

Notes On The Negro Question

(A Discussion Article)

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THE NEGRO QUESTION is a highly complex one, and over the years the Party, despite many outstanding successes, has made a number of mistakes in working it out in practice and theory. These errors have been greatly worsened by the plague of revisionism that has afflicted the Party so severely in the recent past. The ultra-Leftists added their share to the confusion. It is only now that the Party is getting its feet on the ground again in this most vital matter. This is manifested by the current Draft Resolution on the theoretical aspects of the Negro question by the National Committee, the discussion led by comrades Jackson, Allen, and others. It is of the utmost importance that this Resolution be perfected as quickly as possible and become the working basis of the Party in this key political question.

The following three general notes are offered to this end. They are in no sense presented as a substitution for the Draft Resolution, nor are they proposed to be added as specific amendments. Rather they are suggested to be woven substantially into the text of the Resolution as part of the basic line of the work of the Party, and to strengthen it. We believe some of the points made here-

in are new. The three general notes deal especially with the dialectics of the Negro question, and have the most direct and immediate bearing upon the theory and practice of our Negro work. Properly integrated into our resolution, they can do much to strengthen the struggle of the Negro people, and to improve the vanguard role of the Communist Party in that struggle.

INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL DEMO- CRATIC PRESSURES

The international phase of the Negro question is extremely important. One of the most dynamic features of the struggle of the Negro people in recent years has been the pressure on their side of the democratic forces on a world basis. A most striking effect of this has been, in consequence, a dramatic change in the tactics of American imperialism on this burning question. Traditionally, dating back to the mid-1870's or so, monopoly capitalism, or such big capitalist organizations as then existed, have in no sense sought to soften the Jim-Crow oppression of the Negro people. On the contrary, they have tended to exploit and

worsen this persecution. But recently there has been a marked change in the tactics of American imperialism in handling this thorny question. This originated in the fact that, particularly since the end of World War II, United States big business has followed a policy of world conquest, involving war. In attempting to carry this out, it found the Jim-Crow system to be a big handicap in the many countries where it undertook to operate. The strong Communist movements and the alert democratic forces generally, especially in the Socialist countries and in those countries where the darker peoples are fighting against imperialism, look with sharp hostility upon every manifestation of Jim-Crowism in the United States. They see in this a dramatic repudiation of the democratic pretenses which the United States seeks to establish, and they make no bones about showing effective opposition.

Hence, the would-be world conquerors of Wall Street have had to make modifications in certain features of Jim-Crowism. They decided to tone down some of the more spectacular forms of oppression. Especially, they put the soft pedal on the horror of lynching, which had been almost a daily occurrence in the Southern United States, although they continue violence in many ways against the Negro people. Obviously, the democratic world would not tolerate the outrageous shootings, hangings, burnings, and dragging to

death of Negroes that was such a well established part of Southern American life. Hence, lynching had to be glossed over, and every potential lynch mob understood the foreign policy reasons why this was being done. On the same "principle," Jim-Crowism in the armed forces, in the schools, in the hotels, on trains, on buses, etc., had to be softened up, at least on the surface, so it would not be so offensive to foreign democratic eyes. If it had maintained in all its savagery the ultra-brutal Jim-Crow system of earlier days, the United States could not possibly make even thinly plausible its pretenses at leading world democracy. American imperialism did not want to abolish the highly profitable Jim-Crow system in the South, but only by smoothing some of its sharpest edges, to make it less apparent and less objectionable to the democratic masses in other countries. Naturally, the same principle applies also to the American masses; they too were deeply offended by Jim-Crow.

One of the most spectacular features of the changed tactics of American imperialism towards Jim-Crowism, are the *unanimous* votes of the Supreme Court to illegalize segregation in the schools. Thus the court abolished its long established grossly unjust policy of "separate but equal" schools for Negroes. Undoubtedly, an important factor in bringing about this change, was the greatly increased strength of the Negro people over the past several years, including their

intensified alliances with friendly white workers. But even this added strength could not account for such a remarkable shift in policy as that evidenced by the Supreme Court in the school (and other) decisions. Neither did the trade-union movement speak out strongly and sharply enough to bring about such an important change of policy. The factor of socialist and democratic foreign pressure against the Jim-Crow system became an unmistakable force of major importance. Even Eisenhower, in his recent State of the Union Message, spoke freely of this general matter, stating that no country in the world is under such strong pressure from abroad and under such powerful democratic scrutiny, as is the government of the United States. The fact that the Dixiecrats are not going along in this respect with the foreign policy of American imperialism, by no means invalidates its application and effectiveness.

