ENGELS' CONTRIBUTIONS ON NATIONAL QUESTION SEEN AS HISTORIC AID

Views Held by Great Collaborator of Marx Form Basis for Communist Position on Negro and Irish Questions Today

By James S. Allen

The Communist principle with regard to the question of the oppressed peoples has often been looked upon as something new. But as a principle the program of the right of self-determination and Communist support to peoples fighting for liberation from the yoke of oppression by a more powerful nation was already fully formulated for conditions prevailing in the past century by the founders of scientific Communism—Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. This principle was elaborated and further developed for the imperialist epoch and Socialist construction by Lenin and Stalin.

The views held by Engels on this question, as on all matters facing the international working class, were held in common with Marx, since the two were life-long collaborators. Lenin has often pointed to the position held by Marx and Engels on this or that national question to drive home the lesson that each national situation must be judged on its own merits and the question of whether the proletariat should support a national movement depends primarily upon whether that particular national movement is directed against the old order of society.

On the National Question

Marx and Engels summarized their position in the Communist Manifesto briefly as follows: "The Communists support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things." During the life-time of Marx and Engels the national question was linked up directly with the completion of the bourgeois-democratic revolution (the overthrow of the feudal form of society and the establishment of capitalist democracy) in a number of European countries. They therefore judged each national situation from the viewpoint of whether it is conducive to the overthrow of feudal institutions and rights, of whether it weakens the power of reaction and helps the growth of the working class movement.

During the period of the 1848 revolution in Germany Marx and Engels continually pointed out that Russia was the power behind Austrian and Prussian reaction. They were fervent defenders of the Hungarian and Polish revolutions and agitated for an independent and united Poland and the unification of Germany into one republic. The paper which they edited at that time, the **Neue Rheinische Zeitung**, was almost entirely devoted to agitation for creation of such democratic revolutionary forces which would with one blow free Germany of all the remnants of the obsolete feudal system.

Fought Feudalism

When Russia tried to obtain the Turkish domains in Europe, as a result of which England and France were finally forced to declare war against Russian (the Crimean war), Marx and Engels hailed the war, for it signified that the three main powers had fallen out among themselves. While they severely criticized the Russian autocracy as the main bulwark of reaction, they were no less severe in the criticism of the other powers involved and advocated a revolutionary solution: the democratic overturn of the feudal institutions. During the American Civil War, Marx and Engels enlisted the support of the European proletariat on the side of the North for they saw the war as a revolutionary war aimed primarily at the destruction of chattel slavery.

The Polish revolt of 1863 evoked great support from the workers and democrats of Europe. The meetings of workers in support of the Polish revolt, and the correspondence resulting from this agitation led directly to the formation of the First International (the International Workingmen's Association).

The report of the General Council of this organization to the first General Congress of the International in 1866 emphasized "the need for annulling Russian influence in Europe, through enforcing the right of self-determination" and "the reconstitution of Poland upon democratic and social foundations." The report declared that the Russian autocracy could be overthrown by restoring the freedom of Poland and that due to the participation of Prussia in the crime against Poland (Prussia had taken part in the partition of Poland) it was incumbent upon the German proletariat especially to take the initiative in the liberation of Poland.

Engels Answered Proudhon

The failure to see the importance of supporting the struggle of oppressed peoples for liberation was especially peculiar to the followers of Proudhon who, in the words of Lenin, "ignored in the name of the social revolution, understood in a doctrinaire way, the international role of Poland and passed over the national movement with a gesture of the hand." In an English Chartist paper, **The Commonwealth**, Engels wrote a series of articles in reply to the Proudhonist arguments on the Polish question. Against the background of the actual European situation after the revolution of 1830 in France, Engels shows that "the liberation and unification of the oppressed and subdivided nations became a watchword" common to all real democrats. Thus, he showed, the breaking up of the Austrian empire was necessary before Italy could be liberated and Germany unified. As for Russia, he characterized her as the "bulwark of reaction against Russia (the Crimean war), large amount of stolen property, which would have to be disgorged on the day of reckoning." But most illuminating in these articles by Engels was his conclusion in which there are concisely and clearly enumerated the reasons for supporting Polish independence:

"a. Why do the workingmen of Europe take up this question? In the first instance, because the middle class writers and agitators conspire to suppress it, although they patronize all sorts of nationalities on the continent. . . . Whence this reticence? Because both aristocrats and bourgeoisie look upon the dark Asiatic power (Russia) in the background as a last resource against the advancing tide of working class ascendancy. That power can only be effectively put down by the restoration of Poland upon a democratic basis.

"b. In the present changed state of Central Europe, and especially Germany, it is more than ever necessary to have a democratic Poland. Without it, Germany will become the outwork of the Holy Alliance, with it, the cooperator with republican France. The working class movement will continuously be interrupted, checked and retarded, until this great European question be set at rest.

