

# ON SELF-DETERMINATION FOR THE NEGRO PEOPLE

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## I.

IT IS A FACT we must reckon with that, for the most part, the Negro people have not responded favorably to the slogan of self-determination for the Negro people in the Black Belt, a slogan first put forward by our Party in 1928. Because of this lack of response, which amounts in many cases to vigorous opposition, there are some comrades in our ranks who conclude incorrectly that the slogan of self-determination for the Negro people in the Black Belt is wrong.

Well-defined nations, at certain stages in their development, almost always spontaneously put forth a demand for self-determination and fight to realize it in one form or another. The Negro people in the Black Belt constitute a nation. They possess the basic characteristics of a nation, stated as follows by Stalin:

A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.

Despite the fact that the Negro people in the Black Belt possess these qualities of nationhood, they nevertheless do not raise the demand for self-determination. Why is this so?

In my judgment, the basic answer to this question is that the Negro people, although a nation, are still a relatively young nation. They have not yet matured politically to the point where they will conceive of, and fight for, the slogan of self-determination. Nations, like classes, grow and develop; they do not spring full-fledged from the brow of Jove. (Our American working class, for example, with no mass party of its own and with its head full of capitalist ideology, is still far from political maturity.) Nations must pass through a period, more or less extended, of growth and maturation. The Negro people are now in the midst of such national development.

During the past 150 years, from one end of our Hemisphere to the other, more than a score of new nations have come into existence. Some of them, including our own, had great difficulty in acquiring a national consciousness, as well as the various other attributes of nationhood. Indeed, several of them, particularly in Central America, have not yet fully developed a vigorous sense of nationhood, much less won full national independence. In other

parts of the world also, including nations and autonomous regions in the Soviet Union, we have in our time seen peoples maturing into national consciousness. In India, too, there are many peoples who do not yet demand self-determination for themselves, but support the general demand for a free India.

The Negro people in the United States are developing their nationhood under extremely difficult conditions. Nevertheless, they are developing it. Coming to the United States, dating back almost 300 years, from all parts of Africa, they found themselves enchained by chattel slavery. This made it impossible for them, until the Civil War, to develop all the characteristics of a nation. But, even under slavery, they did develop certain national characteristics such as a common homeland, a common speech and a common psychological make-up flowing from their traditions of oppression. It was only with the abolition of slavery in 1865 that the Negro people had an opportunity to develop the higher qualities of nationhood. Since then their progress toward nationhood has been phenomenal. They have in varying degrees registered tremendous strides in science, in politics, in agriculture, in labor unions, in the armed forces, in educational pursuits, in general culture, in sports, in all walks of life. They have now developed a strong proletariat and a well-marked, even though weak, bourgeoisie. This na-

tional progress is all the more remarkable in view of the brief time in which it has occurred and the extremely difficult conditions under which it has taken place. Let us not forget that there are still many thousands of American Negroes who were actually born chattel slaves.

## II.

The Negro people are rapidly developing their nationhood under conditions of repression hardly equalled in any other country in the world. In the North, as a national minority, they have to face widespread discrimination in every phase of social life, and in the South, where the great bulk of them live, they suffer under the weight of the infamous Jim Crow and semi-feudal system. Not long ago several Indian comrades asserted to me that the Negroes in the South were in an even worse condition of oppression and discrimination than the Untouchables of India. Despite all these difficulties, however, the progress being made by the Negro people has been one of the most striking features of American life during the past 80 years.

There are three special features that raise ideological difficulties to the acceptance of the slogan of self-determination by the young Negro nation. The bourgeoisie seized upon these to mask their fierce national repression. The first of these ideological difficulties is the race question. Ever since Negro

slaves were brought to this country, the exploiters have attempted to justify their oppression upon the grounds that the Negroes are biologically an inferior race. This is the theory of white supremacy and Negro inferiority. It has been the ideological basis, not only for slavery, but for the entire system of Jim Crow, white supremacy practices, and other discriminations against Negroes. In consequence, Negroes naturally fight fiercely against this whole concept of racial inferiority and the segregationism that accompanies it. This makes them highly suspicious of any proposals, even slogans of national self-determination, that would seem to set them apart from the bulk of the white population. Preoccupation with this burning question of racial discrimination tends to obscure the more basic conception of their status as a nation.

A second ideological barrier to the development of national consciousness among the Negro people has to do with the general question of American democratic traditions. Negroes rightly feel themselves to be Americans in the fullest sense of the word. And, despite all the discrimination that is directed against them as a people, they are also proud of American democratic traditions and their contributions to establishing them. Consequently, with this strong spirit of Americanism the young Negro people do not readily develop the conception of being themselves a nation, even though

they are an oppressed nation within the broad American nation.

A third obstacle to the development of full national consciousness among the Negroes as a people arises from the fact that, situated literally in the bosom of the strongest and largest capitalist nation in the world, it is difficult for them, a relatively small and the most impoverished section of the American people, to conceive of themselves as taking a stand as a nation within this great American nation, and as demanding the right of self-determination. Such an assertion of nationhood on their part would be an act demanding very high national consciousness.

### III.

The foregoing are some of the major reasons why the young Negro nation has not yet reached the point of political maturity where it fully understands itself to be a nation and where it demands the right of self-determination. But that the Negro people are on the way to achieving such consciousness of nationhood is made obvious by observing their general orientation as a people.

