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# Socialism and the Negro Problem.

by Charles H. Vail

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## THE NEGRO PROBLEM.

To many the negro problem was forever solved when the shackles were struck from the four millions of the colored race. This act was thought to fulfill the theory embodied in the Declaration of Independence that all men were created free and equal. The emancipation of the negro from chattel slavery — an act necessary to modern capitalist industry — was, from the standpoint of economic progress a great step in advance, but instead of solving the negro problem it merely changed its aspect. The negro was emancipated from chattel slavery only to be plunged into wage slavery. This change merely altered the relation in which the negro stood to his master.

The ultimate cause that led to the Northern revolt against the chattel system was its unprofitableness. As soon as industry passed from the individual and manufacturing period into modern mechanical industry, it became unprofitable to own workers as chattels. The change in the North caused New England morality to revolt against the chattel system and inaugurate in its place wage slavery. The new order was exceedingly profitable to the capitalist class and enabled the Northern masters, when the crisis came, to conquer the South and force it to accept capitalism and the wage system. The rapid invasion of the South — by capitalism after the Civil War — the industrial revolution which supplanted the crude tools by mighty machines completely overturned previous relations and gave rise to a new



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negro problem which was none other than the modern problem of labor.

At first the Southern masters looked upon the loss of their slaves as a severe blow, but they soon began to see what the North had long since known, that the ownership of land and capital meant the virtual ownership of those who must have access to those instruments or starve. The negro had been freed but as this freedom did not

include freedom of access to the means of livelihood he was still as dependent as ever. Being unable to employ himself he was compelled to seek employment, or the use of land upon which to live, at the hands of the very class from whom he had been liberated. In either case he was only able to retain barely enough of the product to keep body and soul together. The competition among the newly-emancipated for an opportunity to secure a livelihood was so great that their labor-power could be bought for a mere existence wage. The labor-power of the negro thus became a commodity, and like all commodities, its price was determined by its cost of production. The cost of producing labor-power is the cost of the laborer's keep. The master class were able to secure the necessary labor-power to carry on their industries for merely a subsistence wage for no more than it cost them when they owned the negroes as chattels.

The wage slave spends his own subsistence wage, which, under the chattel system, the owner was obliged to spend for him. The chattel method was fully as desirable for the slave, for the owner, having a stake in the life and health of his slave, desired to keep him in good condition. The wage slave-owner however, does not particularly care whether his wage slave lives or dies, for he has no money invested in him, and there are thousands of others to take his place. Surely wage slavery is an improvement upon the old method of property in human beings. It saves the useless expense of owning workers as chattels, which necessitates caring for them and involves loss in case of death. The results of slavery are secured by simply owning the means of production. He who owns that which men must have in order to live, owns their physical and moral being. There are two ways of enslaving men, then; one is to own the men as chattels, the other is to own the means whereby they live. The new system, with its revolution of industry, gives to the masters, without expense, an industrial reserve army who can only secure employment through their grace. This secures to

the master class cheap labor, for laborers, both white and black having nothing but their labor-power to sell and thus being unable to employ themselves must compete with each other for an opportunity to earn a livelihood.

In the days of chattel slavery capitalist production on a large scale was impossible, because it was unprofitable for the master to keep more slaves than he could profitably use all the time. He could not afford a reserve army, for he must feed and care for his workers whether he could use them or not. This difficulty is overcome by the wage system. The conditions and even the name of slavery have changed, but the fact remains untouched.

Indeed, slavery is not yet abolished. So long as the laborer is deprived of property in the instruments of production, so long as his labor-power is a commodity which he is obliged to sell to another, he is not a free being, be he white or black. He is simply a slave to a master and from morning until night is as much a bondsman as any negro ever was below Mason and Dixon's line before the war. Slaves are cheaper now and do more work than at any time in the world's history. The same principle of subjection that ruled in the chattel system rules in the wage system.