The Negro people are very keen to take advantage of the embarrassment which Jim-Crow makes for American imperialism, and they conduct their struggle accordingly. The socialist and anti-imperialist peoples of the USSR, China, India, Indonesia, Africa, Latin America, and other countries, are repelled by the fact that Negroes are denied the right to vote in the American South, or are lynched or otherwise outrageously Jim-Crowed, and they don't hesitate to speak out quickly and vigorously on the matter. Thus they put

American reactionaries very much on the defensive. The American Negro people are quick to take advantage of the more favorable international situation thus presented for the prosecution of their struggles. In general, foreign democratic pressure against the reactionary doings of American capitalism in the United States, is becoming of great importance in other fields, as well as that of Jim-Crow. It is one of the more powerful signs of socialist moral encirclement of militant imperialism. Undoubtedly, one of the principal reasons why McCarthyism was recently so sharply defeated in the United States, was because of the widespread protest of indignation that it caused in the awakening democratic countries of the world, countries in which American imperialism hoped to build its influence. They correctly felt that the United States was in sharp danger of fascism, which was a menace to themselves as well, and they didn't hesitate to speak out quickly, clearly, and energetically on the matter. In working out our Party's Negro program, therefore, we must be careful to bear in mind this very important factor of foreign socialist and democratic mass pressure against Jim-Crowism in this country. We must develop to the full the international aspects of the Negro question.

THE HIGH MILITANCY OF THE NEGRO PEOPLE

A keen fighting spirit is one of the

most marked features of the Negro people's struggle everywhere. Examples of this are to be found on all sides. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, for example, was a splendid exhibition of Negro solidarity and militant action in the face of terroristic forces that only waited the signal for extreme violence. Also, the attitude of the Negro children, braving the school picket lines at Little Rock and other Southern cities, was an example of courage that inspired the world. In many cities, too, especially in the North, Negro families have valiantly defended their homes, arms in hand, against mobs of white hoodlums who tried to oust them violently from restricted neighborhoods. Then there is the bold stand of countless Negroes in the South in exercising their right to vote in the face of hostile mobs seeking to deprive them of that right. The heavy defeat administered to Tammany in Harlem, where Tammany—one of the few times in its many decades of noisome history that it did such a thing—was forced to come out openly and admit that it made a mistake and was defeated by the Negro voters. Besides, all over the South, Negro leaders have had to face up to bombings, shootings, and Ku Klux Klan threats, as well as the arrogant pressure of the White Citizens Councils, aided by the local Dixiecrat governments.

These militant actions by the Negro people have become so usual, that they are almost taken for granted.

They are unequaled by any section of the mass resistance forces in America to monopoly capital. In fact, they run far back in Negro history, where countless Negro heroes have led many desperate and inspiring slave revolts that were bloodily repressed. The cause of Negro militancy is to be found first of all in the extreme brutality and injustice of the treatment which is meted out to Negroes in every sphere in the United States. In latter years, its increase is due, among other reasons, to the greater proletarianization and urbanization of the Negro people; to the trade-unionization of about 2 million Negro workers; to the development of a huge body of friendly white supporters, particularly in the trade unions; to the powerful influence among American Negroes of the development of many new anti-colonial governments, particularly in Africa and among other darker peoples; and last but not least, the sharp influence of the socialist and democratic forces of the world in their opposition to Jim-Crow outrages practiced in America. The Communist Party, for many years, has been tireless in its cultivation of this noted militancy and solidarity of the Negro people, among themselves and with white workers and other friends. It is indispensable for the success of the Party's work, that it take full account of this quality of Negro militancy that is so characteristic.

It is also very important in developing the fighting policies of the work-

ing class in general, to champion to the full the special militancy of the Negro people. The leader of the basic struggle against American monopoly capital is the broad proletariat, made up of the workers from all national groups and origins, including the Negro. This is the force which must lead the masses of the people to eventual freedom. It has been one of the historic evils of the Right-wing reformists, who have long dominated the trade unions, which for decades have been the actual leading organizations of our working class, that they have sought ceaselessly to suppress the militancy, and to weaken the fighting program, of the whole proletariat, and especially the Negro masses. They work with the help of the employers. The most dramatic aspect of this is their long and tireless fight against the building of a mass labor party.

