Problems of the Negro Masses

The Negro Worker and Labor

A Review of "The Black Worker" by Spero and Harris

THE BLACK WORKER, by Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris. Columbia University Press. New York, 1930.

It would be quite impossible in a brief review of this sort to present a resume of the ground covered in the 500 closely packed pages of this book. There is enough material in it to make many books. But the subject is so carefully developed and the general unity of conception so thoroly maintained that even in sections that are virtually independent the general thread is not broken.

The authors begin with a brief examination of the *Heritage of Slavery*. The study of the *Aftermath of Slavery* serves as the transition to the real subject of the book, the Negro worker in the era of industrial capitalism.

The description of the changing relations of the Negro worker in the period of the rise of trade unionism after the Civil War is one of the best parts of the book. The main theme of this section of the work is how the heritage of slavery and the strictly craft character of the rising trade union movement built up a formidable wall of separation between the organized American labor movement and the Negro, to the inestimable damage of the cause of both. Nowhere have we seen such a ruthlessly true depiction of the havoc-spreading effects of race prejudice upon the minds of the American workers.

On the other hand, the authors picture in an eminently fair manner, the careful fostering of an anti-labor attitude and anti-labor activities (strike-breaking) among the backward Negro workers by the Negro "community leaders", the preachers, the teachers, the politicians, under the false flag of "racial consciousness".

To offset the dark picture painted in Part II (*The Negro Worker and the Rise of Trade Unionism*) we have Part IV (*Industrial Unionism and Labor Solidarity*) in which the story of the struggle of the progressive and radical unions (I.W.W., the United Mine Workers, the unions in the needle trades and food industry, etc.) to organize the Negro workers on the basis of the fullest equality is told with understanding and sympathy.

The final section (Part V) of the book deals with *Negro Labor Since the War*. It considers the rise of "economic radicalism" (i.e. Communism) among Negro intellectuals in the North: it traces the relations between Socialism, Communism and the Negro; it concludes with a provoking but altogether inconclusive chapter on *The Negro Community and the Labor Movement.*

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This Part V is unquestionably the weakest portion of the book and precisely because of the failure of the authors to understand the real bearings of the proletarian revolutionary movement upon the Negro question and upon the relations between the Negro workers and the labor movement in particular. Of course the book is thoroly pro-labor in spirit—but a certain clarity is lacking. The authors conceive "economic radicalism" (Communism) as mere abstract preaching of the "good times coming" and therefore express pronounced scepticism (tho not opposition) as to its future among the Negroes.

The truth seems to be that the authors, as bourgeois intellectuals looking at things from the outside, mistake the "official" brand of Communism dominating the Communist International and the American Communist Party today (and only temporarily!) with its ultra-left nonsense and phantastic phrases, for the Communist strategy and tactics as developed by Lenin and championed by the Communist International for many years. Naturally such an error inevitably disorientates the uninitiated observer and leads to serious confusion.

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Some important questions emerge out of consideration of this book. The primary question, in my opinion, is the problem of the social roots of race prejudice ("white chauvinism"). The old explanation of a "natural antipathy" of races is so palpably absurd that only the Ku Kluxers (in the universities and out) and the orthodox Garveyites still cling to it. Our authors envisage the whole matter as a mere heritage from slave times. Unquestionably this is a serious element in the situation. Only the most vulgar pseudo-Marxist would depreciate the historical efficacy of social tradition. But it should be apparent that so vital a force as race prejudice remains until today, cannot be *merely* an historical vestige; there must be something in the *contemporary* social environment on which it feeds and out of which it gains sustenance. A Marxist analysis of the question, based upon a thoro study of historical experience, leads to the conclusion that, under capitalism, *racial subjection becomes an important point of support and auxiliary for the class domination of the bourgeoisie.* Therefore racial prejudice becomes an integral part of the ruling ideology of bourgeois society which is imbibed by the dominant race (and in an inverted slave form, by the subject race) thru almost every contact in social life. This is an objective historical process and not primarily the deliberately conceived plan of the capitalists, altho, as Spero and Harris themselves give countless examples to prove, it is an important part of the class war strategy of the bourgeoisie to consciously sow dissension in the ranks of the laboring masses. But race prejudice permeates the *whole* of American society precisely because it is an important element of the system of economic exploitation and social subjection which is the embodiment of the deepest class interests of the bourgeoisie.

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The darkest page in the history of the American organized labor movement is its shameful attitude of antipathy and discrimination against the black worker. And yet it is inevitable. For American labor has, by and large, always been and still remains *bourgeois-minded;* this is the sign of its backwardness. And virulent race prejudice is a constituent element of the real American bourgeois outlook. Added to race prejudice, which marks the influence of the bourgeoisie upon the working class, we have what the authors of this book never tire of pointing out, the *"narrow and exclusive craft structure and opportunist philosophy of American trade unionism"* (p.461). The Negro is almost exclusively an unskilled laborer: why should the craft unions of skilled workers "bother" about him? The Negro is oppressed, underprivileged and unbelievably exploited: why should the opportunists who are out to maintain the modern slave system for the sake of few crumbs to some privileged strata of labor, "bother" about him?