Where are the Negro people going? What are they doing to solve the problem of repression? What is the route they are taking in their forward march? These are some of the major questions to which we must find the answers. And we can find them, not in wishful thinking as to what the Negroes should or should not do, but in studying what

the Negroes are actually thinking and doing about these matters. In applying the principles of Marxism to this complex problem we must be careful to avoid schematism; we must, as Lenin often counselled, listen carefully to the voice of the people. We must use our theory, not as a dogma, but as a guide to action.

In order to establish just what the orientation of the Negro people is, it may be helpful first to point out some of the goals toward which they are *not* heading. First, they are not looking, as a people, for the solution of their problems by intermarriage and absorption into the general white majority of the nation, as appears to be taking place in some Latin-American countries. At the same time, they fight against the white supremacy barriers to the right of intermarriage. Second, they are not planning to emigrate from the United States to Africa, as Garvey (and various other exodus proponents since Civil War times) would have had them do. Third, they are not dispersing their national organizations and giving up their struggles and simply relying upon the goodwill and generosity of the American bourgeoisie to provide them with economic, political, and social equality, as Browder recommends they do. And, fourth, they are not looking forward to a time when, in the South, they will have a Negro Republic. Where, then, are they heading as a people, and what is their orientation?

Under the pressure of their difficult situation, the Negro people are developing along a triple-phased course.

First, the Negro people, along with their white allies, are fighting militantly and resolutely for economic, political and social equality, and first-class citizenship, and not without very substantial successes. They are seeking to integrate themselves on a basis of equality into every American institution and into all fields of endeavor. The measure of their efforts in this direction is indicated, among other developments, by such movements as those against lynching, against the poll tax, and for full rights in the armed forces, for fair employment practices, etc.

Second, in order to carry through successfully these struggles for equal rights, the Negro people are energetically organizing themselves, and more and more on a national Negro basis. The N.A.A.C.P., the National Urban League, the National Negro Congress, the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America and other organizations have greatly increased in numbers and influence during the past decade or two, while in the sphere of trade union organization the Negro workers have made most striking progress.

Third, along with this organized fight for equality, the Negro people are also gradually developing their national culture and national consciousness. Specifically Negro culture is showing great vitality, so much so

that it has already profoundly affected American culture in general. As for the development of their national consciousness, one of its most striking manifestations is the extent to which Negroes nowadays have lessened their talk of "race" consciousness and increased their tendency to consider themselves as "the Negro people." They have also developed a marked community of feeling with the colonial peoples of the world who are now fighting for national liberation.

All this signifies that the Negro people are on the path that leads to national struggle, organization, and consciousness. It is the way that leads to the eventual adoption of the slogan of self-determination, with corresponding practical demands for economic and political freedom. Today, both in the North and the South, the Negro people have put forward immediate demands appropriate to those of an oppressed national minority, seeking equality within the given state. But they will eventually advance economic and political demands that will raise their program for the South to the higher level of national liberation.

With their process of increasing struggle, improving organization, and developing national consciousness, the Negro people at this time are orientating in the general direction of statehood in the Black Belt within the general confines of the U.S. There are no separatist tendencies among them. Rather than toward a

Negro Republic in the South, they are much more definitely moving toward relationships roughly analogous in certain respects to those of the French-Canadian people toward the rest of the Canadian people. This is what the living practice of the Negro people teaches us now, and these lessons must not be ignored or misunderstood.

#### IV.

The Communist Party deservedly has a high prestige among the Negro people. This is because our Party, ever since its formation, has fought resolutely beside the harassed Negro masses. We have relentlessly struggled against the outrageous lynchings, against the Jim Crow system, and against anti-Negro discrimination and white chauvinism in all fields. We have also fought tirelessly for all the demands of the Negro people, and for the unity of the Negro masses and the white progressive forces. Our Party can rightfully claim much of the credit for the political progress made in recent years by the Negro people.

A weakness in our Party's work, however, has been the inept way we have handled the question of self-determination in the Black Belt of the South. Our adoption of the slogan of self-determination in 1928 marked a big step forward in our Negro work; but, unfortunately (save for the Browder revisionist period, when we dropped the slogan altogether), we have quite generally

interpreted it in a Leftist manner. This has tended to make it unacceptable to the Negro people. Among the major improvements necessary in our presentation of the slogan of self-determination are the following:

(a) We must not brush aside the question of race, as we have done too often in the past. On the contrary, we must fully evaluate the role racial prejudice plays in the oppression of the Negro people and show its relation to the larger, more basic political question of the *national* oppression of the Negro people.

(b) We must attune our advocacy of the slogan of self-determination more closely to the general stage of national development which the young Negro nation has attained. We must pay closer attention to the incipient national moods, ideas, and movements now developing among this oppressed people, and adopt as a major task the awakening of the Negro people's consciousness of nationhood. We must pay particular attention to solving the land hunger of the Negro people. We must not present the slogan of self-determination to the Negro people in a manner that assumes that they are a

nation fully matured politically.

(c) We must not, either by direct advocacy or by implication, create the impression that self-determination in the Southern Black Belt would necessarily lead to the creation of a Negro Republic. Instead, we must show that self-determination may take various forms, of which separation is but one. This is all the more necessary because the Negro people are in no sense orientating themselves at present toward the setting up of a separate Republic. We must study more carefully the whole question of bi-national and multi-national states, as they exist in various parts of the world.

(d) We must more concretely connect the question of Socialism with the fight of the Negro people against racial and national oppression. We must show them that while their present fight for economic, political, and social equality, and their eventual struggle for national self-determination, are indispensable for their welfare and freedom, it will only be under Socialism that they, together with the white toiling masses, will finally achieve full liberty, equality, and prosperity.