The Communist Party, which is the vanguard of the labor movement, as its central task seeks to cultivate the militant leadership of the proletariat (contrary to the reformists) in all mass struggles against big capital. In this respect the Negro masses are a great force. The Negro people are at once the most working-class, impoverished, and militant element in the ranks of the opponents of big capital. The broad proletariat, as the basic leader of the general struggle against capitalist oppression, should and must make itself the champion of all the demands, both class and national, of the

Negro people. The same principle holds true regarding the demands of the poor farmers and other anti-monopoly elements, although it must be borne in mind that the Negro question is the most outstanding in importance. This all-inclusive character the broad proletariat must display if it is eventually to lay the basis of a powerful anti-monopoly labor party, of which it is the leader. However, it is far from doing so at the present time, to its own loss as well as that of the Negro people and other oppressed masses.

THE VARYING ROLES OF RACE, NATION AND CLASS

These several elements comprise a third general proposition which it is imperative for the Communist Party to pay special attention to in its Negro program. Especially must this be so in the sense of the constantly changing role played by these respective elements in the fight of the Negro people. We must be constantly aware that the struggle of the Negro people, and their status generally, is not a static one, but is constantly changing its character in response to the rapid and radical alterations of the environment in which the Negro masses live.

Race: this is elemental. From the outset, centuries ago, the unscrupulous enslavers of the Negro people sought to justify their barbarous treatment of these abused masses on the white chauvinist grounds that

they constituted biologically an inferior race, created by the good Lord to serve the white man as slaves. All through the more than 350 years that slavery lasted in North, South, and Central America, this white chauvinist idea was relentlessly cultivated by the slave owners generally. It lent great depth and bitterness to the whole slavery controversy. The slave-owners made it a central point in the ideology of the slave system, and their leading intellectuals put in much of their efforts defending it. So widespread was this false conception that even many otherwise friendly to the Negro people fell victim to it. It was a common occurrence for persons who fought hard to free the Negroes from chattel slavery, at the same time to take the position that the Negroes were an inferior race, and not entitled to equal rights with the whites. Even many of the members of Garrison's famous organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society (founded in 1833), were white chauvinists, who considered the Negroes as fundamentally a lower race.

The fighters for real Negro freedom had to devote much of their time and effort to defending the truth that the Negro was a man, and as good a one as the white man. One of Frederick Douglass' most famous writings was his speech of July 12, 1854, entitled, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," in which he developed a scientific argument in favor of the biological equality of the Negro race. By abolishing

slavery, the Civil War dealt a hard blow to the white chauvinists, who were especially eager to use their malevolent doctrines to prevent the newly freed Negroes from securing the vote. Thus, this great war was an important phase in one of the greatest ideological struggles in the history of the United States.

So much has the fight against white chauvinism advanced, that today there are few, even among the most ignorant and violently anti-Negro elements, who would dare to use openly the white chauvinists' arguments that were freely used at the time of the Civil War, and long afterward. During the ensuing years, the Negro people have clearly demonstrated the high quality of their mental and physical abilities in the realms of science, in industry, in art, in music, in athletics, on the field of battle, and in every other field of cultural and constructive endeavor. Negroes now stand in the front lines of every calling, notwithstanding the extreme handicaps that they still suffer in bringing their full powers to bear on their given work. Today there exists a very large body of genuine white friends and supporters of the Negro people, in every sense of the word, especially among the workers.

White chauvinism, or racist prejudice, although forced considerably to the background, still exists strongly and is a vital factor in every phase of the life of the Negro people. This is most dramatic in the South, but it

is also in evidence in the North, as the Southern Dixiecrats, when attacked, are quick to point out. In our Negro program and work, therefore, the Communist Party must make this question clear, and must also make it a special order of business to fight against every form of white chauvinism, no matter how subtle or disguised. Winning the support of the Negro people will depend very largely upon the conscientiousness and determination with which the Party fights against white chauvinism.

Nation: this is a vital question. The Negro people, particularly in the South, possess a number of qualities (often listed) of nationhood. These, however, are not sufficient, under the given circumstances, for them to develop fully into an independent nation. The severest handicap in this respect, is that the Negro people are situated geographically in the very midst of the greatest of all imperialist powers, and scatteringly at that. Consequently, they cannot exercise the right of self-determination, certainly not in its full sense of the status of an independent state. As a result, throughout their historical life, the Negro people have "oscillated" between the tendencies towards the status of separate nationhood, and of integration into the institutions of the United States. They have been particularly influenced in this respect by the rise and fall of democratic waves of development in the United States and the world.

