

Negroes in the Revolution

The Significance of Their Independent Struggles

(The January, 1945, number of the NEW INTERNATIONAL carried the resolution of the National Committee of the Workers Party and the resolution of the minority of the committee on "Negroes and the Revolution." The following article is a discussion article on this question which is now being discussed in the Workers Party.—The Editor.)

The whole argument on the Negro Question revolves around our relationship to the independent struggles of the Negro masses. Com. Johnson in his resolution states:

The ideal situation is that the struggle of the minority group should be organized and led by the proletariat. But to make this a precondition of supporting the struggle of the non-proletarian, semi-proletarian or non-class-conscious groups is a repudiation of Marxist theory and practice. Thus it is utterly false to draw the conclusion that the independent struggle of the Negro masses for their democratic rights is to be looked upon merely as a preliminary stage to a recognition by the Negroes that the real struggle is the struggle for socialism (p. 10, col. 1).

Except for some vague phrases about the revolutionary

potentialities of the Negro masses, there is nowhere in Com. Coolidge, hemmed in by "narrow confines." He displays a dis-Negro mass struggle to the struggle of the whole proletariat. Com. Coolidge is most insistent upon the fact that

While even violent struggles may take place around such issues (equality), the aim of the WP must be to lead the struggle for democratic rights out of these narrow confines" (p. 9, col. 2. My emphasis.—F. F.).

Not only are these democratic struggles, according to Com. Coolidge, hemmed in by "narrow confines," he displays a disregard of their significance except to the degree that they are integrated into the general class struggle. It is his conception that:

The struggle for democratic rights must become and remain an integral part of the class struggle in the U. S. Negroes can attain the strength and confidence to break through the thick walls of Jim Crow to the degree that they are supported by and integrated into the working class and its organizations (p. 10, col. 2. My emphasis.—F. F.).

Are the tremendous struggles that the Negroes are carrying on today, despite the "national unity" called forth by the imperialist war, to be looked down upon because of the "narrow

confines? Aren't the narrow confines in actuality the confines of the capitalist state from which the Negro masses will never break out except through breaking that state? In this struggle do they have a decisive role to play or can they not get to first base except as an integral part of the general class struggle?

The question of the effect of independent struggles of minority groups is not without a past, although Com. Coolidge seems to disregard that past. Here is what Lenin wrote:

The dialectic of history is such that small nations, powerless as an *independent* factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the bacilli, which help the *real* power against imperialism to come on the scene, namely, the *socialist* proletariat.

Does or does not Com. Coolidge think that the Negro struggles in America are just such bacilli as Lenin refers to? What does he think brought about Executive Order 8802, the FEPC, the Ives-Quinn Bill? Doesn't *Labor Action*, week in and week out, stress the fact that it is the activity of the Negroes, their refusal to subordinate their demand for democratic rights to "national unity," their demonstrated hostility to this imperialist war, that forced these sops out of the capitalist state? What stimulated both the CIO and AFL to fight for the passage of the Ives-Quinn Bill? Here, too, wasn't it the activity of the Negro masses that brought about the united front between labor and the Negro? I should like to know from Com. Coolidge: does he or does he not accept Lenin's analysis of the significance of the struggles of minority groups? His Resolution is a veiled polemic against Lenin's views.

"The Trade Unions or the WP?"

Here is how Com. Coolidge defines our task:

The WP does not consider the struggle for democratic rights an *end in itself*. The party does not look upon the Negro or mixed organizations formed for leading this struggle as *ends in themselves* to be permanently maintained and useful in all situations and in all circumstances" (p. 9, col. 1. My emphasis.—F. F.).

Whoever considered any struggle "an end in itself"? Why should any one wish to maintain any organization "permanently"? Com. Coolidge considers the "ordeal of agitation for democratic rights and the economic struggle" justified because it is the best means of bringing the workers "into class struggle and class consciousness." (p. 9, col. 1) Does he then consider the class struggle "an end in itself"? The final struggle against capitalism is not an "end in itself" but a struggle for socialism. What is an "end in itself"? Against whom is he arguing? He continues, as follows:

The masses of the Negroes today are triply deluded. They are beguiled by white politicians, traduced by the industrial overlords and misled by the Negro leaders, lieutenants of the politico-economic general staff of the bourgeoisie. Herein lies the danger of *uncritical support* of organizations, even the best of them, fighting for democratic rights. *The program of this leadership* does not include a struggle against capitalism, now or in the future" (p. 9, col. 2. My emphasis).

I should like to ask Com. Coolidge: what revolutionist ever gave any organization, not to speak of a non-Marxist one, its "uncritical support"? I should like to ask further: does the program of the trade union leadership envisage such a struggle against capitalism? And we do, don't we, enthusiastically support trade union struggle for immediate demands?