Let us inquire here of what does slavery consist? It consists in the compulsory using of men for the benefit of the user. One who is forced to yield to another a part of the product of his toil is a slave, no matter where he resides or what may be the color of his skin. This was the condition of the negro before the war, and it is his condition today, and not only his condition, but the condition of all propertyless workers. That the workman can today change his master does not alter the fact. The negro was a slave, not because of a certain master, but because he must yield a part of the wealth he produced to a master. Today he may desert one master but he must look upon another or starve, and this necessity constitutes his continued slavery. Under the old system he

was sure of a master and consequently his livelihood. One of the greatest curses of modern slavery is the fear of the slave that he will lose his position of servitude. Many a negro wage slave, and white as well, would gladly exchange their freedom to leave their master for a guarantee that their master would not discharge them. Formerly the masters overbid each other to get the slaves, today, the slaves underbid each other to get a master, and not to get a master means starvation.

The loss of the security of existence is the fearful price which the negro has been obliged to pay for his so-called liberty. The insecurity of the wage worker is the greatest curse of the present system. Closely connected with this is the dependence which inheres in the wage system. The wage worker is absolutely dependent for his daily bread upon the favor or whim of his master. Indeed, the wage earner is a wage slave. The intensity of this slavery depends upon the amount of time which the workers are compelled to work gratuitously for others. Under present conditions they must work the greater portion of their time for some one else. It is thus that the wage-earning class is a slave to the employing class. Workingmen may change their master, but they are still at the mercy of the master class. The choice of the chattel slave was between work and the lash, the choice of a wage slave is between work and starvation. The whip of hunger is all sufficient to drive the wage slave to his task.

The worker today, then, is a slave, bound by the pressure of economic wants to compulsory servitude to idle capitalist masters. He is obliged to sell his liberties in exchange for the means of subsistence. He is under the greatest tyranny of which it is possible to conceive — the tyranny of want. By this lash men are driven to work long hours and in unwholesome occupations and to live in tenement rookeries in our city slums that for vileness would surpass the slave quarters of old. The man who has no work or is compelled to submit to wages dictated by a corporation, and is

at the beck and call of a master for ten hours a day has not much personal liberty to brag of over his prototype — the chattel slave. A man thus conditioned is far from free. John Stuart Mill said that “the majority of laborers have as little choice of occupation or freedom of locomotion, are practically as dependent on fixed rules and on the will of others, as they could be in any system short of actual slavery.” This is the condition into which the negro was “liberated.” It is quite evident that he has not yet secured anything worthy to be called freedom he is still in need of emancipation.

The changed conditions which transformed the negro into a wage slave, identify the negro problem with the labor problem as a whole, the solution of which is the abolition of wage slavery and the emancipation of both black and white from the servitude to capitalist masters. This can only be accomplished by collective ownership of the means of production and distribution. Socialism is the only remedy it is the only escape from personal or class rule. It would put an end to economic despotism and establish popular self-government in the industrial realm. Economic democracy is a corollary of political democracy. We want every person engaged in industry whether male or female, white or black, to have a voice in making the rules under which they must work. Under Socialism the workers would elect their own directors, regulate their hours of work and determine the conditions under which production would be carried on. We may be sure that when this power is vested in the producing class, the factories will be arranged according to convenience and beauty and all disagreeable smells, vapor, smoke, etc. eliminated, the buildings well lighted, heated and ventilated and every precaution taken against accidents. In other words, under Socialism the laborers would have absolute freedom in the economic sphere in place of the present absolute servitude. Socialists emphasize the need of this economic freedom, for it is the basis of all freedom. Intellectual and moral freedom is

practically nullified today through the absence of economic liberty

Not only would Socialism secure to the laborers greater liberty within the economic sphere, but what would be of more importance is the liberty that the regime would secure to all outside this realm. The real restrictions today are economic. We are prevented from doing the things we would like to do, not by governmental restrictions, but by limited means. I would like to take a trip abroad. No statute prohibits me, but I am restricted by the lack of the needed resources. Socialism would increase resources by securing to all steady employment and the full product of their toil. Today labor is exploited out of fully 80 percent of the wealth it brings into being. Socialism will abolish this exploitation.

