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## A Critique of the Communist Party USA's "Struggle for Afro-American Liberation"

**A**t its last convention, in August of 1979, the Communist Party USA presented to the world its new resolution on "The Struggle for Afro-American Liberation."\* Before examining this document, let us briefly sum up the period of history we are living in.

We may characterize it as a continuing international crisis of over-production. It began with the 1974-5 recession and is now threatening to throw the entire capitalist world into a depression far worse than that of the 1930s. Although at first the crisis was somewhat mitigated by the massive extension of credit, the latter has in turn aggravated an international monetary crisis of spiraling inflation and an ever-extending world debt structure which has brought many of the neocolonies ("lesser developed countries") to the brink of default. The historical context of this economic downturn is a newly intensified stage of the general crisis of world imperialism, which finds itself with no other major areas of expansion except the socialist countries.

The full effect of the economic crisis is already being felt by a number of countries within the newly proletarianized colonial and neocolonial sector of the imperialist world. This explains the new wave of social revolutions in Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Latin America. On the one hand, these developments promise to heat up the entire world revolutionary process, including the proletarian

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movements in the imperialist nations. On the other, they are throwing into collision the national interests of especially the major powers (both those of the imperialist versus the socialist countries, and those among the imperialist powers themselves), thereby aggravating the danger of World War Three.

Part of this new wave of world revolutions is the growing upsurge in the southern United States of the struggles of the black and white masses, spearheaded by the black workers. The center of these growing storms is the Negro national-colonial area of the "deep South." The international and strategic significance of the movement of the Negro national proletariat in relation to the world revolutionary struggle cannot be ignored. U.S. imperialism is the main economic and military prop of world imperialism, it is the international hangman of revolutions. And any serious analysis of the history, economy, and political nature of U.S. imperialism will show that its primary colonial base is the prostrate Negro Nation in the South.

The recognition of all this, particularly the last fact, is indispensable to the struggle for the unity of the working class of the United States in preparation for fulfilling its historic task of sweeping away the "scourge of the earth," U.S. imperialism. Yet it is precisely the centrality of the Negro question that the CPUSA wishes to obscure, reducing the entire question to just one of many issues in their populist conception of the united front, the "anti-monopoly coalition."

Let us examine some of the main points of their most recent resolution.

### Distortion of History

The following passage (p. 3) sums up its main theoretical premise:

The anti-humanist nature of the historically outmoded system of capitalism is manifested in its racist treatment of the Afro-American people. The values which the toil and creativity of this people have contributed to the formation, developments and wealth of the nation establishes the objective and historical fact of the 30 million Afro-Americans being a component part of the U.S. nation.

This truly remarkable statement, stripped of its "humanist" rhetoric, equates "values . . . contributed" by Afro-Americans to their "being a component part of the U.S. nation." The U.S. nation is by implication defined as consisting of any people who have by their toil and creativity contributed values to it. By this definition, at least the

bulk of the western hemisphere should be included in the U.S. nation, since the peoples of Puerto Rico, Mexico, Brazil, Jamaica et al. have certainly, even while remaining in their homelands, contributed "toil and creativity" and "values" to the enrichment of U.S. capital. Gone is any kind of historical analysis of how and where and in what way the African slaves were annexed to the U.S. colonies and evolved in a specific, historically determined way, in a definite territory—the plantation area of the South.

Manifest Destiny has become manifest, in the CPUSA's definition: the U.S. nation includes all contributors of values based on toil and creativity. Not only "Afro-Americans," but the direct and indirect colonies of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Panama, formerly Cuba, and others are lucky enough to fall under this definition, annexed to the U.S. nation by the CPUSA.

Besides smelling suspiciously of chauvinism, this definition of nation, covering up the distinction between nation and multinational imperialist state, is based on severe distortions of the history of the United States of North America. In order to clear up a little of the confusion let us point to some of the more important historical features which led to the development of the Negro question as a separate, national question:

1) Before the Civil War, most southern capital was invested and fixed in black slaves, particularly on the large plantations. Had slavery not been profitable, the \$2 billion in the form of nearly four million slaves would have taken other forms—improved land, industry, banks, and wage labor.

