distinction between blacks in the West Indies and Africa and the U.S.:

“Here they are not territorially separated from the oppressing white American nation, but on the contrary, live with the whites within the confines of one state. Under these conditions the bourgeois ruling classes must pursue the most energetic policy in order to keep up the bar of separation between white and Negroes, i.e., retard the process of assimilation and thus preserve the conditions for the super-exploitation of the latter.”

For Haywood, the economic and social content of the black question in the South was given a national dimension in the following way:

“...the unfinished agrarian revolution as reflected in the preservation of the remnants of slavery in the economy of the South has its political counterpart in the unfinished bourgeois democratic revolution (as far as Negroes are concerned) as reflected in the denial of democratic rights of the Negro masses.”

Therefore Haywood saw a “national revolutionary movement” based on the Negro peasantry in the South emerging:

“Marx, Engels and Lenin at all times considered that the revolutionary strength of the bourgeois-democratic nationalist movements ... lie mainly in the struggle of the peasants.”

In October 1930 the CI Executive Committee issued another resolution to elaborate and expand on the Black Belt theory. (Both CI resolutions are reprinted in the Communist League’s *Negro National Colonial Question*). The earlier resolution began:

“The industrialization of the South, the concentration of a new Negro working class population in the big cities of the East and North and the entrance of the Negroes into basic industries on a mass scale, create the possibility for the Negro workers, under the leadership of the Communist Party, to assume the hegemony of all Negro liberation movements, and to increase their importance and role in the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat.”

The new resolution, however, began by denouncing Lovestone’s theory that “the ‘Industrial Revolution’ will proletarianize the Negro peasantry, so that the Negro question as a special national question would thereby presumably be resolved.” After complimenting the American CP for purging Lovestone and his position on the black question, the new resolution goes on to attack the Party for not “overcoming in its own ranks all underestimation of the struggle for the slogan of the right of self-determination, and still less in doing away with all lack of unclarity on the Negro question.” In the North the main slogan was to be “equal rights” and in the South “the right to self-determination.”

The resolution gives “recognition and support for the Negroes’ right to their own special schools.” As Lenin pointed out in *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, in the South blacks already had their own “special schools” and Lenin considered them a product of the deep oppression, persecution and cultural backwardness to which blacks in the South were subjected.

He used the example of the “special schools” for Negroes in the South in polemicizing against the demand for “special schools” for oppressed minorities, nationalities, religions and races in general.

The 1928 resolution did not mention the “white minority” in the Black Belt, but the 1930 resolution stated: “Within the limits of this state there will of course remain a fairly significant white minority which must submit to the right of self-determination of the Negro majority.” As if this were not enough for a Southern black Communist to tell his fellow white worker or tenant farmer, the resolution goes on to proclaim: “First of all, the right to self-determination means that the Negro majority and not the white minority in the entire territory of the administratively united Black Belt exercises the right of administering governmental, legislative and juridical authority.”

James Allen’s *Negro Question in the U.S.*, published in 1935, was the most extensive elaboration of the Black Belt theory ever produced by the CP. Turning gerrymandering into a fine art which even those who carved a Jewish state out of Palestine in 1947 would have admired, Allen was still only able to creak out a “Black Belt” with a 50.3 percent black majority (4,790,716 out of a total population of 9,525,865). Certainly the “white minority” of 4,735,716 whom the CI ... wanted to disenfranchise and turn into non-citizens under a black dictatorship could not all have been Southern Bourbons and their henchmen or former officers of the Confederate Army. The overwhelming majority of the “white minority” were in fact tenant farmers and workers who, while generally better off than Southern blacks, were often worse off than workers in the North or farmers in the West. This “poor white trash” was certainly no privileged aristocracy. This sort of political outlook could not have done

more to inflame racial tensions and set white worker and farmer against black than had it been written by the Klan.

As was clear from both the Haywood article and the 1930 CI resolution, the Stalinists had learned nothing from the Chinese Revolution and were trying to apply, with a little “third period” demagoguery, the two-stage revolution to the black question in the South, thus reducing it to a national question because of the unresolved agrarian and therefore bourgeois-democratic aspects.

It was envisioned that in the “third period,” U.S. capitalism was at its “apex” and could only go on to stagnate and decline; therefore, there could be no further assimilation of blacks into the proletariat. Blacks were seen as locked into the Black Belt and the plantations. What was needed was a primarily peasant-based “national revolutionary movement” or “bourgeois democratic nationalist movements” (a black Kuomintang?), to use Haywood’s words, which would foment rebellion, drive out imperialism and carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution – in part, by disenfranchising 4.7 million whites who would then become the downtrodden and oppressed, and perhaps would be granted by the Moscow wizards the “right to self-determination in the White Belt.” Another example of the CI’s application of the theory of two-stage revolution is that, while great stress is placed on the confiscation of the land, nothing is said about confiscation of industry. In arguing against Pepper’s “colony” thesis, however, the 1930 resolution is forced to concede:

“Industrialization in the Black Belt is not, as is generally the case in the colonies, properly speaking, in contradiction with the ruling interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie, which has in its hands the monopoly of all industry....”

