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February 25, 1975

TO ALL NATIONAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dear Comrades,

Enclosed is a copy of a letter that I wrote to a comrade in India in the course of a discussion between us on the national question in India. The discussion was initiated around a draft article he had written on this subject. While written from that specific point of view, his article highlighted several important aspects of the national question of a more general character, including points relevant to the United States. These include such questions as whether a multi-national state is historically "abnormal"; the distinction between a state and a nation; the process of nation-formation; the criteria to define a nation, a nationality, and a national minority; the distinction between self-determination, national autonomy and cultural autonomy, and the conditions under which these are applicable.

Several of the points in this discussion may be of interest to the National Committee. I have edited and abridged my original letter to eliminate secondary points of limited interest. The comrade in India is still working on his article, and it is not yet completed in a form that he wishes to have published.

Comradely,

Gus Horowitz

Gus Horowitz

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New York
September 19, 1974

India

Dear S.,

Here are the observations I promised to send you on the document, "Critical Remarks on the National Question in India." I venture these observations with hesitation, due to my lack of knowledge about India. Some suggestions below are made with the idea that the "Critical Remarks..." document might be published, and thus certain points would require more explanation for a non-Indian audience. And, on some of the more general theoretical questions, I became inspired to write at length to clarify my own thought....

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A multinational state [like India] is not an abnormality; on the contrary, it is quite common. There are no "ideal" completely homogeneous nation-states. Everywhere there are internal national, socio-religious, or ethnic divisions; these are a result of historically created unevenness.

Even in the very long-established bourgeois nation-states, there are big national divisions. Some of them have become well known because of the rise of national struggles for self-determination: Blacks and Chicanos in the USA, the Irish people, the Basque people in Spain, the Quebecois people in Canada, and others. In addition to these well-known examples, we can see the continued existence of national minorities in many countries that are socially rather homogeneous: the Bretons and others in France, the Scots and Welsh in Britain, etc. There are important disparities (regional, ethnic or cultural) in even the most seemingly "homogeneous" countries like Germany. An interesting article on this type of situation in Jura, Switzerland, can be found in the July 15, 1974 issue of Intercontinental Press.

What is unusual about India, I think, is the great specific weight of the national question, stemming from the division of the state of India into so many sizable nationalities. This contrasts with the usual situation in which there is one nationality preponderant....

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[The draft says that] India "is a state or a nation..." Well, it certainly is a state, but is India also a nation? The answer to this important question is not obvious to me. For example, there is a Soviet state, but is there a Soviet nation? Certainly not in the sense that there is a French nation. Or look at another type of development: there is an Arab nation (more accurately, an Arab nationality), but not yet a pan-Arab state.

Often there are several distinct processes going on at the same time. Which becomes dominant is determined by the vicissitudes

of history. The Arab nationality includes a very strong tendency towards becoming one single nation; but the present division into separate Arab states, however much it originated as an artificial construct of imperialism, itself introduces a dynamic towards the evolution of separate nationalities.

In the Spanish-speaking areas of Latin America, can we speak of one nation, or of many nations? The truth is probably that there is a combination of both: an up-to-now dominant tendency toward reinforcement of separate nationalities, and a possible historical variant of the formation of one nationality. (Note also, that there are also many non-Spanish-speaking, native American peoples in these areas.)

Both processes (or even more than two) can be dialectically combined at the same time. I think it is most accurate to speak of Palestinian Arabs, for example, not only as Arabs by nationality, but also as Palestinians by nationality. Both processes are going on simultaneously.

With this in mind, would it make sense to speak of someone as both a Gujarati by nationality and an Indian by nationality? Are both processes going on? Or is India more analogous to the Soviet Union in this regard; that is, can India be considered a coercive federal union of separate nations, but definitely not one nation? There are, of course, important differences between the Soviet Union and India. India has a far older history than the Soviet Union and the Czarist Empire; centralization on the state level has existed in India for a long time, reinforcing many elements of a common cultural heritage throughout the sub-continent.

An interesting point to keep in mind: in the present era a coercive union will usually foster the perpetuation of national divisions, but a voluntary union should eventually lead to the merging of nationalities. The latter is our socialist perspective, although we do recognize that it will take many years.

