

---

# American Negro Problems.

by John Pepper

Published as a pamphlet by Workers Library Publishers, New York, 1928.

## Foreword:

### The Communist Fight for the Negro Cause

The two major capitalist parties, the Republican and Democratic, and their small brother, the Socialist Party, have an unwritten "gentleman's agreement" on the Negro question. According to this sacred "gentleman's agreement," which no capitalist politician has dared to violate in the present election campaign, there is no Negro question in the United States, there are no problems of social and political equality, no questions of discrimination against the Negro masses. During the whole course of the election campaign there has been only one political party which has had the courage to violate this "gentleman's agreement" to keep a deathly silence on the Negro question. The Workers (Communist) Party of America has come out in its election platform and in its whole election struggle as the fearless champion of the Negro masses.

The southern states are stirred up by the political struggle of the communist speakers and organizers for the Negro masses. Communist anti-lynching leaflets are being distributed everywhere.

The candidates of the Communist Party are everywhere putting up a courageous fight for the full social and political equality of the Negro race.

The meetings of the Communist Party have been broken up in Arizona, in Texas, in Delaware, and in other southern states, because the communist spokesmen dared to tackle the Negro question and were bold enough to call the Negro workers to their meetings.

The Ku Klux Klan, the American Legion, the forces of police and other organs of governmental terrorism are mobilized everywhere against the communists, because the Communist Party is the only party

of the working class and of the oppressed Negro masses.

One, if not the most outstanding, feature of the election campaign of 1928 is the fact that communist speakers, organizers, and candidates for President, Vice-President, and Governor are being jailed everywhere because of their uncompromising struggle for the Negroes.

To this brief foreword to the following essay on some of the basic Negro problems in America, we wish to add the principal demands for the oppressed Negro masses as embodied in the Platform of the Workers (Communist) Party of America:

1. Abolition of the whole system of race discrimination. Full racial, political, and social equality for the Negro race.
2. Abolition of all laws which result in segregation of Negroes. Abolition of all Jim Crow laws. The law shall forbid all discrimination against Negroes in selling or renting houses.
3. Abolition of all laws which disfranchise the Negroes.
4. Abolition of laws forbidding intermarriage of persons of different races.
5. Abolition of all laws and public administration measures which prohibit, or in practice prevent, Negro children or youth from attending general public schools or universities.
6. Full and equal admittance of Negroes to all railway station waiting rooms, restaurants, hotels, and theatres.
7. Federal law against lynching and the protection of the Negro masses in their right of self-defense.
8. Abolition of discrimination practices in courts against Negroes. No discrimination in jury service.
9. Abolition of the convict lease system and of the chain-gang.
10. Abolition of all Jim Crow distinction in the army, navy, and civil service.
11. Immediate removal of all restrictions in all trade unions against the membership of Negro workers.
12. Equal opportunity for employment, wages, hours, and working conditions for Negro and white workers. Equal pay for equal work for Negro and white workers.

—J.P.

## AMERICAN NEGRO PROBLEMS

The Negro question in America must be treated in its relation to the liberation struggle of the proletariat against American imperialism. *The struggle against white oppression of the Negro masses is a part of the proletarian revolution in America against capitalism.* The American working class cannot free itself from capitalist exploitation without freeing the Negro race from white oppression. What Marx said about the United States is still true: "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

*At the same time the Negro question in the United States of America must be treated in its relations to the huge Negro masses of farmers and workers oppressed and exploited by white imperialism in Africa and South America.* The Negroes of the United States are the most advanced section of the Negro population of the world and can play a decisive role in helping and leading the liberation movement of the Negro colonies. Within the Negro population of the United States, the *Negro working class* is destined to be the vanguard of all liberation movements and may become the vanguard of the liberation movement of the Negro peasant masses on an international scale.

### A Negro Proletariat Appears.

The industrialization of the agrarian south of the United States, the concentration of a new Negro working-class population in the big cities of the east and north, and the entrance of the Negroes into the basic industries on a mass scale, have been changing, in the last few years, the whole social composition of the Negro race in America. *The appearance of a genuine Negro industrial proletariat creates an organizing force for the Negro race,* furnishes a new working-class leadership to all Negro race movements, creates the possibility for the Negro workers under the leadership of the Communist Party to assume the hegemony of the Negro liberation movement, strengthens immensely the fighting possibilities for the emancipation of the Negro race and increases the importance of the Negro question for the revolutionary struggle of the American proletariat.