For many decades, the great body of slaves in the Americas did not advance beyond concepts of race. Big factors in holding back their ideological national development, were the extreme oppression under which they lived, and also that they originally came from many different tribes and localities, with widely varying languages and general backgrounds. The United States Revolution of 1776 awakened in them moving desires of winning their freedom, which they undoubtedly connected up with the general idea of being more or less integrated as citizens of the new republic. But the Revolution also blasted all these cherished hopes. Instead of setting them free, in the South, it fastened even more firmly upon them the shackles of slavery. Then, as a consequence, there took place one of the "oscillations" that have been characteristic of American Negro national development. That is, during the first generation or so after the Revolution, the Negro people went into various strong nationalist (separatist) tendencies. The minority of freedmen built many Negro institutions that had distinct nationalistic characteristics. Among these may be mentioned: the beginnings of the Negro church (1785); the first Negro schools (shortly after the Revolution); the Negro Convention (political) movement (1817); the Negro press; the Negro fraternal and insurance movements; etc. These institutions were generally composed solely of Negroes and did not have

marked integrationist tendencies.

The great pre-Civil War struggle over slavery took on sharp intensity from about 1830 on. The Negro people played a key and heroic part in the whole momentous struggle. The approaching war generated afresh in their ranks concepts of integration. Many, but not all, white abolitionists shared in these general ideas of the Negro people being integrated, on the basis of equality, into the general body of American citizenry. These integrationist tendencies came to a head not only in the several constitutional amendments of the post-war time, especially granting to the Negroes the right to vote, but particularly in the reconstruction governments that were organized in the South right after the war. These historic governments, especially so far as the Negroes were concerned, were organized on the basis of the integration of the Negro people with Americans generally, on the principle of political equality. The concept of social equality was as yet, however, but poorly developed.

This profound experience with integration came, however, to a sudden end in the Hayes-Tilden campaign of 1876, when the forces of monopoly capital, convinced that they had secured a workable control over the plantation owners, cold-bloodedly sold out the Negro people, who had played such a vital part in winning the Civil War and in breaking the power of the planters. After this, for the next half century, the Negro

people were subjected to the most barbarous Jim-Crow oppression in every form. It was, above all, the period of widespread brutal lynching, and of all the most terrible features of the Jim-Crow system. Uncounted thousands of Negroes were slaughtered by every savage means. With few exceptions, notably during the Populist Party period at the close of the nineteenth century, the Negroes had to fight practically alone. Hundreds of thousands of them fled the South to the North, where, with terrible race riots and the widespread Jim-Crow system, matters were not decisively better for the Negroes.

During this half century, the Negro people, deeply persecuted, developed their sharpest tendency of independent Negro nationalism. This was to be found in many directions, although many Negro leaders also continued essentially integrationists. The most definite national expression was the movement led by the West Indian, Marcus M. Garvey, during the several years following 1916. The Universal Negro Improvement Association, Garvey's organization, had a profound grip on the Negro masses in the United States. Its plan for the Negro people was to migrate "Back to Africa." Garvey claimed two million members. The movement was saturated with a spirit of Negro nationalism. Many other Negro leaders, during this long period of bitter oppression were nationalists to some degree or other. Even Booker T. Washington, who has been

deeply criticized for his toadying attitude towards the white rulers, had much nationalism in his ideological makeup. For, after all, he was the founder of the National Negro Business League, with its program of building the Negro bourgeoisie and Negro industry. It was during this general period, in the late 1920's, that the Communist Party adopted the theory that the Negro people in the South were a nation, and when it seriously over-stressed the theory of self-determination.

At the present time, however, the Negro people are developing a strong trend towards integration with the dominant institutions of the United States. This tendency has a direct connection with the powerful democratic movements which have taken place within the past generation here and abroad. They included the New Deal of the 1930's, the trade unionization of some two million Negro workers, the monumental international struggle against fascism, which culminated in the winning of World War II, and the tremendous growth of socialist countries in Eastern Europe and Asia in the post-war period. These vast democratic movements had profound effects upon the Negro people. Their general pressure was in the direction of integration.

In this movement for integration, the slogan of self-determination is altogether inapplicable for the American Negro people. Various other nationalist tendencies are also at a very low ebb among them. This does not

mean, however, that they are finished with nationalism altogether, and that hereafter the only tendency they will have will be towards integration. Integration, of course, is the dominant trend; but the basic tendency of nationalism will also remain in evidence and may even last deep into socialism. These national tendencies may express themselves in the continued maintenance of many purely Negro organizations, the strong affinity of the Negro people for the erst-while colonial peoples of the world, the continuing necessity to put special stress upon the Negro question in every field, including trade-union leadership, the need to make an especially vigorous defense of the Negro people's right to decent housing, the war against their being discriminated against in employment, etc. One of the worst errors that the Party could now make, would be to fall into the revisionist, opportunist policy to conclude that because the Negro people are now orienting heavily towards integration, therefore, they will have nothing further to do with the national question in general.

