
Speeches to the 4th World Congress of the Comintern on the Negro Question

by Otto Huiswoud and Claude MacKay

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Billings [Otto Huiswoud]. (America): Comrades, the colonial question was recognized as an important question in relation to the world revolution by the Second Congress of the Communist International [July 19-Aug. 7, 1920], but it is a general complaint among the oriental comrades, and also among some of the colonial comrades, that this matter has been treated rather in the form of a step-child than as a part of the general world revolutionary problem. In the Negro question we have before us another phase of the race and colonial question to which no attention has been paid heretofore. I mean by that that, heretofore, the Second International has not paid any particular attention to the Negro question as such. Therefore we find that in the thesis of the Second Congress there is a statement that the Second International was an International of white workers, while the Third International was an International of the workers of the world.

Both Comrade Zinoviev and Comrade Bukharin in their speeches referred to the colonial question as one of the most important questions with which we have to deal at the present time. However, now that this important problem is before discussion, I expect this Congress to take cognizance of the lessons learned and the tactics applied relative to the Colonial question. The Congress must have, at least the Third International must have, gained certain experiences in dealing with the Far Eastern people and also with the Near Eastern question, and it ought to have crystallized some knowledge out of this particular problem. It will find that in dealing with this question certain mistakes (mistakes made inevitably) occur, must be taken into account,

and, when we begin with the Negro question, we must begin from the very start in the proper direction.

In considering the Negro question as such, we must also be prepared to take into consideration the psychological factors which enter into the Negro problem. Therefore, we must realize that different peoples at certain given times reaching a special stage of development must of necessity have certain different psychological reactions towards the world in general. When we attempt to carry on the work amongst these masses, to carry our agitational propaganda to them, we must perforce take into consideration these factors that we find in the particular question at issue.

Although the Negro problem as such is fundamentally an economic problem, notwithstanding, we find that this particular problem is aggravated and intensified by the friction which exists between the white and black races. It is a matter of common knowledge that prejudice as such, although born from the class prejudice that any group takes in society, notwithstanding the question of race, does play an important part. Whilst it is true that, for instance, in the United States of America the main basis of racial antagonism lies in the fact that there is competition of labor in America between black and white, nevertheless, the Negro bears a badge of slavery on him which has its origin way back in the time of his slavery. Hence you find that this particular antagonism on the part of the white workers to the black workers assumes this particular form because of this very fact.

There are about 150 million Negroes throughout the world. Approximately 25 million of them reside in the New World, and the rest reside in Africa. The Negroes in America and the West Indies are a source of cheap labor supply for the American capitalist, and we find that the capitalist class has always used and will always continue to use them as an instrument in order to suppress the white working class in its everyday struggle. They will be the source from which the "white guard" elements will be recruited in the event of a revolutionary uprising anywhere and everywhere.

In Africa the exploitation of the Negroes afforded opportunities for the continuation of the accumulation process of capital. The capitalist class as a class has recognized the valuable aid that the Negro masses will be to them. Therefore, for years they have made it their

business to cultivate a bourgeois ideology in the mind of the Negro populace. This, of course, was done in their own interests, and not in those of the Negroes. They have carefully planned out and planted organizations amongst the Negroes to carry agitation in favor of the bourgeoisie as against the white workers. They have what is known as the Rockefeller Foundation, they have the Urban League. The first organization supplies grants of money to Negro schools; the second is a notorious strike-breaking institution. They have been on the job while most of the revolutionaries have been asleep. Facing this condition, it was inevitable that the Negro population would have some sort of reaction against the oppression and the suppression to which they were subjected throughout the world. Their first reaction was, of course, in the forming of religious institutions, the only forms permitted at certain times for their own enjoyment, but later we find that there has been a continuous development of organizations on the part of the Negroes, which, although purely Negro, are to a certain extent directly or indirectly opposed to capitalism. The three most important Negro organizations operating today are firstly, what is known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an organization which is composed of a large proletarian element led by bourgeois intellectuals, an organization that today bases its action upon the principle of seeking redress from the capitalist class by means of petitions and what practically amounts to begging that something may be done for them. Then we come to the other more interesting form of organization, which is known as the Garvey Association, an organization that is ultra-nationalist, yet composed of a rebel rank and file element. It is an organization which, in spite of the fact that it has drafted on its program various cheap stock schemes, is influencing the minds of the Negroes against imperialism. This organization came into existence after the world war. Of course it did not take any definite radical form, it was saved in time by its own leader, but, notwithstanding this, the race consciousness has been planted and used to a very large extent, far into the interior of Africa, where hardly anyone could expect that an organization could be planted there which had its origin in America. The third organization is the African Blood Brotherhood, a radical Negro organization which bases its program upon the abolition of capitalism. It was the

