

The Negro Question in the Southern Textile Strikes

By CYRIL BRIGGS

ITS leadership of the struggles of the Southern textile workers brought our Party for the first time in its history squarely up against the Negro question in its most acute form.

To understand just what this means it is necessary to realize that it is in the South that the imperialist ideology of white superiority and racial separation, which even in the North plays such havoc in the ranks of the American working-class, finds its sharpest expression and most fertile breeding ground. The imperialist ideology is utilized by the white master class to "keep the Negro in his place," to prevent the "freed" Negro from rising, to keep him as a slave caste at the bottom of American society, now of that capitalist society which, with the close of the Civil War and the victory of the northern industrialists, had supplanted the old chattel slave system.

The slave system had given rise to a class of "poor whites." During the period of chattel slavery this class was held by the master class in greater contempt than even the slaves, even though they were of the same racial stock. In theory this class was free, white and superior to the slave. In actual fact, their status was indeterminate. They lived on the fringe of the economic and social life of the South, unable to lift themselves because of the great mass of slave labor which condemned them to almost certain degradation. In order to facilitate exploitation of the "freed" Negro, the white master class sought, and with eminent success, to prevent any fraternization between the "freed" Negro and the "poor whites." Toward accomplishing this end the social, if not the economic, status of the "poor whites" was elevated. The "poor whites" were invited to share the superiority traditions of the white master class. They were, in effect, admitted to the slopes, if not to the summit, of Mount Olympus. They became respected, albeit minor and exploited, members of the "great white race" of Madison Grant, Lotthrop Stoddard and other imperialist bunk-sputters. White supremacy became the battle-cry of the emerging "poor white" class, which only today is dimly beginning to realize that white supremacy means the supremacy only of the white imperialists and the degradation of both black and white toilers. The cry of Negro domination was worked overtime as an ever serviceable

bogey in the hands of the white ruling class, serving to whip the "poor whites" into frequent acts of savage terrorism against the Negro. And with these crimes of terrorism came the fear of Negro retaliation and a real hatred of the object feared. That fear today permeates the life of the South.

It was into this atmosphere of reeking race hatreds and antagonisms, of brutal repressions and rising resentment, of fears and suspicions, that the National Textile Union went in its campaign to organize the unorganized Southern workers and to lead them against capitalist rationalization.

That the situation with which the organizers of the N. T. U. were faced was most difficult is readily seen. What then was the duty of these organizers? Was it to prepare the way for retreat on the policy of the Union of organizing the black and white workers in the same locals on a basis of absolute equality? Was it to pretend unfamiliarity with the program of the R. I. L. U. on the Negro, that in organizing the new unions under our control the Negro must be organized on a basis of full equality? Unfamiliarity with the attitude of the Communist International on the Negro question and with the Party's program on the Negro, based on the decisions of the C. I. and the R. I. L. U.? Emphatically no! Was it to make one or two speeches advocating equality in the Union for the Negro and let it go at that? And to qualify such advocacy with the statement that this need not mean the establishment of any bonds of friendship between Negro and white workers in the Union? And to throw up their hands at the specter of intermarriage, shouting we don't advocate that! Again No!

The first duty of the Union and its organizers in the task of overcoming the racial antagonisms so successfully cultivated by the capitalist class in its policy of dividing the working-class, was to start a wide and determined ideological campaign against white chauvinism, which is the expression of the ideological influence of American imperialism and is at its greatest strength in the South. Failure to wage such a campaign resulted in the development of a powerful opposition on the part of the white strikers to the policy of the Union on the Negro workers. This and the sneaking feeling on the part of our comrades in the field that perhaps we would have to have a different Negro policy for the South gave rise to a dangerous situation in which we witness a most shameful retreat before white chauvinism on the part of these comrades. This retreat went so far that in Bessemer City, where a number of Negro workers had come out on strike with the white workers, the organizers permitted a jim-crow wire to be drawn across the hall, separating the Negro strikers from the whites. This was a shameful

capitulation before white chauvinism and was so branded by the Party. While Bessemer City was the worst example it was unfortunately not the only example of white chauvinism being permitted to come out in the open simply because our comrades had not taken the C. I. and the R. I. L. U. decisions on the Negro seriously to heart and had not set about energetically to combat the influences of the imperialist ideology.

