

Old 'self-determination' program resurrected

What was the CP's 'Black belt' theory?

By DOUG JENNESS

One of the political questions around which there has been a great deal of discussion in the radical movement is the relationship between Black nationalism and Black separatism. Lending its confused gyrations to this discussion has been the Lynn Wells-Mike Klonsky faction inside the Revolutionary Youth Movement. This faction is attempting to resurrect the Communist Party's tattered banner of "self-determination for the Black belt."

Within the context of American radical politics the Wells-Klonsky group is relatively insignificant and its success in winning adherents to the "Black belt" theory very limited. Nonetheless it does provide an opportunity for discussing the general aspects of this important question.

The slogan of self-determination for the Black belt was not raised by the American Communist Party until 1928, that is, after Lenin's death. Stalin had come to power at the head of a privileged bureaucratic caste, and turned the Bolshevik's policy on self-determination for oppressed nationalities into its opposite. The consolidation of the anti-Marxist and anti-Leninist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union had its repercussions throughout the Third International, known as the Comintern, and one of those repercussions was the position of the American CP on the Black liberation struggle.

In 1928, the leadership of the Comintern decided that Black people in America conformed to Stalin's definition of a nation and should fight for the "right of self-determination in the South." The American CP thereupon began publishing maps which indicated the exact boundaries of the projected Black Republic.

The American CP was not given the opportunity to discuss the position before Moscow made its decision. But even worse, the position was adopted in total disregard of the millions of Black people in the United States, who were, to say the least, not consulted. The Soviet bureaucrats took it upon themselves to determine for Afro-Americans what the slogans of their struggle should be, what they should fight for. Whether or not Black people wanted a separate nation and, if they did, whether or not they thought it should be in the South, was irrelevant. A more arbitrary caricature of the right of self-determination has never been seen.

In subsequent years the slogan of "self-determination for the Black belt" was advanced whenever the Soviet bureaucracy wanted to put pressure on the U.S. government (such as during the ultraleft "third period" in 1928-34), and withdrawn whenever they saw a possibility of a deal with Washington (such as during the Second World War). Such shifts—now for, now against—

have had nothing to do with the interests of the Black struggle in this country, but have been dictated by the foreign policy needs of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Thus, the slogan was dropped in 1943 on the grounds that Afro-Americans had already "exercised the historical right of self-determination by rejecting it." After World War II a watered down version of the "self-determination for the Black belt" slogan was revived. The demand was not strongly pushed in the 1950s, and it was finally removed from the CP's program at the end of the 1950s.

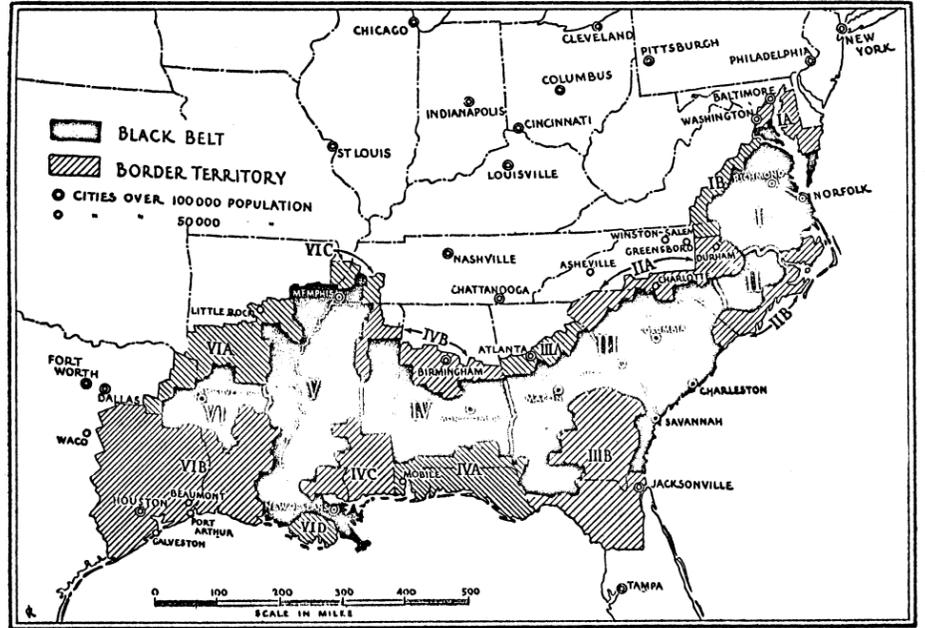
The theory behind the slogan of "self-determination for the Black belt" was that the homeland of Afro-Americans is in those counties in the South where there are Black majorities or significant Black minorities and where share cropping is the prevalent form of livelihood for Blacks. A 1930 Comintern resolution indicated that only in the Black belt were Afro-Americans entitled to determine their own affairs, including the right to a separate state, while in the rest of the country the CP was to promote the demand for "full equality," not self-determination, as the principal slogan.

This mechanical approach to the Black liberation struggle failed to reckon with the tremendous migration of Black sharecroppers to Northern cities, with the bitter fact that Black people in the United States are oppressed as a group regardless of where they live in the United States, and that the demand for full equality in white capitalist society cannot be achieved North or South.