one organization which, during the time of a race riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma, put up a splendid and courageous fight, and the one to which the capitalist class is going to turn its attention next.

We have also in Africa certain small organizations which get their direct inspiration from America, the headquarters and center of political thought among Negroes. These organizations are stretching out and developing as far as the Sudan. These can be utilized by Communists if the means of propaganda are carefully, deliberately, and intensively used to link up these movements. We see already that there is a sort of organization which will react against imperialism throughout the world.

There are in the United States about 450 Negro newspapers and magazines, and, while they are mostly strictly racial, nevertheless they have a great influence upon the Negro masses everywhere. There is, for instance, the *Chicago Defender*, which issues 250,000 copies weekly, which are spread out all over the world, wherever there are large groups of Negroes. Then there is *The Crisis*, a monthly magazine which has a circulation of 600,000. These papers, and especially the Chicago Defender and others with a smaller circulation, have constantly used radical propaganda material that we sent out.

The Negroes feel the impending crisis which will break out in the South between black and white. It was in the South that the seed was sown and the results are bound to come in some way. It will probably take the form of race rioting on a very large scale.

The Negro question, comrades, is of very great interest and of very great importance to us. For example, you find that in the United States, of the approximate number of 12 million Negroes who inhabit that country, 2 million live in the northern industrialized part of the country, and the other 9 or 10 million in the South (and I suppose that all of you have a picture in your mind of what the South is like. When you enter there it is like Dante's Inferno. Sometimes you feel like giving up hope altogether). It is almost a country all by itself. Eighty percent of the Negroes live on the land. They are discriminated against and disfranchised, and it is there that the class struggle is waged in its most brutal form. You find the relation between blacks and whites to be one of constant conflict and of fighting to the death. You find there lynching and race riots. You find there that lynching of

a Negro is something to be enjoyed in the South as a picture show is enjoyed elsewhere. When you find that the white population in the South is so saturated with this idea of white domination over the Negro, you see that this question must engage our attention. At the present time when there are big strikes in the Northern United States, you find that the capitalist class and its hirelings hurry to the South in order to draw the Southern Negroes into the Northern districts as strikebreakers. They promise them a higher wage and better conditions, and so induce them to enter those areas in which strikes are in progress. That is a constant danger to the white workers when on strike. Of course, the entire blame for this must not be placed upon the Negroes. The labor unions in America, and I am speaking of the bonafide trade unions, have for the last few years insisted that although a Negro is a skilled worker, he cannot by virtue of the fact that he is a Negro enter the trade union. It is only recently that the American Federation of Labor has made a weak attempt to try to get Negroes into the regular trade unions. But even today, such an organization as the Machinists' Union still has, if I am not mistaken, the assertion in its program that the qualification of membership is that every white brother shall introduce for membership other white men or something to that effect. This means that the Negroes are permanently excluded from the unions simply on account of the fact they are black, and the capitalist class, and the reactionary Negro press uses this to the fullest extent in order to prejudice the minds of these black workers against the labor unions. When you speak to a Negro about his joining a trade union or about the necessity of his becoming radical, the first thing he throw at you is the assertion: "Don't preach to me. Preach to the whites. They need it and I do not. I am always ready to fight alongside of them so long as they agree to take me into the trade unions, but as long as they do not, I will scab and, by God, I have a right to scab. I want to protect my own life." that is one of their arguments and it cannot be ignored. While theoretically we may use all the beautiful phrases that we know, nevertheless these are hard concrete facts in everyday struggle.