It is all the more impossible to make out what Com. Coolidge means since he does not carry the critical attitude that he has toward Negro organizations over to the trade unions. On the contrary. Here is what he writes:

The strategy and tactics of the revolutionists must be to liquidate the ideological influence of the present Negro and white leadership of the Negro masses and to replace this leadership with a militant leadership at least moving in the direction of class consciousness. Concretely, this could only be a leadership supplied from the *trade unions or the WP* (p. 9, col. 2. My emphasis.—F. F.)

Now, why—to borrow an expression from Com. Coolidge—so "exalt" the trade unions as to elevate them to an equal plane with a *revolutionary Marxist political party, the WP*? A trade union is not a political party; its field is generally limited to economic struggles of an immediate nature, struggles that are hemmed in—to borrow another expression from Com. Coolidge—by "narrow confines." At the moment it has a class-collaborationist, pro-imperialist war leadership—all the attributes which make Coolidge distrust the Negro organizations. What, I repeat, causes the distinction in attitudes nevertheless?

Com. Coolidge is betrayed into this false position by the motive which drives him all through the Resolution to wipe away any significance that can be attached to the independent Negro struggle. We support the trade union struggle for immediate demands because, due to the workers' role in the process of production, this struggle leads them to a struggle against capitalism, despite the class-collaborationist program of their leadership. Likewise, the logic of the Negro struggle for immediate democratic rights will lead them to a struggle against capital and the state. The MOW, for instance, was a movement directed against the capitalist state. The Negroes were prepared to march on Washington. That is where they have to begin. In 1905 the Russian proletariat under the leadership of a priest marched to the Czar; that was the beginning of their wisdom. Com. Coolidge, however, plays down the role of the MOW, while at the same time exalting the trade unionist part of the leadership whose *program* is indistinguishable from that of the petty bourgeois leadership and whose *action* has bound the masses to the chariot of the capitalist state. Here is what he writes:

The MOW was at first visualized and advertised as a militant mass movement of protest against Jim Crow and discrimination. ... The leaders of the MOW, however, with the exception of Randolph, being from Negro and Negro-white petty bourgeois organizations, with jobs to protect, soon turned the movement away from its militant beginnings into a sort of pacifist do-nothing organization. *Before* this stage was reached, however, most of the original Negro leadership in the MOW had withdrawn. (P. 10, col. 1. My emphasis.—F. F.)

If, as is true, the petty bourgeois leadership had withdrawn *before* even it became a do-nothing organization, who then led it to the do-nothing stage? Com. Coolidge, in one breath, admits that the trade-unionist Randolph who remained the leader of the organization led it to this stage, and, in the next breath, writes "if it (a militant Negro organization) is to serve the interests of the masses of Negroes, such an organization will have to be led by militant Negro workers of the *trade union movement*." (p. 10, col. 1, my emphasis F. F.) Once again: why so exalt the trade union leadership? Isn't this the political consequence of belittling the mass activities of the Negroes?

An Appeal to the Trade Unions or Fight Against the Bourgeoisie?

The crux of the matter lies in this: Com. Coolidge conceives of the struggle for democratic rights not as a *fight against* the bourgeoisie but as an *appeal to* the trade union movement. Here is how he expresses it:

The demand of the WP for social, political and economic equality for Negroes is not directed primarily at the bourgeoisie... The slogan is addressed directly to the white proletariat; to the white workers in the organized labor movement. (P. 10, col. 2.)

Who oppresses the Negro: is it the bourgeoisie or is it the white workingclass? Who deprives him of social and political equality? Is it the capitalist state? Or is it the organized labor movement?

It is true that there is a distinction *within* the ranks of the proletariat. It is this which motivated Trotsky to say that *to the Negro worker* the white worker appears as an oppressor. A revolutionary party, he counselled, should take that into consideration; it is one of the elements which makes of the Negro problem a special problem that cannot be merely "integrated" into the general class struggle. It is true, further, that the distinction within the proletarian ranks motivated Lenin to espouse a "duality of propaganda," one addressed to the proletariat of the *oppressing* nation which gains from the special oppression by its bourgeoisie of the *workers of the oppressed nation*, and the other addressed to the proletariat of the oppressed nation which suffered from a *dual* oppression. Education of the proletariat of the oppressing nation proceeds at all times, but at no time is the fact lost sight of that this consists not merely of an appeal to the proletariat but a struggle against capitalism and the state.