American imperialism oppresses in the most terrific way the nearly 11 million Negroes who consti-

tute not less than one-tenth of the country's total population. White capitalist prejudice considers the Negro race a "lower race," the born servants of the lofty white masters. *The racial caste system is a fundamental feature of the social, industrial and political organization of the United States.*

The Workers (Communist) Party of America, in its fight against imperialism, must recognize clearly the tremendous revolutionary possibilities of the liberation movement of the Negro people. Today the "solid south," the millions of Negro farmers of the "black belt," living under the most oppressive conditions, "half-feudal, half-slave" (Lenin) constitute one of the props of American imperialism. It is the basic duty of the Communist Party to develop all revolutionary possibilities of the Negro race, to transform the "solid south" and the "black belt" from "reserves of forces for the bourgeoisie into reserves of forces for the proletariat" (Stalin). *The Communist Party must consider itself not only the Party of the working class generally, but also the champion of the Negroes as an oppressed race and especially the organizer of the Negro working-class elements.* The Communist Party cannot be a real Bolshevik Party without being also the Party of the liberation of the Negro race from all white oppression.

### The Solid South — An American Colony.

The Negro tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and agricultural workers of the south are still, despite all the pompous phrases of "freeing the slaves," in the status of virtual slavery. They have not the slightest prospect of ever acquiring possession of the land on which they work. By means of a usurious credit system they are chained to the plantation owners as firmly as plantation slaves. Peonage and contract labor are the fate of the Negro cotton farmers. The bankers of the east and the south are increasingly becoming the landowners. The *landowners*, who are at the same time the *merchants*, having a monopoly of marketing the crops of the Negro tenant farmers, and of the government in the south, rule over the Negroes with a merciless dictatorship.

The most backward half-feudal, half-slave methods of exploitation by the plantation owners, are merged in the south with the most modern forms of

capitalist exploitation by the huge trusts and banks of financial capital. No other section of the American toiling masses feels the ruthless capitalist dictatorship of the much-vaunted American bourgeois democracy more than the oppressed Negro masses. The Negroes of the south are disfranchised politically. Sheer force prevents the Negroes from exercising their so-called political rights. Lynch law is the law over the Negroes. The terror of the Ku Klux Klan is the constitution for the Negroes. Most infamous segregation policies prevail everywhere against them. The white masters try to reduce the Negroes to illiteracy.

The "black belt" of the south, with its starving and pauperized Negro farmers, and Negro agricultural working masses; with its Jim-Crowism, its semi-feudal status and its political system still bearing the earmarks of the period of slavery, *constitutes virtually a colony within the body of the United States of America.* The super-profits extracted from this Negro "colony" are one of the most important sources of the growth of American imperialism; the oppression of the Negro race is one of the most important bases of the government apparatus of American capitalism. The prejudices created in the minds of large sections of the white workers against the Negroes are the most dangerous obstacles to the unity of the American working class.

### Class Differentiation of the Negroes.

*A sharp class differentiation has taken place in the Negro population in recent years.* Formerly the Negro was in the main the cotton farmer in the south and the domestic help in the north. The peasantry (the Negro farm owners, the share-croppers, the Negro tenant farmers) and the agricultural workers are still the largest stratum of the Negro race. Out of eight million Negroes in the south, there are six million still on the land. In the big cities and industrial centres of the north there is concentrated to a growing degree a Negro working-class population. There are already one and one-half to two million Negroes in industry in the north. At the same time there is a rapid development of a Negro petit-bourgeoisie, a Negro intelligentsia and even a *Negro bourgeoisie*. The very fact of segregation of the Negro masses creates the basis for the

development of a stratum of small merchants, lawyers, physicians, preachers, brokers, who try to attract the Negro workers and farmers as consumers. There is no Negro *industrial* bourgeoisie. Predominance of white trusts restricts the young and weak Negro bourgeoisie to the fields of trade and second-rate banking.

*It would be a major mistake to overlook the existence of class differences among the Negroes, especially the crystallization of a Negro bourgeoisie.* There were in 1924, 73 Negro banks, carrying an annual volume of business of over \$100,000,000. There are 25 Negro insurance companies; 14 of these have assets totalling \$6,000,000 and during 1926 alone paid over \$3,000,000 in claims. *This Negro bourgeoisie is closely tied up with the white bourgeoisie; is often the agent of the white capitalists.* Economically the Negro banks are often part of the Federal Reserve System of banking.

Politically the Negro bourgeoisie is participating, to a growing degree, in the so-called "committees for interracial cooperation." These committees exist in eight hundred counties of the south and are spreading all through the "black belt." But the ideological and organizational bearer of the national racial movement of the Negroes is today rather the intelligentsia and petit-bourgeoisie.

### Proletarianization and Pauperization of the Farmer.

*There is a growing process of disintegration going on among the Negro farmers.* Ever larger sections are transformed into agricultural workers (2,000,000) and hundreds of thousands of Negro farmers and agricultural workers desert their lands and migrate to the big cities and industrial centres. This migration is not only to the industrial centres and big cities of the east and north, but also to the rising industrial centres of the south. There is even migration from the plantations to the villages of the south where there is a non-agrarian Negro population of about two millions.