But it is not only freedom of labor but freedom from labor that Socialists seek. With a scientific organization of industry, eliminating all the wastes of the present system, two or three hours a day would suffice to supply all the comforts and even luxuries of life. This would secure to the laborer the leisure necessary to enable him to develop his faculties and which could be devoted to recreation and travel.

Socialism, then, would secure to the laborers the utmost freedom both within and without the economic sphere. It would enable men to live as men and would secure to each, regardless of his nationality, the best opportunity for free development and movement. There can be no liberty in economic dependence. The man who is in want or in the fear of want is not a free man. No man is free if he does not possess the means of livelihood. As long as he must look to the pleasure or profit of another for his living he is not independent and without independence there can be no freedom. Freedom will become the heritage of all as soon as Socialism is realized because it will guarantee to all security, independence and prosperity by securing labor to all and recompensing each according to performance. Socialism contains the

only hope for either black or white. True liberty and freedom can only be attained in the cooperative commonwealth.

But it may be said that although Socialism would emancipate the negro from economic servitude, it would not completely solve the negro problem unless its advent would destroy race prejudices. This is precisely what Socialism would do. Of course, it would not accomplish it all at once, but race prejudices cannot exist with true enlightenment. Socialism would educate and enlighten the race. It would secure to the laborers, whether black or white, the full opportunities for the education of their children. Socialism would not only demand that all children be educated, but it would make compulsory education effective by removing the incentive to deprive children of instruction. Today thousands of children, white and black, are robbed of the bright days of childhood simply because employers can make money out of them. The income of the parents being insufficient to keep them in school, they are withdrawn from the school and sent to the factory. It does but little good to pass laws prohibiting child labor so long as it is beneficial to both parents and capitalists; they will conspire in some way to evade the law. The lack of learning, then, is not the fault of our schools, but of our economic system which deprives the poor of the opportunity of utilizing them. Socialism would secure to all children this opportunity by giving to the head of the family sufficient income so that his children would not be obliged to become breadwinners. Socialism would not only secure to the child an education, but it would secure to the adult ample leisure for the cultivation of those tastes which his training has awakened. These blessings would not be confined to the white race; Socialism recognizes no class nor race distinction. It draws no line of exclusion. Under Socialism the negro will enjoy, equally with the whites, the advantages and opportunities for culture and refinement. In this higher education we may be sure race prejudices

will be obliterated.

Not only will universal enlightenment destroy this low prejudice but abolition of competition will aid in working the same result.

The struggle between the black and white to sell themselves in the auction of the new slave market has, in many quarters, engendered bitter race feeling, and that they might bid the fiercer against each other the masters have fanned this prejudice into hate. In other sections, as in the coal mines and railroad camps the blacks have been used by the masters as a club to beat down striking whites. This antagonism will cease under Socialism, and with it the hatred which springs from all class conflicts. It will even disappear under the present system just in proportion as workingmen recognize the solidarity of human labor. Socialism emphasizes the fact that the interests of all laborers are identical regardless of race or sex. In this common class interest race distinctions are forgotten. If this is true of Socialists today, how much more will it be true when humanity is lifted to the higher plane where the economic interests of all are identical.

Socialism, then, is the only solution of the negro problem. It offers to this much-wronged race the joys and privileges of an emancipated humanity. It proposes to make him joint owner with his white neighbor in the nation's capital, and to secure him equal opportunity for the attainment of wealth and progress. Socialism will secure to him the enjoyment of the inalienable rights of all men to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Today, in common with all wage slaves, he is deprived by an economic system of inequality, of the privilege of exercising such rights. In the new economic environment where the negro will enjoy equality of opportunity, he will take on a new development.