The Negroes and the Trade Unions

Since World War I the Negro has experienced a phenomenal proletarianization and urbanization. In addition to this, he has, since the organization of the CIO, experienced a tremendous unionization. This, however, has not solved the Negro problem because the more integrated into the trade union movement, the more the Negro resents and struggles against his segregation outside of it. This is an organic part of the Leninist conception of the National Question. Com. Johnson has drawn from this the following conclusion:

This dual movement is the key to the Marxist analysis of the Negro question in the U. S. A. (P. 13, col. 1.)

For Com. Coolidge, on the other hand, this integration into the trade union movement is the straight road to the solution of the Negro problem, and he counsels:

The Negroes in the United States must lay their case before the trade unions. Not as outsiders seeking a united front, but from the inside as an integral and integrated part of the labor movement. (P. 10, col. 2.)

It is a fact, however, isn't it, that in Detroit, where the Negroes are most integrated into the trade union movement, the riots occurred? Precisely because the significance of this escapes Com. Coolidge, he falls into subjectivism. Duality of propaganda in his hands becomes a duality of blame. Where he does not blame the bourgeoisie for its "plots," he blames the Negro working class for its "delusion" and he appeals to the white proletariat "to wipe out the blot placed on labor's escutcheon by the shabby and shameful treatment labor has accorded the Negro since emancipation." (P. 10, col. 2) The greatness of the Bolshevik solution lies precisely in knowing *how* to meet the danger of the division in the labor movement. We go to meet it by class struggle, and by stimulating the independent mass movement of the Negroes and turning it against the bourgeoisie. There is no other way of avoiding a divided labor movement. Didn't the independent activity of the Negroes stimulate the UAW to fight for Negro housing in Detroit and have a united front with labor in the elections?

Independent mass activity of the Negroes is the best instrument for educating both white and Negro workers and mobilizing the white workers in the fight for Negro emancipation.

The Party Policy

Com. Coolidge writes:

While the party is *positive and sincere* in its demands for Negro equality, urging Negroes to carry on the fight ceaselessly and relentlessly, the party has its own correct Marxist outlook and aims, the consolidation of the whole proletariat, irrespective of race, color or nationality. (P. 9, col. 1. My emphasis—F. F.)

Why, in a political resolution, is there need to offer assurances of the party's "sincerity" in the fight for democratic rights unless implicit in that resolution was a distrust of these struggles? Implicit, because our condescending attitude to these struggles, which we consider an "ordeal," is positively protruding through the assurances? Implicit, because Com. Coolidge gives with one hand and takes away with the other. Although he has stated that only "one totally ignorant of the dual disability of the American Negro" would wish to submerge the struggle for democratic rights in the general class struggle, he has also written:

We have said that *not even* the struggle for democratic rights can be divorced or separated from the class struggle. (P. 11, col. 2. My emphasis—F. F.)

Why then does there exist a special Negro problem and what is our attitude to the Negro organizations that try to deal with that problem? Com. Coolidge explains:

The WP will approach Negroes and Negro organizations with an appeal directed primarily to the proletarians. Our aim is to break the wage earners away from the stultifying, defeatist, class-collaborationist Negro leadership. This is the first step in creating a class rupture between the proletarians and the Negro leader clique, servants of the white bourgeoisie. (P. 9, col. 2. My emphasis—F. F.)

The first step ought to be to fight. If the first step is not to fight, but to create a class rupture in these organizations, does or does not such a statement mean a declaration of war against these organizations? This is not a theoretical question, but one concerning practical action. Do we propose to make these organizations appendages to the revolutionary party? If that can be done, then why shouldn't they become an integral part of the revolutionary party? To maintain a separate existence under the circumstances that they are proletarian organizations and have adopted a revolutionary program would indeed be reactionary. If the first step in entering the organizations that fight for democratic rights of the Negro people is the creating of a class rupture between the proletarian Negroes and the "leader clique," then, of necessity, the party in actuality is demanding that these organizations accept our program as a *condition* for our support.

The Negro Question as a National Question

The failure to recognize the objective validity of the Negro mass struggle; or recognize it in one paragraph and deny it in the next compels Comrade Coolidge to slip into an idealistic approach to the Negro question. He writes:

Two and a half centuries of bondage place a stigma on the Negro which even after several decades of freedom he has not been able to wipe away. (P. 7, col. 1. My emphasis—F. F.)