Nor are the Negro comrades without responsibility in this shameful retreat before white chauvinism. In the early weeks of the strike, John Owens had been sent to Gastonia to help in seeing that the Party's policy on the Negro was carried out, but misunderstanding his instructions and without waiting for permission to return, Comrade Owens left Gastonia. Upon the news of the Bessemer incident reaching the center, another Negro comrade, Otto Hall, was despatched to Gastonia as a Central Committee representative, sharing this responsibility with two other comrades. Upon Hall's arrival in the strike area most of the organizers showed a most uncommendable zeal to shift to Comrade Hall's shoulders the entire burden of making the fight against white chauvinism. An impermissible hounding of the Central Committee representative occurred in the fraction, where Hall was requested to tell what *he* would have done about the "Jim-Crow" wire had he been present at Bessemer City. These comrades had to be sharply reminded by the Central Committee that the fight against white chauvinism in the ranks of the working class must be waged mainly by the white comrades. Comrade Hall found himself in an atmosphere of defeatism. He found the fraction in collapse on the Negro program of the Union, the R. I. L. U., the Party and the C. I. He permitted himself to be stampeded into himself making a retreat on that program, offering a motion in the fraction that the Negro workers should be organized into the A. N. L. C. Again the Central Committee laid down the line that there could be no retreat on the Party's program on the Negro, that the Negro workers were to be organized side by side with the whites in the locals of the new union.

In the meantime, however, considerable injury had been done. The Negro workers, militantly suspicious of the white workers, well remembering the role of tools of white ruling class terrorism played by the white working class in the South, but showing a favorable disposition toward the new Union as they came to understand its attitude on the Negro—these Negro workers were ripe for organization into the new Union—some even complaining that no effort had been made to organize them—when these incidents occurred to shatter their faith in the new Union and, what is worse, in its Communist leadership.

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This shameful retreat before white chauvinism the very first time we come up against the Southern race question cannot go uncensured by our Party. Our comrades now in the Southern strike area, and others who may be sent there, must be made to realize that there can be no Social-Democratic attitude of soft-pedaling on our Negro problem in the South, or of having one program for the North and another for the South. The new left wing unions under our leadership cannot so betray the Negro masses. On the contrary, the new left wing unions must champion the cause of the Negro workers, and must

“bring the white workers into the struggle on behalf of the Negro demands. It must be borne in mind that the Negro masses will not be won for the revolutionary struggles until such time as the most conscious section of the white workers show, by action, that they are fighting with the Negroes against all racial discrimination and persecution. Every member of the Party must bear in mind that the age long oppression of the colonial and weak nationalities by the imperialist powers, has given rise to a feeling of bitterness among the masses of the enslaved countries as well as a feeling of distrust toward the oppressing nation in general and toward the proletariat of those nations.”—(C. I. Resolution on Negro Question in U. S. A.)

It is very clearly pointed out in the Resolution of the E. C. C. I. on the Negro Question in the U. S. A. that the Communists must wage a relentless fight against racial bars in the reactionary trade unions. It is also clearly pointed out that the new Unions organized by the left wing must embrace all nationalities and all colors. Separate unions for Negro workers are to be organized only in those trades where the reactionary unions bar Negro membership and where we have no left wing unions:

“The proletarianization of the Negro masses makes the trade unions the principal form of mass organization. It is the primary task of the Party to play an active part and lead in the work of organizing the Negro workers and agricultural laborers in trade unions. Owing to the refusal of the majority of the white unions in the U. S. A., led by the reactionary leaders to admit Negroes to membership, steps must be immediately taken to set up special unions for those Negro workers who are not allowed to join the white unions. At the same time, however, the struggles for the inclusion of Negro workers in the existing unions must be intensified and concentrated upon, special attention must be given to those unions in which the statutes and rules set up special limitations against the admission of Negro workers. Primary duty of the Communist Party in this connection is to wage a merciless struggle against the A. F. of L. bureaucracy, which prevents the Negro workers from joining the white workers' unions. The organization of special trade unions for the Negro masses must be carried out as part and parcel of the struggle against the restrictions imposed upon the Negro workers and for their admission to the white

workers' unions. The creation of separate Negro unions should in no way weaken the struggle in the old unions for the admission of Negroes on equal terms. Every effort must be made to see that all the new unions organized by the left wing and by the Communist Party should embrace the workers of all nationalities and of all races. The principle of one union for all workers in each industry, white and black, should cease to be a mere slogan of propaganda, and must become a slogan of action."—(C. I. Resolution on Negro Question in the U. S. A.)

Every Communist will carry out the decisions of the Communist International. The decisions of the Communist International on the Negro question leave no ground for compromise with white chauvinism and no basis for any idea that the new left wing unions under our leadership can be organized in any other manner but on the basis of organizing the Negro as well as the white worker, and of absolute equality in the union for the Negroes with full participation in the leadership of the Union and equal opportunity for advancement on the job. It is not only necessary to fight the chauvinism of the white workers but the segregation tendencies of the Negro workers themselves. Again the C. I. Resolution speaks on this phase:

"The fight—by propaganda and by deeds—should be directed first and foremost against the chauvinism of the workers of the oppressing nationality as well as against bourgeois segregation tendencies of the oppressed nationality. The propaganda of international class solidarity is the necessary prerequisite for the unity of the working class in the struggle."