Class: This is also a fundamental question in the Negro work. There has been much confusion about this matter. Thus, for many years, the Socialist Party held the position that the Negro question was solely a class issue, and it did not especially concern itself with such racial outrages as lynching, and other manifestations of Jim-Crow. The Communist Party,

on the other hand, went to the opposite extreme, for a considerable period, in theory if not so much in practice, of seriously underplaying the class aspects of the Negro question. The class question is inextricably bound up with questions of race and nation, and it can be intelligently considered only if these vital and ever-present matters are taken fully into consideration. The Party cannot work at maximum efficiency in the Negro field, unless, together with questions of race and nation, it also has a clear line and full understanding of the importance of the class question to the Negro people.

As the Negro people reach greater political maturity (whether on the basis of nation or integration), they progressively differentiate themselves along class lines. In general, they develop the characteristic class divisions that are inevitable by the very nature of the capitalist system—such as capitalists, petty bourgeoisie, working class, and farmers. But here again, the special national role of the Negro people plays a very important part. Thus, the numbers of Negroes are disproportionately weak in the capitalist and upper middle classes. While there are some Negro members of the upper middle class, and even some that may be characterized as big capitalists (as, for example, the so-called Texas Negro oil millionaires), the vast majority of the Negro people, however, as is characteristic of a bitterly oppressed and exploited people, belong to the

ranks of the lower middle class, the poor farmers, and the working class. The class composition of the Negro people is of decisive importance in determining their ideology and action, and must therefore constantly be borne in mind.

Going increasingly into their current integrationist orientation, the Negro people step up their class activities, and these become more complex. The proposition is much more complicated than for them simply to join up with the particular class organization and activities of their special vocations. Race and national considerations, as well as class, must imperatively also be borne in mind, else the given effort will fail. In the trade unions, for example, which already contain the principal class expression of the Negro people, the task is much more than for the Negroes to enroll as members. There are a lot of other matters to be considered, including white chauvinism. Because the members in question are Negroes, they confront special problems on the issue of wages, for instance, in which the Negroes always face hardships of discrimination; there are matters, too, of upgrading, of seniority, of securing employment, of daily work grievances, and the like, in all of which they are also victimized. In these matters, the Negro is at a serious disadvantage as compared to the white workers, and unless he fights against these disadvantages, with the maximum of white allies, he is very apt to be seriously

on the losing end. These are just a few examples to indicate the vast importance of the class element in the Negro question.

To sum up this general section: one of the principal thoughts we have sought to emphasize is that in the Negro program one-sidedness must be avoided. Race, nation, and class must each be recognized as such, and properly dealt with. During the Party's history, although the Party has done some splendid work, it has tended to overplay or underplay, from time to time, the various elements—race, nation, and class—that go to make up the Negro question as a whole. This has served to inject some one-sidedness into its work, and has deepened and multiplied its mistakes. Just now, the Party is emerging from a tragic experience with revisionism during the past couple of years. It is at present clearing out the basic errors that the Right opportunists, with considerable ultra-Left help, injected into the Negro work. It is high time, therefore, that the Party overcome its traditional and harmful one-sidedness in its work, and build a balanced Negro program, one in which the questions of race, nation, and class all play their proper role. If this is done, it will enormously improve our Negro work in general.

Vitally important is it not to forget the outstanding importance of the Negro question. The great task con-

fronting the Negro people and their allies—indeed the whole American people—is the completion of the unfinished democratic revolution in the South. The prosecution of this work will have the most far-reaching effects in every field of the class struggle, North and South. The democratization of the South by striking the Jim Crow shackles from the Negro people will enormously stimulate democracy all over the country. It will not only bring the Southern Negro masses into the trade unions and farm organizations, and the other channels of democracy, but it will also release the democratic strength of the masses of poor whites who, in many respects, also suffer from shocking conditions of oppression and exploitation. This curtailing of the power of the Dixiecrats in the South will bring about a big growth in the general trade-union movement. For the first time the Southern masses will have an opportunity to elect legitimate representatives in the local and state governments, and also to send representative delegations to Congress. The opportunity will present itself to break the grip the Dixiecrats in Congress now have upon the chairmanships of key committees. There must, therefore, be no under-estimation of the basic importance of the liberation movement of the Negro people.