Thus, somehow the black tenants and workers were to “drive out the imperialists,” set up a black independent state and confiscate the land while all the industry remained in the hands of the imperialist bourgeoisie. The resolution even explicitly states: “One cannot deny that it is just possible for the Negro population of the Black Belt to win the right of self-determination during capitalism....” and continues with an argument against Pepper’s “Negro Soviet Republic.”

Was Lovestone Right?

Has subsequent history proved the correctness of the Lovestone thesis that industrialization would liquidate the agrarian component of the black question through migration and assimilation into the proletariat?

What the Black Belt theory from its “third period” perspective of American capitalism could not see was that U.S. capitalism was capable of expanding, but that it was capable of expanding only in a chaotic, uneven and destructive fashion, stimulated by preparation for and participation in another world imperialist war. Certainly, the expansion of American capitalism could in no way be progressive.

Lovestone was wrong insofar as he thought the expansion of capitalism would in simple, linear and natural fashion liquidate the reactionary tenancy system in the South and assimilate blacks into the proletariat. The previous world imperialist conflict, WWI, had also stimulated an enormous expansion of U.S. capitalism in which the black “reserve” from the South played an enormous role. But immediately after WWI they were tossed right back out of industry and sent back to the plantations in boxcars.

It was precisely the fact that CP black work in the 1930’s was guided not by “Black Belt self-determination” but by a militant struggle for equal rights, especially the struggle to bring blacks into a new labor movement on the basis of equality, that opened the door to genuine assimilation into the proletariat. And in the main they were not purged from industry at the end of WWII to the same degree as after WWI because, as a result of the heroic work of the CP in the early 1930’s, they had at least obtained the status of “semi-citizenship” in the labor movement.

Maoism and Black Self-Determination

Thus it is indeed ironic that Maoist groups like the Communist League and the October League look back to “third period” Stalinism for inspiration on the black question and overlook what was progressive and healthy in the CP’s black work: the efforts of the Trade Union Unity League, the International Labor Defense, the League of

Struggle for Negro Rights, the Unemployment Councils and Tenants Leagues and the Sharecropper Union. Instead, they resurrect what was most tangential and reactionary: the Black Belt theory.

It is, however, understandable, in that they have chosen the aspect that was most Maoist, i.e., most Stalinist: the reduction of the black question to a peasant and national question, the conception of a peasant-based “national revolutionary movement” leading an “anti-imperialist” (but not anti-capitalist) struggle for independence. The Black Belt theory may not be one of bourgeois reaction but, with its theory of a peasant-based, two-stage revolution culminating in a “New Democracy”-type “bloc of four classes,” it is one of the few ways to apply Maoist-reformist theories to the U.S.

Within the American Stalinist movement, the Black Belt theory has generally been associated with “leftism” as a distinctly Communist alternative to liberal integrationism. Thus, the right turns of the CP have generally involved burying the Black Belt theory as unacceptable to bourgeois public opinion. However, while opposition to the theory from within the confines of American Stalinism was generally a rightist conciliation to liberalism, the Black Belt position itself is objectively utopian and reactionary. The only progressive solution to the black question lies in revolutionary integrationism – egalitarianism rooted in a socialist economic system.

Black Question Not A National Question

The nation, as even Maoists must know, is not a transcendental or timeless entity. It is a “historical category belonging to a definite epoch, the epoch of rising capitalism” (Lenin, *Critical Remarks on the National Question*) - The amalgamation of peoples into nations occurs when technology is sufficiently developed so that commodity production and circulation become the dominant modes. Then the nation becomes the natural unit of commodity exchange and the rising capitalist class seeks to secure its “own” market within the unit of the nation. As Lenin says, “The market is the first school in which the bourgeoisie learns its nationalism.”

But even in the epoch of rising capitalism, when the development of capitalism had an overall progressive role to play and the first nations were consolidated out of bourgeois revolutions (Holland, England, France) – even then, capitalism had already outgrown its cocoon, its national unit, and could only develop by subjugating other peoples (the slave trade, Ireland).

National oppression is the subjugation of a people so that they cannot fulfill their normal economic function in the process of technological growth: the development of nationhood. Either the technological development is itself retarded and/or the emerging national characteristics (language, culture) are suppressed. In Ireland both were the case.

The Black Belt could have gone the way of Ireland (the analogy most frequently used by the Communist League) if the South had won the Civil War under the direct intervention and “protection” of imperial England. By losing the Civil War, the South and the Black Belt in particular were thoroughly integrated into a common national economic unit with the North. The fact that the former slaves were still bound to the land through a tenancy structure grew out of the level of technological development: after the Civil War there was nothing to replace the contribution that the plantation made to the American economy and nothing to replace labor-intensive farming and therefore the continuing need for a stable labor supply.

Blacks are not oppressed as a nation. They do not desire to develop those national characteristics which could be the foundation for a separate economic unit. They are oppressed insofar as their aspiration to assimilate into the American political economy, the wealthiest political economy in the world (whose wealth is in large part due to the exploitation of the black slave, black tenant farmer and black worker), is thwarted. Nothing could be more reactionary than the proposal that blacks form a separate political economy in the Black Belt based on cotton and turpentine.

It was the first paragraph of the 1928 CI resolution on the black question which caught the real importance of the black question for the proletarian revolution in the U.S.: The entry of blacks into basic industry and the industrialization of the South laid the basis for a bi-racial proletarian vanguard in which blacks, because of their special oppression, will play a vanguard role. ■