The question is interesting from the point of view of an observer far removed from the actual situation. In the United States, most people are unfamiliar with India, and tend to think of the inhabitants of India as one nationality, mainly because there is a state of India. At the same time, they tend to think of the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Latin America as distinct peoples, because they live in separate states. Yet the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Latin America all speak the same language, while the inhabitants of India speak different languages...

Is the Hindi language imposed on the non-Hindi-speaking people of the South with a greater degree of coercion than on the non-Hindi-speaking people of the North? If so, perhaps this should be explained. Outside India, it is not widely known that the northern Indian languages are closely related to each other, but are quite distant from the southern languages...

It would [also] be useful, for the benefit of a non-Indian audience, to explain which nationalities and regions are favored in the central governmental apparatus. Another interesting point can perhaps be made here too: while there is favoritism toward Hindi-speakers in the governmental apparatus, the Hindi regions are economically less advanced than some other areas of India. This

anomaly is not unique to India, by the way. In Spain the Castilians, and in Yugoslavia the Serbs are the politically dominant nationalities, but they are less advanced economically than some of the other nationalities in these countries. There are other examples as well....

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I think that the "classic criterion" defining a nation has been proved inadequate. For example, Blacks in the United States do not live in a common territory, and their common language is English, yet they are most definitely a distinct nationality.

One cannot define a nationality by easy schema. There are a variety of factors that must be taken into account--in their totality--in determining if a group is a nationality. Among these factors, a group's self-consciousness is perhaps most important. The existence of a common history and common language may be the most important factors shaping that self-consciousness. But a common language need not be unique: there are many distinct Spanish-speaking, French-speaking, and English-speaking nationalities. Territoriality is important, but not essential--it is the totality that is decisive.

By the way, if common language were an absolute requirement of nationality, then you would have to say that Indians are not a nationality; you would have to say that while there are citizens of the Indian state and residents of the Indian subcontinent, there is not an Indian people. This is an interesting question, because India is not unique. For example, Belgium is composed primarily of Flemish-speaking and French-speaking people. Switzerland is composed primarily of German-speaking, French-Speaking and Italian-speaking people. Is there such a thing as a Belgian or a Swiss nationality?

To help make the discussion clear, I should point out the way in which I prefer to use the terms, "nation," "nationality," and "national minority."

I think it is useful to think of a nationality as a nation-in-formation, and a nation as a nationality which has established a sovereign nation-state. Thus, the French people can be considered a nation, whereas Black people in the United States are a nationality.

A distinction is necessary because a nation-in-formation may not necessarily ever form its own nation-state. Whether or not Black people presently living in the United States eventually form their own nation-state cannot be predicted. Separatist sentiment is a minority sentiment among Black people, but it is not insignificant. Only history will tell. Thus, the SWP calls for the right of Black people to self-determination, but we do not now advocate separation.

Among some oppressed nationalities (nations-in-formation) the tendency towards forming a nation-state can be so strong that we advocate that position (going beyond defense of the right of self-determination). We advocate independence for Puerto Rico, Angola, and Quebec; we advocate the unification of Ireland and of the Arab people. Perhaps these nationalities could be called nations, in

anticipation of the future. But history is so full of surprises that I would urge caution in doing so. The very act of forming a nation-state, and undergoing a process of historical development as a sovereign nation-state, is, I think, essential in making the qualitative leap from nationality to nation. In the absence of forming a nation-state other historical variants are possible (for example, the division of the German people into Germany and Austria, or the division between the Latin American nations.)

In some cases, a nationality may be so small, or have undergone a historical development such that the question of its forming a separate nation-state is not considered a serious question by the nationality itself. In such cases, however, the question of achieving national autonomy (as distinct from independence) is usually a relevant issue. (Note that there can be various degrees of national autonomy.)

I have deliberately linked the definitions with our policy on the national question. I think that the description of a group as a nationality should be tied to the posing of the question of self-determination or national autonomy (leaving aside the special case of oppressor nationalities). That is, a group can be considered a nationality when the question of possibly forming a separate nation-state or winning national autonomy is posed as a realistic variant of development.

This leaves the question of national minorities. Usually this term has been applied to members of a recognized nation or nationality living as minorities in a country other than their homeland.