"c. It is especially the duty of the German working class to take the initiative in this matter, because Germany is one of the partitioners of Poland."

Engels on the Irish Question

Of special interest is Engels' comment in a letter to Marx after an early visit to Ireland in 1855: "Here," he said, "it is already clear how the so-called freedom of English citizens is based upon the suppression of the colonies." In 1869 Marx wrote: "I more and more come to the conviction (and the thing is to fix this conviction in the minds of the English working class) that it will never be in a position to make a decisive step forward in England itself until it finally breaks with the policy of the ruling classes on the Irish question, until it not only makes common cause with the Irish, but takes the initiative in breaking the union founded in 1801 and substitute for it a free union on a federative basis. And this must be done, not primarily as a question of sympathy with Ireland, but as a demand based on the interests of the English proletariat."

The first cardinal view of Engels, which he shared with Marx, on the question of the oppressed peoples was that every movement of an oppressed people which was progressive—directed against reaction—was to be directly supported by the working class. The Communists today—in the epoch of imperialism, when the majority of the peoples of the world are oppressed by a handful of capitalist powers—apply this principle by supporting materially and morally every revolutionary movement of the colonial peoples: the defense of Ethiopia against Italian aggression, the struggle of the Chinese people against imperialism, independence of the Philippines, the Irish independence movement, etc. But the most immediate and direct application of this principle in the United States is the struggle led by the Communists for equal rights for Negroes and the liberation of the Negro people.

Application to Negro Question

The second cardinal principle enunciated by the founders of Communism on this question is that the working class of the **oppressing** nation must take the initiative in the struggle for the freedom of the oppressed people. Engels applied this, as we noted above, to the German working class in relation to Poland. In the United States this principle has its immediate application to the white workers in relation to the Negro people, in the first place, as well as in relation to the other peoples oppressed by Yankee imperialism. The Communists in the United States therefore hold, in accordance with the fundamental tenets of Marxism, that the white workers should be in the forefront of the struggle for Negro rights, disassociating themselves from the policy of the ruling class and forging unity with the Negro masses in the struggle against capitalism. This united fighting front must also be extended into the colonial and semi-colonial world.

The third basic principle was enunciated by Marx in relation to Ireland. This is the principle that the working class must not only guarantee but must take the initiative in winning the right of self-determination for the peoples oppressed by "its own" nation. For as Lenin again and again emphasized, international Socialism can only be built upon the basis of a free union of peoples.

The Ethiopian people are at present struggling for the right of self-determination, in this case for independence, for their existence as an independent people in the political sense, is being threatened by Italian fascism. Their support by the international working class movement will facilitate the struggle against capitalism at home, the struggle for progressive development in Ethiopia itself and cement a unity between the Ethiopian people and the proletariat of the advanced capitalist countries.

The correctness of this principle has been conclusively shown in the Soviet Union, where, after capitalism was overthrown and the basis for national oppression removed, the proletariat by granting the right of self-determination to the peoples within the old Tzarist empire was able to overcome the old national antagonisms and prejudices and create a free union of people in the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. In the same sense, the ultimate solution of the Negro question in the United States, even in a Soviet America, depends upon the full realization of the right of self-determination for the Negro majority in the South

Leaders

Karl Marx, founder of sc retician, leader of workin leader of victorious soci



Communists March In Van of Workers, Said Marx and Engels

"The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantages of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."—(**Manifesto of the Communist Party**, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels)

Insurrection Is an Art, Said Engels

"Now, insurrection is an art quite as much as war or any other, and subject to certain rules of proceeding, which, when neglected, will produce the ruin of the party neglecting them. Those rules, logical deductions from the nature of the parties and the circumstances one has to deal with in such a case, are so plain and simple that the short experience of 1848 had made the Germans pretty well acquainted with them.

"Firstly, never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to face the consequences of your play. Insurrection is a calculus with very indefinite magnitudes the value of which may change every day; the forces opposed to you have all the advantage of organization, discipline, and habitual authority; unless you bring strong odds against them you are defeated and ruined.

Secondly, the insurrectionary career once entered upon, act with the greatest determination, and on the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed rising; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies. Surprise your antagonists while their forces are scattering, prepare new successes, however small, but daily; keep up the moral ascendancy which the first successful rising has given to you; rally those vacillating elements to your side which always follow the strongest impulse, and which always look out for the safer side; force your enemies to a retreat before they can collect their strength against you; in the words of Danton, the greatest master of revolutionary policy yet known, **de l'audace, de l'audace, encore de l'audace!**" — (**Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution**, by Frederick Engels).