The Negro Commission has prepared a thesis on the Negro Question which I shall read to you presently. While going into the Negro question, we also prepared certain definite proposals which we

thing should be carried out by the various sections of the Communist International who have Negroes in their territories or colonies. We have prepared these proposals of course not to have them left merely on paper, but to be carried out by the various sections, and we will request the Communist International to see to it that the proposals are carried out in the letter and in the spirit in which they are written. We have prepared an outline for the work, a proposal for the immediate carrying on of the work amongst Negroes throughout the world. We have also made a proposal for the establishment of a Negro Bureau as part of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. The reason we did this was because we wanted this work co-ordinated and centralized, and we thought the best place for this Bureau or section, or whatever you like to call it, is Moscow. The Negro question is to us of very great importance, and therefore we have endeavored to carefully consider the situations as they actually exist in Africa and in America especially. We have not gone into any dreams about a program although we have made certain definite suggestions as to what should be included in a plan for a Negro organization, taking into consideration the peculiar mental reactions of the Negro at the present time. The thesis on the Negro question reads as follows:

"The basis of the process of accumulation, which existed for the development of capitalism before the war, has, as a result of the war, been completely revolutionized as regards the relationship between advanced capitalist countries exporting capital and the colonial and semi-colonial peoples under their domination. At the same time there has developed among these peoples a movement of revolt, which is still making successful progress against the power of world capital as embodied in British imperialism, so much so that the penetration and intensive colonization of regions inhabited by black races is becoming the last great problem on the solution of which the further development of capitalist accumulation itself depends. French capitalists clearly recognize that the power of French post-war imperialism will only be able to maintain itself through the creation of a Franco-African Empire, linked up by a Trans-Sahara Railway. America's financial magnates (who are exploiting 12 million Negroes at home) are now entering upon a peaceful penetration of Africa. How keenly

Britain on her part dreads the menace to her position is shown by the extreme measures taken to crush the Rand strike. Just as in the Pacific the danger of another world war has become acute owing to the competition of imperialist powers there, so Africa looms ominously as an object of their rival ambitions. Moreover, the war, the Russian Revolution, and the great movements of revolt against imperialism on the part of the Asiatic and Mussulman nationalities have aroused the consciousness of the millions of the Negro race whom capitalism has oppressed and degraded beyond all others for hundreds of years, not only in Africa but perhaps even more in America, where the movement of revolt has grown more and more intense, with a reflex effect on the whole Negro race. Consequently the Negro problem, on subjective no less than objective grounds, has become a vital question of the world revolution, and the Third International, which has already recognized what valuable aid can be rendered to the proletarian revolution by colored Asiatic peoples in semi-capitalist countries, likewise regards the cooperation of our oppressed black fellowmen as essential in the revolution of the proletarian masses and the destruction of capitalist power. The Fourth Congress accordingly declares it to be a special duty of Communists to apply the ‘Thesis on Colonial Questions’ to the Negro problem.

1. The Fourth Congress recognizes the necessity of supporting every form of Negro movement which tends to undermine or weaken capitalism or imperialism, or to impede its further penetration.

2. Negro workers should everywhere be organized, and if and when Negro and white working masses coexist, a United Front should be formed at every opportunity.

3. Work among the Negroes should be carried on more particularly by Negroes.

4. Immediate steps should be taken to hold a Negro conference or congress in Moscow.”

Well, comrades, in closing, I want just to make this remark, that I hope the comrades who come from the various sections of the Communist International where the Negro workers will take cognizance of the Negro problem as it exists today, and that they will carry on, not in the form of a New Year’s resolution, but, actually and directly, this

work in order to arouse the consciousness of the Negro masses, so that we may be able to link them up for the proletarian revolution.