The only hope for the colored race is in Socialism, that system of society that gives to every individual, without regard to race, color or sex, an equal opportunity to develop the best within

him. In such a society an individual's social position will be determined by the use he makes of his opportunities by what he becomes.

Socialism, then, is the only hope for the negro and for humanity. To realize this ideal is the mission of the working class. Modern production is wiping out all distinction of race and color and dividing society into two classes — the laborers and the capitalists. The interests of these two classes are diametrically opposed, and the time has come for the black and the white to join hands at the ballot box against the common enemy capitalism.

The Socialist Party is the only political organization that has anything to offer the colored race. The Republican and Democratic Parties are both parties of capitalism, and could not help the negro if they would, and would not if they could. There is absolutely no choice between these two parties so far as the rights of labor are concerned. They both represent the interests of the capitalist class and their sham battles are for the purpose of dividing the laborers into various factions lest they unite to secure their freedom.

The experience of the negro since the Civil War has proven that the colored race will never secure equal opportunities so long as the present system exists. They were given the ballot by the Republican party, because that party wished to use them, as a tool against the Democrats. The white laborer was originally endowed with the franchise for precisely the same motives. When the mercantile class wished to wipe out the last thread of landed aristocracy they gave the ballot to the workers and used them as a weapon to accomplish that end. The laborers have been continually deceived and intimidated into doing the masters' bidding ever since. The negro, perhaps, has been the most deceived of any branch of the working class. He has been taught that he is the special ward of the Republican Party and he has turned in the midst of the barbaric outrages committed by Southern fanatics and asked his sup-

posed friends for help, but his appeals have fallen on deaf ears. The recent disfranchisement of the negro in the South is but an indication of what capitalists will soon try to do with all the workers regardless of color and regardless of location. The conditions of forty or fifty years ago have changed. The capitalist class of the North and the South have now joined hands as the owners of wage slaves, and while the Democratic Party represents the interests of the small capitalist and the Republican Party the interests of the large capitalist, the interests of both are opposed to the laborer.

May the negro wage slave become awakened to his own interests, the interests of the class of which he is a member, and cast his ballot for the only party that stands for human emancipation the Socialist Party. When Socialism supplants capitalism the negro problem will be forever solved.

**Resolution adopted by the Socialist Party  
in National Convention at Indianapolis, Ind.,  
July 31, 1901**

Whereas, The negroes of the United States because of their long training in slavery and but recent emancipation therefrom, occupy a peculiar position in the working class and in society at large; and

Whereas, The capitalist class' seeks to preserve this peculiar condition, and to foster and increase color prejudice and race hatred 'between the white worker and the black, so as to make their social and economic interests to appear to be separate and antagonistic, in order that the workers of both races may thereby be more easily and completely exploited; and

Whereas, Both the old political parties and educational and religious institutions alike betray the negro in his present helpless struggle against disfranchisement and violence, in order to receive the economic favors of the capitalist class; be it therefore

Resolved, That we the Socialists of America, in national convention assembled, do hereby assure our negro fellow worker of our sympathy with him in his subjection to lawlessness and oppression, and also assure him of the fellowship of the workers who suffer from the lawlessness and exploitation of capital in every nation or tribe of the world, be it further

Resolved, That we declare to the negro worker the identity of his interests and struggles with the interests and struggles of the workers of all lands, without regard to race or color or sectional lines, that the causes which have made him the victim of social and political inequality are the effects of the long exploitation of his labor-power, that all social and race prejudices spring from the ancient economic causes which still endure, to the misery of the whole human family, that the only line of division which exists in fact is that between the producers and the owners of the world between capitalism and labor, and be it further

Resolved, That we, the American Socialist party, invite the negro to membership and fellowship with us in the world movement for economic emancipation by which equal liberty and opportunity shall be secured to every man and fraternity become the order of the world.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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