2) In the production of such profitable crops as cotton, tobacco, etc., the African slaves were concentrated in the black alluvial soil area of the deep South. While their tribal distinctions were being eliminated by the slave system, creating a newly evolved people, the same system subjugated the poor white farmers, stripping many of them of the means to escape semi-peonage and join the westward migrations.

3) Capitalist slavery prevented the formation of one national market (including both the North and South) based on the national integration of northern and southern capital.

4) The Civil War was the result of the antagonism between the two forms of capitalist economy in the North and South.

The Civil War unleashed forces, some previously latent, which contributed to the national development of the deep South. What were some of its effects?

1) An enormous amount of bank and industrial capital was accumulated in the North, coalescing in the form of finance capital. At the same time, southern capital in the form of the slaves themselves was expropriated without compensation from the slaveocracy, which also lost enormous wealth in the form of fixed capital destroyed in the war — railroads, land, farm property, war plants, etc. The result of all this was the reduction of the plantation area to the level of a colony, with little or no indigenous capital, subordinated to northern finance.

2) The freeing of the slaves spurred on a differentiation of classes among the Negro people already nascent under slavery in the division of labor between town and country, between slave and freeman, and among different strata of slaves. Thus the better situated house servants and free Negroes were roots of the Negro national bourgeoisie, while the artisans and field slaves were roots of the Negro national proletariat. At the same time, the end of slavery allowed the integration of the poor whites into the general national evolution of the plantation and adjacent areas toward a common economic life. For example, where before the Civil War 11 percent of laborers engaged in the cultivation of cotton were white, by 1876 the figure was 40 percent.

All these things led to the constitution of the economic base of the emerging Negro Nation, distinct from but connected by Wall Street to Anglo-America. The colonization of the Black Belt by United States finance capital was the latter's first, a prelude to the annexation of Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and the neocolonization of Latin America and the domination of the entire hemisphere.

### The CPUSA's Cultural National Autonomy Concept

The CPUSA resolution admits that the "Afro-American" question in the U.S. is a national question, but reduces the national aspect to one of culture:

The singular experience of, and epic struggle against the cauldron of slavery's horror and segregation's aftermath, were unique factors which fused a national consciousness that continues to be tempered in the fires of the ongoing struggle for freedom. It is such singular historical and contemporary experiences which contribute to and account for the special national features of the culture of Black people. (pp. 4-5)

Here again, bombastic rhetoric obscures the extremely tame (and reactionary) political message: "The national aspect" of the Afro-American question equals "distinctive cultural expression." Unpleasant questions like changing the national boundaries of the United States, breaking up the imperialist state, and revolutionary wars of national liberation are reduced to niceties about "a rich and growing body of literature and artistic creation," "prideful reclamation of their history and the popularization of esthetic taste and styles of American and African liberation," "self-determined esthetic standards," and so on and so on.

What about the economic history of the deep South, the question of an historically evolved territory on which this "singular experience" and "epic struggle" took place? Nothing. The historic oppression of the South, based on the colonization of the Negro Nation, is passed over in silence. It is too hot a potato for the CPUSA to handle. It is also a very sweet potato — for U.S. imperialism, which is using its control of the South and its superprofits as an economic and political lever to intensify the exploitation of the Anglo-American working class as a whole. The threat of running away and the actual relocation of plants in the South, with its rich reservoir of nonunion labor; General Motors' "Southern Strategy," and Nixon's before that; Andy Young's "third world" diplomacy based on an advocacy of a "New South" solution for particularly southern Africa — all these things, and many more, reflect the strategic importance of the Negro Nation and surrounding area as the main social, political, and economic prop of U.S. imperialism, which whistles "Dixie" loud and long while the CPUSA whispers, if it says anything at all, about the South.

There is a logic in the CPUSA's position. If history can be distorted to prove that the United States is one "national family" instead of a multinational state structure, a "prisonhouse of nations"; if the colonial status of white toilers in the Negro Nation (which we shall discuss below) can be left unexplained; if the entire question can be reduced to a mental problem of "racism"; then the CPUSA can avoid the unpleasantness of talking about changing state boundaries and national liberation and a socialist reconstruction of the state and economy of the United States of North America. The Communist Labor Party, on the contrary, bases its stand precisely on all these unpleasantnesses.