And yet the problem of breaking down the wall between the Negro worker and the organized labor movement is of vital importance not only to the former but even more to the latter—as the authors well realize What is the road leading out of the darkness? It is the road of the revolutionary class struggle, of Communism. From the analysis of causes made by the authors themselves, the integration of the Negro working masses into the trade union movement can only take place thru:

1. The dissipation of the poisonous clouds of race prejudice in the minds of the white workers. This may be accomplished not only (and not mainly) by propaganda and enlightenment but primarily in the white heat of the class struggle. The fraternization of white and colored workers in South during strikes, however hesitating, uncertain, and unstable, is a straw in the wind.

2. The organization of the unorganized workers and the substitution of industrial unionism for the outworn structure of craft unionism.

3. The dissipation of bourgeois influence upon the working class (that is: opportunism) and the replacement of the conservative pro-capitalist spirit of the A. F. of L. by a spirit of militant unionism based upon labor solidarity and the class struggle.

But are not these among the aims of the Communist movement?

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This book is the best that has yet appeared on the subject. This may seem a rash statement to make considering the volume of literature on the Negro worker but I believe that the positive merits of this book are so great that it literally speaks for itself. Every worker, white or black, should certainly read it.

—*WILL HERBERG*

TEXTILE WORKERS MUST UNITE

A Statement and Answer

We publish below the statement sent in by Comrades Weisbord and Buch to the REVOLUTIONARY AGE. In the next issue we will publish the declaration of the Textile Unity Committee, explaining its policy and exposing the sectarian course of Comrade Weisbord.

In connection with Comrade Weisbord's statement we publish an article by Comrade Eli Keller which represents the viewpoint of the Textile Unity Committee.

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On Saturday January 10 the Textile Unity Committee of the National Textile Workers Union met to consider the situation in Paterson and the tasks of our committee. At this meeting those members of the committee who were also members of the Communist Party (Majority Group—Lovestone), brought forth a whole series of propositions calculated to change entirely our original program on which the Textile Unity Committee of the NTWU had been built.

It will be recalled that the manifesto of the Textile Unity Committee of the NTWU had called on the workers to rally round the following slogans:

Raise the struggle against the textile barons!

Put Fight into the National Textile Workers Union!

Save the National Textile Worwers Union from destruction!

Reinstate the workers and fighters now expelled or removed! etc.

The whole basis of this committee was to unite the militant forces in the textile industry on a correct fighting program as the only force possible to carry on the struggle against the textile barons. The manifesto clearly stated: *Do not be discouraged by the bad conditions within the NTWU! After all the NTWU is not like the A. F. of L. It is the only textile workers union with a militant history, with the possibility of carrying on a fight for better conditions against the textile barons."*

At the last meeting Vera Buch and I proposed the following motions:

1. That we continue our orientations to put fight into the NTWU as the sole organization possible to lead the struggle. That we affirm our program. That we demand unity of the National Textile Workers Union forces and reinstatement of those expelled.

"2. That we advise the workers to join the NTWU and to fight for our policies inside.

"3. That we prepare the workers for the coming struggle and that at the mass meetings which we call we sharply attack the traitor officials of the UTW and the Associated Silk

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Conference

PPOSITION PAPERS



nist Oppositions in Germany, Sweden, ia, the U.S.A., etc. are shown above

In this very brief article we cannot go into details of the reports of the various delegates. An estimate of the problems faced by the International Communist Opposition as well as an examination of the outlook for Communist reconstruction I will attempt to give in a future article. Let it be sufficient for me to say for the present that as a result of the International Conference and its establishment of the International Communist Opposition Center the fight for the reconstruction and reunification of the Communist International, which was and remains our only world party of Communism, our ONLY Communist International, will be waged more correctly, more effectively, with greater spirit, and more determination.

The international platform, or program of action, finally adopted, is a powerful guide for the revolutionary workers in contra-distinction to the ruinous, ultra-left hodge-podge of constant "turns" and "twists" by the present leadership of the Executive Committee of the Communist Internaitonal. The publication of a monthly political theoretical organ by our international forces, will go a long way towards strengthening our forces ideologically and towards breaking down the anti-Leninist course of the official line. In its manifesto to the world's workers, to the members of the Comintern, to the present official leadership, the International Communist Opposition conference struck a very healthy note for Communist unity, for working class unity against the reactionary capitalist offensive, against the impending imperialist world war, and for an effective and victorious defense of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, the centre of inspiration and strength of the world proletarian revolution.

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Practical steps to set up the necessary organizational machinery were also taken to insure cooperation in international struggles, exchange of opinions, and increasing co-ordination of our efforts for Communist unity in the revolutionary class struggle.

All in all, the First International Conference of the Communist Opposition is the most effective move yet made to bring back the international Communist movement to the Leninist line, to reunite the Communist International and to hasten its reconstruction into a mighty world party of the revolutionary proletariat which will lead the workers of the world to a victory over the capitalist exploiters and oppressor such as our Russian brothers have already won.

short, the atmosphere and conditions prevailing at the conference were in fortunate contrast to the stifling, artificial, and mechanical settings so characteristic of the recent "deliberative" sessions of the Comintern.