Comrade McKay. (America): Comrades, I feel that I would rather face a lynching stake in civilized America than try to make a speech before the most intellectual and critical audience in the world. I belong to a race of creators but my public speaking has been so bad that I have been told by my own people that I should never try to make speeches, but stick to writing and laughing. However, when I heard the Negro question was going to be brought up on the floor of the Congress, I felt that it would be an eternal shame if I did not say anything on behalf of the members of my race. Especially would I be a disgrace to the American Negroes because, since I published a notorious poem in 1919, I have been pushed forward as one of the spokesmen of Negro radicalism in America, to the detriment of my poetical temperament. I feel that my race is honored by this invitation to one of its members to speak at this Fourth Congress of the Third International. My race on this occasion is honored, not because it is different from the white race and the yellow race, but is especially a race of toilers, hewers of wood and drawers of water that belong to the most oppressed, exploited, and suppressed section of the working class of the world. The Third International stands for the emancipation of all the workers of the world regardless of race or color, and this stand of the Third International is not made merely on paper like the 15th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. It is a real thing.

The Negro race in the economic life of the world today occupies a very peculiar position. In every country where the Whites and Blacks must work together the capitalists have set the one against the other. It would seem at the present day that the International bourgeoisie would use the Negro race as their trump card in their fight against the world revolution. Great Britain has her Negro regiments in the colonies and she has demonstrated what she can do with her Negro soldiers by the use that she made of them during the late war. The revolution in England is very far away because of the highly organized exploitation of the subject peoples of the British Empire. In Europe we find that France has a Negro army of over 300,000, and that to

carry out their policy of imperial domination in Europe the French are going to use their Negro minions.

In America we have the same situation. The Northern bourgeoisie knows how well the Negro soldiers fought for their own emancipation, although illiterate and untrained, during the Civil War. They also remember how well the Negro soldiers fought in the Spanish-American War under Theodore Roosevelt. They know that in the last war over 400,000 Negroes who were mobilized gave a very good account of themselves, and that, besides fighting for the capitalists, they also put up a very good fight for themselves on returning to America, when they fought the white mobs in Chicago, St. Louis, and Washington.

But more than the fact that the American capitalists are using Negro soldiers in their fight against the interests of labor is the fact that the American capitalists are setting out to mobilize the entire black race of America for the purpose of fighting organized labor. The situation in America today is terrible and fraught with grave dangers. It is much uglier and more terrible than was the condition of the peasants and Jews of Russia under the Tsar. It is so ugly and terrible that very few people in America are willing to face it. The reformist bourgeoisie have been carrying on the battle against discrimination and racial prejudice in America. The Socialists and Communists have fought very shy of it because there is a great element of prejudice among the socialists and communists of America. They are not willing to face the Negro question. In associating with the comrades of America I have found demonstrations of prejudice on the various occasions when the white and black comrades had to get together, and this is the greatest difficulty that the Communists of America have got to overcome — the fact that they have got to emancipate themselves from the ideas they entertained towards the Negroes before they can be able to reach the Negroes with any kind of radical propaganda. However, regarding the Negroes themselves, I feel that as the subject races of other nations have come to Moscow to learn how to fight against their exploiters, the Negroes will also come to Moscow. In 1919 when the Third International published its Manifesto and included that part referring to the exploited colonies, there were several groups of Negro radicals in America that sent this propaganda

out to their people. When in 1920 the American government started to investigate and to suppress radical propaganda among the Negroes, the small radical Negro groups in America retaliated by publishing the fact that the Socialists stood for the emancipation of the Negroes, and that reformist America could do nothing for them. Then, I think, for the first time in American history, the American Negroes found that Karl Marx had been interested in their emancipation and had fought valiantly for it. I shall just read this extract that was taken from Karl Marx's writing at the time of the Civil War:

"When an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders for the first time in the annals of the world dared to inscribe "Slavery" on the banner of armed revolt, who on the very spot hardly a century ago the very idea of one great democratic republic had first sprung up, whence the first declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the 18th Century, when on that spot the counter-revolution cynically proclaimed property in man to be the 'cornerstone of the new edifice' — then the working class of Europe understood at once that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy war of property against labor, with their hopes of the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic."