The reduction of the national question to the demand for cultural freedom provides, among other things, the basis for the advocacy of "all class black unity" which is slipped through the carefully prepared loopholes in the resolution

### All Class Black Unity

The document reads,

All social strata of Afro-American people aspire to be free from the oppression, special exploitation, racial indignities and humiliation to which Afro-Americans are subjected. (p. 10)

Here the CPUSA deliberately covers up and thereby upholds the position and role of the black comprador, whose existence and interests are based precisely on the intensification of national oppression and who is in no way exploited. Andrew Young is a perfect example. To classify him as merely a token is to underestimate his significance. He is no "Handy Andy." He is a respected member of the Trilateral Commission and represents the historic integration of Negro capital into international capital.

Further, on pp. 12-13, the resolution upholds the supposedly "anti-monopoly" role of the black capitalist, opening another loophole for the legitimization of "black capitalism" and with it all class black unity. But the CPUSA's argument contradicts history.

At a certain stage of the Negro People's Liberation Movement, black petty capitalists played a certain progressive role. Despite the capitalist character of the old southern sharecropping system, its forms and features were necessarily semi-feudal. The economic base was kept intact by a legal superstructure of Jim Crow segregation, legal restrictions, and lynch laws. The historic struggle of the black petty bourgeoisie to break through this peculiar form of colonial oppression and establish an independent economy was certainly progressive at the time. The independent, or what W. E. B. DuBois called the "group economy," was among other things a means of survival, providing necessary services denied blacks in southern cities. The social movement led by the so-called "Talented Tenth" was part of a general defensive struggle of the Negro people which carried over into the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The civil rights movement ended in the defeat of *de jure* Jim Crow segregation and opened the way for an unhampered industrialization of

the South by northern capital. With the end of the civil rights stage, the present stage of the Negro national liberation movement began. It is but a particular expression of the newly intensified crisis of imperialism. The old cracks and crevices which allowed for the growth of black capitalism beyond the funeral parlors and catering establishments and mutual aid societies turned insurance companies were found mainly in the sphere of retailing. This development found its base in the Negro Nation and surrounding areas of the South, the oldest and highest concentration of black-owned businesses. For example, over half of all black businesses, 80 percent of the life insurance companies, and 30 of the 44 saving and loans developed in the South. But the laws of monopoly and centralization and concentration of capital are closing the cracks and crevices. There is no more room for the independent black businessman. We are witnessing a decline of the middle strata of the black population. This has meant essentially the proletarianization of the black masses and the integration of Negro capital into U.S. monopoly capital. With respect to the latter, we have witnessed the growing reliance of black businesses on government and corporate loans, the integration of corporate boards of directors, etc. The *Review of Black Political Economy* (Fall, 1979) noted this process when it said

The number of black families with incomes less than \$5000 a year rose by 27 percent between 1969 and 1976. . . . The number of black families with incomes of \$25,000 or more increased by 22 percent between 1969 and 1976. What we have seen occurring therefore is a diminishing black middle class."

This new stage marks the end of the progressive role of the Negro bourgeois and the emergence of the movement of the Negro national proletariat—both black and white.

When one adds the CPUSA's cover-up of the role of the black comprador to its call for "majority rule for Afro-American people in all localities where they are the majority of the population, especially in the counties and towns of the South," the result is a betrayal of the interests of the working class. For the Black Belt South in particular, "majority rule" can only have a meaning similar to U.S. neocolonialist policy in southern Africa, that is, imperialist political and economic domination through the black comprador.

A necessary condition for the effective leadership of the Negro proletariat in the Negro national liberation movement is the exposure of

the Negro bourgeoisie, particularly the black comprador, who has become inextricably woven into the fabric of U.S. monopoly capital. But we get from the CPUSA, instead of exposure, a Watergate cover-up in the form of the call for all class black unity against monopoly. But what they refuse to do the Negro workers are objectively (and increasingly subjectively) prepared to do—discard the deceptive leadership of the black compradors and the compromised petty bourgeoisie and wage a real struggle against the capitalist state for emancipation. The explosive events in Miami and Newport News bear this projection out.

### The CPUSA's Concept of "Racism"

On p. 9 the resolution says,

Black people are integral to the U.S. nation, but are deprived of their rightful and full equal status with white peoples in the family of the U.S. nation.

A complex pattern of racist prejudices and practice operates in the nation to deprive Black people of economic, political and social equality with their white fellow citizens.

