
Report on the Negro Question: Speech to the 4th Congress of the Comintern, Nov. 1922.

by Claude McKay

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Comrade McKay: Comrades, I feel that I would rather face a lynching stake in civilized America than try to make a speech before the most intellectual and critical audience in the world. I belong to a race of creators but my public speaking has been so bad that I have been told by my own people that I should never try to make speeches, but stick to writing, and laughing. However, when I heard the Negro question was going to be brought up on the floor of the Congress, I felt it would be an eternal shame if I did not say something on behalf of the members of my race. Especially would I be a disgrace to the American Negroes because, since I published a notorious poem in 1919 ["If We Must Die"], I have been pushed forward as one of the spokesmen of Negro radicalism in America to the detriment of my poetical temperament. I feel that my race is honored by this invitation to one of its members to speak at this Fourth Congress of the Third International. My race on this occasion is honored, not because it is different from the white race and the yellow race, but [because it] is especially a race of toilers, hewers of wood and drawers of water, that belongs to the most oppressed, exploited, and suppressed section of the working class of the world. The Third International

stands for the emancipation of all the workers of the world, regardless of race or color, and this stand of the Third International is not merely on paper like the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. It is a real thing.

The Negro race in the economic life of the world today occupies a very peculiar position. In every country where the Whites and Blacks must



work together the capitalists have set the one against the other. It would seem at the present day that the international bourgeoisie would use the Negro race as their trump card in their fight against the world revolution. Great Britain has her Negro regiments in the colonies and she has demonstrated what she can do with her Negro soldiers by the use that she made of them during the late War. The revolution in England is very far away be-

cause of the highly organized exploitation of the subject peoples of the British Empire. In Europe, we find that France had a Negro army of over 300,000 and that to carry out their policy of imperial domination in Europe the French are going to use their Negro minions.

In America we have the same situation. The Northern bourgeoisie knows how well the Negro soldiers fought for their own emancipation, although illiterate and untrained, during the Civil War. They also remember how well the Negro soldiers fought in the Spanish-American War under Theodore Roosevelt. They know that in the last war over 400,000 Negroes who were mobilized gave a very good account of themselves, and that, besides fighting for the capitalists, they also put up a very good fight for themselves on returning to America when they fought the white mobs in Chicago, St. Louis and Washington.

But more than the fact that the American capitalists are using Negro soldiers in their fight against the interests of labor is the fact that the American capitalists are setting out to mobilize the entire black race of America for the purpose of fighting organized labor. The situation in America today is terrible and fraught with grave dangers. It is much uglier and more terrible than was the condition of the peasants and Jews of Russia under the Tsar. It is so ugly and terrible that very few people in America are willing to face it. The reformist bourgeoisie have been carrying on the battle against discrimination and racial prejudice in America. The Socialists and Communists have fought very shy of it because there is a great element of prejudice among the Socialists and Communists of America. They are not willing to face the Negro question. In associating with the comrades of America I have found demonstrations of prejudice on the various occasions when the White and Black comrades had to get together: and this is the greatest difficulty that the Communists of America have got to overcome—the fact that they first have got to emancipate themselves from the

ideas they entertain towards the Negroes before they can be able to reach the Negroes with any kind of radical propaganda. However, regarding the Negroes themselves, I feel that as the subject races of other nations have come to Moscow to learn how to fight against their exploiters, the Negroes will also come to Moscow. In 1918 when the Third International published its Manifesto and included the part referring to the exploited colonies, there were several groups of Negro radicals in America that sent this propaganda out among their people. When in 1920 the American government started to investigate and to suppress radical propaganda among the Negroes, the small radical groups in America retaliated by publishing the fact that the Socialists stood for the emancipation of the Negroes, and that reformist America could do nothing for them. Then, I think, for the first time in American history, the American Negroes found that Karl Marx had been interested in their emancipation and had fought valiantly for it. I shall just read this extract that was taken from Karl Marx's writing at the time of the Civil War:

When an oligarchy of 300,000 slave holders for the first time in the annals of the world, dared to inscribe "Slavery" on the banner of armed revolt, on the very spot where hardly a century ago, the idea of one great democratic republic had first sprung up, whence the first declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth-century, when on that spot the counter-revolution cynically proclaimed property in man to be "the cornerstone of the new edifice" — then the working class of Europe understood at once that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy war of property against labor, and that (its) hopes of the future, even its past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic.

Karl Marx who drafted the above resolution is generally known as the father of Scientific Socialism and also of the epoch-making volume popularly known as the socialist bible, *Capital*. During the Civil War he was correspondent of the *New York Tribune*. In the company of Richard

Cobden, Charles Bradlaugh, the atheist, and John Bright, he toured England making speeches and so roused up the sentiment of the workers of that country against the Confederacy that Lord Palmerston, [the] Prime Minister, who was about to recognize the South, had to desist.

As Marx fought against chattel slavery in 1861, so are present-day socialists, his intellectual descendants, fighting wage slavery.

If the Workers Party in America were really a Workers Party that included Negroes it would, for instance, in the South, have to be illegal, and I would inform the American Comrades that there is a branch of the Workers Party in the South, in Richmond, Virginia, that is illegal — illegal because it includes colored members. There we have a very small group of white and colored comrades working together, and the fact that they have laws in Virginia and most of the Southern states discriminating against whites and blacks assembling together means that the Workers Party in the South must be illegal. To get round these laws of Virginia, the comrades have to meet separately, according to color, and about once a month they assemble behind closed doors.

This is just an indication of the work that will have to be done in the South. The work among the Negroes of the South will have to be carried on by some legal propaganda organized in the North, because we find at the present time in America that the situation in the Southern States (where nine million out of ten million of the Negro population live), is that even the liberal bour-

geoisie and the petty bourgeoisie among the Negroes cannot get their own papers of a reformist propaganda type into the South on account of the laws that there discriminate against them. The fact is that it is really only in the Southern States that there is any real suppression of opinion. No suppression of opinion exists in the Northern states in the way it exists in the South. In the Northern states special laws are made for special occasions — as those against Communists and Socialists during the War — but in the South we find laws that have existed for fifty years, under which the Negroes cannot meet to talk about their grievances. The white people who are interested in their cause cannot go and speak to them. If we send white comrades into the South they are generally ordered out by the Southern oligarchy and if they do not leave they are generally whipped, tarred and feathered; and if we send black comrades into the South they generally won't be able to get out again — they will be lynched and burned at the stake.

I hope that as a symbol that the Negroes of the world will not be used by the international bourgeoisie in the final conflicts against the World Revolution, that as a challenge to the international bourgeoisie, who have an understanding of the Negro question, we shall soon see a few Negro soldiers in the finest, bravest, and cleanest fighting forces in the world — the Red Army and Navy of Russia — fighting not only for their own emancipation, but also for the emancipation of all the working class of the whole world.

*Transcribed by William Maxwell for the Modern American Poetry website.
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*For further information on Claude McKay and his role, see Dr. Maxwell's book,
New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars.
(New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).*

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