Karl Marx, who drafted the above resolution, is generally known as the father of Scientific Socialism and also of the epoch-making volume, popularly known as the Socialist bible, *Capital*. During the Civil War he was correspondent of the *New York Tribune*. In company with Richard Cobden, Charles Bradlaugh the Atheist, and John Bright, he toured England making speeches and so roused up the sentiment of the workers of that country against the Confederacy that Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister, who was about to recognize the South, had to desist.

As Marx fought against chattel slavery in 1861, so are present-day socialists, his intellectual descendants, fighting against wage slavery.

If the Workers Party of America were really a Workers Party that included the Negroes it would, for instance, in the South have to be illegal, and I would inform the American comrades that there is a branch of the Workers Party in the South, in Richmond, Virginia, that is illegal — illegal because it includes colored members. There we

have a very small group of white and colored comrades working together, and the fact that they have laws in Virginia and most of the Southern States discriminating against whites and blacks assembling together means that the Workers Party in the South must be illegal. To get round these laws of Virginia, the comrades have to meet separately, according to color, and about once a month they assemble behind closed doors.

This is just an indication of the work that will have to be done in the South. The work among the Negroes of the South will have to be carried on by some legal propaganda organized in the North, because we find at the present time in America that the situation in the Southern States (where 9 million out of 10 million of the Negro population live), is that even the liberal bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie among the Negroes cannot get their own papers of a reformist propaganda type into the South on account of the laws that there discriminate against them.

The fact is that it is really only in the Southern States that there is any real suppression of opinion. No suppression of opinion exists in the Northern States in the way it exists in the South. In the Northern States special laws are made for special occasions — as those against Communists and Socialists during the war — but in the South we find laws that have existed for 55 years, under which the Negroes cannot meet to talk about their grievances. The white people who are interested in their cause cannot go and speak to them. If we send white comrades into the South they are generally ordered out by the Southern oligarchy and if they do not leave they are generally whipped, tarred, and feathered; and if we send black comrades into the South they won't be able to get out again — they will be lynched and burned at the stake.

I hope that as a symbol that the Negroes of the world will not be used by the international bourgeoisie in the final conflicts against the World Revolution. I hope that just as a challenge to the international bourgeoisie, who have really got an understanding on the Negro question, we shall soon see a few Negro soldiers in the finest, bravest, and cleanest fighting forces in the world — the Red Army and Navy of Russia — fighting not only for their own emancipation, but also for the emancipation of the working class of the whole world.

Kolarov. (Chairman): I call your attention to the fact that this is the first time that the Negro problem has been brought before the World congress of the Comintern; I do not believe it necessary to prove the importance of this question. We have to win over to our side a race which has lived till now in a state of oppression. The Negro Commission has adopted the resolution, which is somewhat too theoretical in form and may not be wholly understood by the working class and the lower section of the black race. The Presidium therefore decided to refer this resolution back to the commission to be altered and simplified.

There being no objection the motion is adopted.

It has been proposed to adjourn the session now and reconvene at 7 o'clock. The cooperative question will then come up for discussion. This motion will be considered as carried if there is no opposition.

The following commissions will meet tonight:

6 o'clock, the Agrarian Commission;

8 o'clock, the Yugoslavian Commission;

9 o'clock, the Commission on Education.

All commissions meet here in the adjoining halls.

Session closed 4:55 pm.