... The national aspect of the oppression of Afro-American people manifests itself in the fact that racism subjects all social strata of Black people to racist humiliation and violation of their dignity as human beings.

If the fight for cultural autonomy is one half of the CPUSA's program, the fight against "racism" is the other half. Here again the CPUSA overestimates the color factor (thus including the black comprador in the call for all class black unity) and underestimates the colonial factor, particularly the status of white workers in the black belt. Despite the thousand tears they cry over "racism," they cannot recognize that the color factor is neither more nor less than the social face of the *national* oppression of the Negro Nation.

"Racism" cannot explain the actual position of the Negro worker, black or white. It cannot explain the following chart, taken from one of the CPUSA's own books, Victor Perlo's *Economics of Racism* (figures from government statistics):

	MEDIAN EARNINGS—1969			
	North		South	
	white	black	white	black
Craftsmen, etc.	\$8968	\$7536	\$7223	\$4731
Operatives	7508	7084	5809	4386
Service workers	5294	5204	4460	3503

How does the theory of "racism" explain why a black worker in the North is paid more than *either* a black or white worker in the South; why, while the northern white operative makes six percent more than the northern black, he makes 71 percent more than the southern black; why a southern white operative makes 22 percent less than a northern black operative? How does it explain why, while the southern white operative makes 32 percent more than the southern black operative, the northern black operative makes 62 percent more than the southern black operative?

Why the North-South differential which transcends "race"? The southern drawl? Given the CPUSA's penchant for surface analysis, this rationale would not surprise us at all.

The realities of United States history dictate that the color factor be neither underestimated nor overestimated. The *People's Tribune*\* (volume 6, number 12) says,

Every colonizing country is compelled to utilize and exacerbate the existing social struggle in order to maintain control. In some areas it is religion, in others it is physical characteristics—including skin color. It arose as a justification for chattel slavery. . . . Modern imperialism, a relatively new economic and social force, had to utilize the existing forms of social contradictions. At the end of the Civil War, the existing struggle between the white southern ruling class and the black toilers provided that form. The existing color discrimination which appeared to be racism was converted into a form of national chauvinism. Since the oppressing nation was primarily white and the oppressed nation (the Negro Nation) was primarily black this national chauvinism was concretely expressed as white chauvinism.

Only a scientific presentation of the question as a Negro national colonial question can explain the relation of the color factor to the colonial oppression of both black and white toilers. The economic statistics cited above show that the color factor, while it cannot be exaggerated as the "theory of racism" does, is the main *form* through which the Negro question presents itself. The content is a colonial oppression which affects white workers in the South as well as black. But not equally. Consequently, the recognition by the U.S. working class of the Negro national colonial question requires that it understand the centrality of the struggle for equality of the black worker. The black semi-skilled or unskilled worker in the North or West constitutes, as a

\* The *People's Tribune* is the political paper of the Communist Labor Party. For more information, write P.O. Box 3774, Chicago, Illinois 60654.

minority in the Anglo-American nation, a strategic part of the advanced section of the proletariat. As a worker in the Negro Nation, he or she, along with a section of the white workforce, constitutes the fighting vanguard of the Negro proletariat within the strategically important (to the U.S. socialist revolution) Negro national liberation movement.

Historically, the bourgeoisie has always used and will continue to use the isolation and vulnerability of the black worker to maintain division and weakness among the U.S. working class. This isolation and vulnerability have been the main levers of class and colonial oppression within the multinational U.S. state. In this sense Karl Marx's precept, "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded," retains validity to this day.

The Communist Labor Party sees its task as preparing the multinational U.S. working class for the taking of state power and the overthrow of U.S. monopoly capital. This can be done only by the injection of class consciousness into the proletariat, consciousness which will find concrete expression in political unity. Central to this preparation are two opposite but interrelated forms of propaganda activity. On the one hand, the white workers must be convinced of the necessity of taking up the struggle for the equality of the black workers. On the other hand, the black workers in particular must be convinced of the need to deepen the political polarization between themselves and the black bourgeoisie. The newly intensified stage of imperialist crisis is placing precisely these tasks on the shoulders of conscious revolutionaries.