Marxists disagree with the Communist Party's old Black belt theory not because it provides for the existence of a separate Black state, but because it arbitrarily creates such a state without reference to the desires of Afro-Americans.

Marxists unconditionally support the right of oppressed nations to control their own affairs, and this must include the right to form a separate nation-state with definite geographical boundaries. If the masses of an oppressed nation determine for themselves that they want to break all political ties with the oppressor state and demand their own separate state, we will support and struggle for that demand.

Afro-Americans, as an oppressed nationality inside the United States, are now raising the demand for self-determination. Most commonly this has taken the form of struggles for Black control of the Black communities. At this time, however, only a relatively small number of vanguard organizations have raised the demand for a separate state and it is not at this time a position widely supported in the Black community. (Although *Newsweek* reported last summer that approximately 20 percent of



THE BLACK BELT. According to the 1930 census, the area designated by roman numerals I-VI had a population which was a majority Black. In the area labeled "border territory," 28.8 percent of the total population was Black. This map, printed in "The Negro Question in the United States" by James S. Allen, International Publishers, 1936, is a good example of the CP's mechanical approach to their former demand, "self-determination for the Black belt."

those Afro-Americans questioned in the most recent *Newsweek* poll favored the creation of a separate state.)

This does not mean that the majority of Afro-Americans at some future point in their struggle may not raise this demand. If they do, this will not indicate a step backward for the Black liberation movement, but, on the contrary, will signify a further sweeping revolutionary break with the imperialist oppressor state. If the Black masses demand a separate state, revolutionary socialists must be among the best fighters for that goal.

"But where will the boundaries of that state be?" ask the fainthearts who quiver at the thought that some portion of the holy USA will come under Black control. "Black people are widely dispersed throughout the country. They have no homeland inside the borders of the United States." This legalistic argument is the same one that the CP "Black belt theorists" and now the Wells-Klonsky group try to answer by counting Black heads in the southern counties.

Since the masses of Black people have not yet declared for a separate state, let alone made any demands for specific territorial boundaries, it is presumptuous for a section of the white radical movement, such as one faction of RYM, to specify these boundaries. In fact, it is totally inconsistent with the principle of self-determination.

Klonsky and Wells argue that it is "unscientific" not to specify boundaries, that a definite homeland for Blacks must exist or there cannot be any "territorial" basis for classifying Black Americans as an oppressed nation. It is not enough for them that the Afro-American nationality has a common language, English; common culture and heritage; and most significantly, a common economic, political and social oppression based on skin color. And along with these objective facts is the growing nationalist consciousness of hundreds of thousands of Afro-Americans. These features are a sufficient basis to characterize Black Americans as an oppressed nationality, and there is no need to make a fetish out of territoriality to reach this conclusion.

The Klonsky-Wells group, despite all of their reading of the old CP documents on this question, are still unclear as to what position they would take if the masses of Black people were to demand a separate state with boundaries radically different from those "scientifically" assigned to them.

What position would they take toward the Chicano and Native-American struggles for self-determination? Would they support a separate Chicano state if the masses of Chicanos were to demand it? Where is the "historical homeland" of the Native Americans? Does their wide

dispersal throughout the United States mean that Wells-Klonsky would not support a separate Native-American state if the majority of Indians demanded it? All the major Indian organizations are presently demanding that Alcatraz Island be ceded to them. Does this meet Klonsky's and Well's requirement for a "scientific" location?

The mere fact that a couple of years ago virtually no one would have guessed that Native Americans would demand that Alcatraz be ceded to them as a part of their homeland, is a good example of why it is wrong for socialists to prescribe in advance the territorial boundaries for oppressed nationalities.

Bay Area group plans referendum on withdrawal

By GEORGE JOHNSON

SAN FRANCISCO—The Bay Area Peace Action Council has filed a motion with the registrar here for a referendum this fall on immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Vietnam.

The wording of the referendum will be "It is the policy of the people of the City and County of San Francisco that there be an immediate cease-fire and immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Vietnam so that the Vietnamese can settle their own affairs."

The wording is substantially the same as Proposition P, the referendum that got 36.4 percent of the vote here in 1967, and which was twice used in Dearborn, Mich., where it carried the second time by four to three. The second "immediate" and "all" have been added to eliminate any possible confusion about whether the referendum is for immediate withdrawal.

A petition drive, which will begin Feb. 23, is needed to place the referendum on the ballot. BAPAC activists expect to get twice the 15,000 required signatures.

The decision to organize the referendum was made in hopes that other areas would adopt it too. Initial response both in San Francisco and among peace groups in other regions has been very favorable. The referendum is expected to be a major topic at the BAPAC-hosted Western States Anti-war Conference to be held here Feb. 28-Mar. 1.

The referendum is viewed by BAPAC as in no way contrary to mass actions, but complementary to them, and as an educational and organizational means of broadening opposition to the war, and providing a forum to expose Nixon's "Vietnamization" shell game.

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