But what, Comrade Coolidge, is the economic root of this stigma? Isn't it true that for a "stigma" to be so persistent it must feed and nourish itself in economic roots deeply im-

bedded in the community? Could the "stigma" have persisted so long if the economic remains of slavery had not persisted? Of the thirteen million Negroes in America, nine and a half million are still in the South and the majority of these are sharecroppers. Lenin thought that *within the economic remains of slavery resided the economic roots of the Negro question*. In his study of *Capitalism and Agriculture in the United States*, Lenin found a "striking similarity" between the economic position of the American Negro and the Russian serf. Lenin stressed the fact that the Negro is "conditioned and developed by special economic relations" which follow him wherever he goes, whether on the plantation or in the factory, in the North or in the South. It is this in fact which motivated Lenin in his *Theses on the National Question* to single out the Irish and the American Negroes as examples of special oppression that required special methods of handling outside of the general struggle. It is the special oppression which has persisted through the industrialization and urbanization of the Negro and which has made the Negro conscious of his being a special "group" in the community that motivated Trotsky in 1939 to place the Negro question in the category of the National Question. Does Comrade Coolidge accept this interpretation?

In a Marxist organization like ours Comrade Coolidge should make clear: (1) What is his attitude to the Leninist conception of the Negro Question? (2) What is his attitude to Trotsky's conception of the Negro Question? (3) Does he believe that Lenin and Trotsky thought the Negroes were a nation and that this is the reason for the position they took? (4) Does he believe that they underestimated the rôle of the Negro proletariat and that is why they placed the Negro Question as part of the National Question, as they unmistakably did? (5) Or does he agree that they placed the Negro Question as part of the National Question because of their conception of the Negro struggle as an independent mass struggle? Bolshevism has always known that the avoidance of stating an attitude on these questions is in reality to repudiate them.

Comrade Coolidge's resolution confuses the party as to the significance of the position of Lenin and Trotsky on the National Question and makes impossible any understanding of the continuity of Marxist doctrine and its application to the developing situation.

Conclusions

How, concretely, do the differences between the Coolidge and Johnson positions express themselves in the politics of today?

Comrade Johnson's resolution attaches enormous significance to the movement of the Negroes in Harlem, in Detroit, etc. It claims that these movements have initiated political activity among the organized proletariat. It claims, further, *that it is along these lines that the Negro struggle must, and will develop*. It asserts that the best means of educating the Negro people in the realities of class politics is by means of encouraging organizations of these mass struggles. It states, further, that it is by means of this mass struggle that the organized labor movement, which is predominantly white, will realize that the Negro struggle is not merely a trade union question but one that requires political organization and extra-parliamentary struggles. The Johnson resolution claims that this is the way, both among the white proletarians and among the Negroes, to wipe away the possibility of inter-racial clashes which might disrupt the solidity of the labor move-

ment. It is along these lines that the propaganda and agitation of the party in its education not only of Negroes but of the white proletariat can do its best service.

Read the Coolidge resolution. It does not understand the significance of the mass struggles of the Negro people that excited such enormous interest and forced the bourgeoisie to pass bills, for the most part spurious. These can have value only if the masses of the Negroes continue to demonstrate their hostility to the degradation to which they are subjected. It is this which makes the Negro Question a special question. Without this there would be no need to discuss the Negro Question at all.

The consequence of Comrade Coolidge's resolution is, on the one hand, to foster the impression among the white workers that to the extent the Negroes come into the trade unions the Negro problem is in the course of being settled when in reality the whole problem gets more and more sharpened; and, on the other hand, it encourages among the white workers a disregard of the Negro struggle and its significance, thereby weakening both the Negro and the white proletarian struggle against the bourgeoisie. It is this type of attitude which Comrade Trotsky feared when he wrote that, to the Negro, the white worker is an oppressor, and that, furthermore, to think that the Negro problem is not such a special problem as to make it part of the National Question was "a concession to the point of view of American chauvinism." His solution was not to turn the independent mass struggle into an appeal to the white proletariat, but a deepening and widening of that independent struggle.

It is perfectly true, of course, that the Negroes are dependent upon the white proletariat for ultimate victory. It is also perfectly true that the independent mass struggle of the Negroes has a fundamental contribution to make to the struggle of the proletariat and all the oppressed masses for socialism. There is no conception of this in the Coolidge resolution.

Merely to say that labor will "fix" it all is to say nothing. Labor has to "fix" all problems. The proletariat is the only cohesive revolutionary class in present-day society and no fundamental transformation of the social order can occur except under its leadership. But meanwhile the Negroes are in constant activity and organization (NAACP, Urban League, Garvey movement, MOW) on the basis of the fact that they are a nationally oppressed minority. It is up to the revolutionists to recognize that fundamental fact, to see that it is not merely a trade union question, nor even merely a question of grudging support of these democratic struggles, but of support and development of a powerful force, which, when it fights, as it must, leads inevitably to clash with the bourgeoisie and thereby makes it a part of the struggle for socialism.

F. FOREST.

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