Sometimes this applies to immigrant workers temporarily resident in another country. For example, in Europe there are large numbers of Spanish, Portuguese, Algerian, Italian, Turkish and Yugoslav workers living and working in countries other than their own. It is widely assumed that almost all will return to their countries of origin after several years. But it would be wise not to be too categorical about this assumption.

The term national minority is also applied to the first few generations of long-term immigrants to a country: for example, the Irish, Poles, Russians, and Italians in past years in the United States. These groups have become assimilated, and I doubt that it is correct to describe them today as national minorities. They are sometimes called "ethnic groups."

But assimilation does not always occur. In Britain, the immigrants from the Indian subcontinent are strongly oppressed, and may not become assimilated. In the United States, the Chicanos, who originate partly as descendants of the nineteenth century inhabitants of the Southwest prior to its takeover by the expanding United States and partly from more recent immigrants from Mexico, have not been assimilated. Instead, they have developed into a distinct nationality (different than Mexicans).

At present, the Puerto Rican immigrants in the U.S. are an oppressed national minority. It is not yet clear whether: 1. they will remain a national minority in the U.S., belonging to the same nationality as Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico; 2. they will develop

into a distinct nationality like the Chicanos; 3. they will become assimilated; 4. most will return to Puerto Rico, as European immigrant workers are expected to do. (I think that the last two alternatives are very unlikely.)

In some cases, national minorities have existed as such for many years without being assimilated. Sometimes they play a specific socio-economic role, not always at the bottom of the ladder: the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Indians in East Africa, the Armenians in the Middle East, the Germans in Eastern Europe.

Following the method I mentioned earlier, the appropriate policy of Marxists with regard to oppressed national minorities is to call for national autonomy. There can be varying degrees of national autonomy, depending on the specific circumstances. National autonomy can include those elements of governmental administration that fall short of control over a separate state (self-determination). But national autonomy, like self-determination, refers to questions of government, which are applicable in relation to national groups. It should be distinguished from cultural autonomy, which can be applicable in relation to ethnic or socio-religious groups, as well as national groups.

Perhaps it is a little artificial to speak of three separate categories (nation, nationality, national minority). Perhaps we might better speak of one category, that of nationality, of which there are two special types: 1. nations, in cases where a nationality has formed its own sovereign nation-state; 2. national minorities, who live in countries other than the one to whose nationality they belong.

The most important thing, of course, is not the term or the definition, but the policies and demands we put forward in this area. For us, the question is definitely not academic.

It is also important to realize that we are not talking about categories that are fixed for all time, or that are mutually exclusive. A group that begins as a national minority (Mexican inhabitants of the American Southwest, for example) can evolve into a nationality (Chicanos) distinct from its original one. Because a dialectical process is going on, a group can belong to more than one category at the same time (Palestinian Arabs, for example). An ethnic group or a socio-religious group can develop into a nationality (East European Jews, for example)...[Similarly in India,] the very predominance of the Muslim religion in areas like Sind and Baluchistan was an important factor in shaping these peoples as distinct nationalities.

Aside from the large nationalities that are mentioned in the document, such as the Andhras, Malayalis, etc., many smaller groups are left out. The Eighth Schedule to the constitution of India lists 15 major languages spoken in India. But that does not tell the whole story. The 1961 census lists 1,652 mother tongues in India, of which only 103 are non-Indian! Doesn't this indicate that there are some significant national minorities, in addition to the major nationalities in India?

Of course, most of these mother tongues are probably spoken

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by very few people; many are undoubtedly tribal languages. Perhaps the term "ethnic groups" is most appropriate in these cases. I confess, however, that I tend to dislike this term, because it is used so often by bourgeois sociologists to cover up the existence of a national question.

We should look at these cases very carefully. After all, it is precisely out of "ethnic" groups, and also out of "socio-religious" groups that nationalities are often created. It is a matter of trying to determine when the qualitative step has been taken from an "ethnic" or "socio-religious" group into a "nationality." This process is not historically completed. One of the effects of the Bolshevik revolution, for example, was the flowering of national self-consciousness among some groups in the Soviet areas of Asia that had not previously been classified as nationalities, but were thought of more as "ethnic" or "socio-religious" groups....

Regards,

Gus Horowitz