The main battle which is bringing these questions into focus is the struggle to unionize the South and repeal the colonial labor law, Taft-Hartley, particularly its Section 14(b), which legitimizes "right-to-work." This is true because, on the one hand, the nonunionized South held legally intact by Taft-Hartley is heaven for the black comprador and hell for the black worker. The open conflict between Atlanta's mayor, Maynard Jackson, and the garbage workers in 1977 reflected this split. On the other hand, Taft-Hartley and an unorganized South allows the capitalist class to perpetuate the unequal position of the black workers as the necessary measure to keep in check the workers of Anglo-America and maintain the colonial status of the white workers in the Negro Nation.

The organization of the South is the strategic issue that affects the entire U.S. working class, North and South. It is the battle in which revolutionaries must wield all their weapons of agitation and propaganda. And it is the battle in which the objective unity of black and white workers can and must enter into the consciousness of the working class.

The class struggle, particularly in the South, has already taken and will inevitably continue to take a more and more violent form. The struggle of particularly the black worker, whether in Miami or Newport News, is of necessity being waged directly against the U.S. state apparatus (police, courts, prison system, federal and state governments) backed up by the extralegal terror of the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, and others. The U.S. state has become the immediate obstacle to economic and social equality. The black petty bourgeois buffer has basically disappeared. So has *de jure* segregation, which was also a buffer in the sense that while it existed, individual laws and regulations, and not the capitalist system and state as a whole, appeared to be the problem. Now there is nothing left to fight except the state and system as a whole.

The U.S. capitalist system and state which backs it up are extremely violent, and will become more so. The revisionism of the Communist Party USA, which tried to muddy the waters on the question of what is necessary by thin populist slogans about "peaceful" electoral transition and "anti-monopoly governments," cannot begin to deal with the reality of the developing social situation in our country, particularly the South, today.

### The Negro Question and Detente

No other major political issue, perhaps, reveals as clearly the opportunism and chauvinism of the CPUSA as the Negro question. Its latest resolution is part of a pattern of ideological confusion woven throughout the history of the Party's existence.

It is interesting to note that the CPUSA's vacillations on the Negro question have followed, historically, the ebbs and flows of the class struggle, particularly the changing relations of the United States and Soviet Union since World War Two. During the period when tensions were relaxed as the two countries fought Nazi Germany, the Communist Party USA put the Negro skeleton back in the closet. Earl Browder, then general secretary, decreed that the Negro people had

made their choice on the question of self-determination, opting for integration, and that therefore the whole problem had been solved.

The end of World War Two saw the heightening of tensions between the socialist and capitalist camps and between the capitalists and workers here at home. During this period of confrontation the CPUSA once again struck a militant pose and restated the Negro question more or less correctly, as a pressing national *territorial* question. Gus Hall's pamphlet *Marxism and Negro Liberation*, published in 1951, articulated this militant position. But the spirit of Camp David and Kennedy-Khrushchev rapprochement marked the lessening of tensions again, and gave birth to what later came to be called *detente*. Again the CPUSA's position on the Negro question mellowed. James Jackson's *New Theoretical Aspects of the Negro Question*, from which the present resolution on Afro-American liberation evolved, justified the abandonment of the Negro question as a revolutionary, central question. Jackson essentially declared that the Negro Nation had disappeared through dispersal, thus attributing to the United States a super-historical strength, since no other nation in history has ever been dispersed out of existence. (Recent statistics about, first, net *in*-migration of blacks into the South, as well as, second, a long-term steady growth of blacks in the South despite earlier out-migrations, expose Jackson's theoretical projections as merely the latest form of American Exceptionalism.)

Finally, the CPUSA's most recent position—that the Negro Nation was not dispersed since it never existed to begin with—is the latest stage of their “let's be nice” position. Being the opportunists they are, the Communist Party leaders have historically used the Negro question as a sort of “bargaining chip” in their battle to defend what they take to be the interests of the Soviet Union (actually the national interests of the revisionist leading group) against U.S. imperialism. In essence they say to the U.S. bourgeoisie, “If you're nice to the Soviet leadership and to us, we will sign, seal, and deliver to you the Negro Nation and the leadership of the national liberation movement.”

However, with the opening volleys of the new period of confrontation between labor and capital here at home and the decline of *detente* between the United States and the Soviet Union, the CPUSA will, undoubtedly, once again be compelled to don a new and militant mask and perform new political acrobatics in the arena of the Negro national-colonial question.