Lenin pointed out back in 1913, as one of the foremost characteristics of the southern rural areas, the fact that *"its population is deserting it."* The disintegration of the Negro peasantry means partly *proletarianization* of the Negro share-croppers,† partly

† "A cropper is a tenant who works the land for his landlord without supplying any of the working capital, *but he might almost as well be regarded as a laborer who accepts a share of the crop as his wages...* The payment for their services in the form of a share of

*pauperization* of the Negro masses. In the past the south has had a stratum of "poor whites," today it is developing a new stratum of "poor blacks" — driven completely outside the process of production.

The southern plantation owners and their government have tried to hold the Negro farmers and agricultural workers in the southern cotton fields by force, but even their brutal terror has not been able to stop the mighty migration from the Cotton plantations to the industrial centres. *This migration is an "unarmed Spartacist uprising" against slavery and oppression by a capitalist and feudal oligarchy.* The Negro has fled from the south, but what has he found in the north? He has found in the company towns and industrial centres of the north and east a wage slavery virtually not better than the contract slavery in the south. He has found crowded, unsanitary slums. He has exchanged the old segregation for a new segregation in the worst sections of the cities. He is doing the most dangerous, worst-paid, unskilled work in the steel, coal and packing industries. *He has found the racial prejudice of a narrow white labor aristocracy* which refuses to recognize the unskilled Negro worker as its equal. He has found the treachery of the bureaucracy of the AF of L, which refuses to organize the Negro workers into trade unions; he has found betrayal by the renegade Socialist Party which capitulated completely to white chauvinism. The lynchings of the south have their counterpart in the race riots of the east. The employing class deliberately arouses the racial hatred and prejudices of the white workers against the Negro workers with the sinister aim of splitting and dividing the ranks of the working class, thereby maintaining the exploitation and oppression of both the white and Negro workers.

### **The Slogan of Self-Determination.**

The Workers (Communist) Party of America puts forward correctly as its central slogan: *Abolition of the whole system of race discrimination. Full racial, social, and political equality for the Negro people.* But it is necessary to supplement the struggle for the full racial, social and political equality of the Negroes with a

struggle for their right of national self-determination. Self-determination means the right to establish their own state, to erect their own government, if they choose to do so. *In the economic and social conditions and class relations of the Negro people there are increasing forces which serve as a basis for the development of a Negro nation (a compact mass of farmers on a contiguous territory, semi-feudal conditions, complete segregation, common traditions of slavery, the development of distinct classes and economic ties, etc., etc.).* It is true, the Negro people in the United States have not their own language as distinct from the language of the oppressing white nation; but there is a certain amount of special Negro culture; there is still alive the Common, deep-rooted tradition of the bitter centuries of slavery; there is developing a new Negro literature and press.

*First of all, we must consider the compact Negro farming masses of the "black belt" as the potential basis for a national liberation movement of the Negroes and as the basis for the realization of its right of self-determination of a Negro state.* Despite growing migration to the north, in 1920 there were still over 3,000,00 Negroes who constituted a majority of the population in 219 counties over a contiguous area in the "black belt." There are many national movements of the Negro city petit-bourgeoisie and intelligentsia. The fact that the most important mass movement of this kind, the Garvey movement, was a sort of Negro Zionism and has such reactionary, extremely harmful slogans as leaving the United States and back to Africa, should not blind us to the revolutionary possibilities of the Negro national liberation movements of the future. It is unquestionable that first of all the Negro farmers can be the basis of a Negro national liberation movement of the future, despite the fact that today the Negro farming masses of the south are so oppressed that they do not, yet show any signs of national awakening.

*The Negro national liberation movement has tremendous revolutionary potentialities,* despite the fact that at the outset its bearer will likely be the rural and urban petit-bourgeoisie. Lenin has stated: "There can be no doubt that all nationalist movements cannot be but bourgeois-democratic movements." But the knowl-

---

production rather than in the form of a stated weekly or a monthly wage is the part of a plan whereby the landlord is able to insure himself of their continued services throughout the season.... In other words, *while tenancy in theory represents merely a method of holding possession of the land, in practice it sometimes works out into a method of obtaining laborers to work on the land.*" Goldweiser and Truesdell, *Farm Tenancy in the United States*. Census Monographs IV. Washington, 1927).

edge of this fact did not prevent Lenin and the C. I. from recognizing the tremendous unexhausted revolutionary possibilities of the national liberation movement of the colonies and oppressed nations and races generally. *As the national liberation movement grows, the Negro proletariat will play an increasing role in it and will struggle for the hegemony over it.* There is a certain amount of assimilation going on among the Negro industrial workers in the north and east. The Negro worker works shoulder to shoulder with the white worker in the factories and plants, but at the same time it is necessary to recognize that there is practically no social contact between these workers. *The social and residential segregation of the Negro workers in the north is complete and manifests an increasing tendency.* Veritable Negro cities are being created in Harlem, New York, and on the south side of Chicago. This segregation of the Negro working class creates an economic basis for the development of a Negro petty-bourgeoisie even in the north and east, which loads additional exploitation onto the backs of the Negro workers and as a result of this distinct development, strengthens the basis of the Negro national movement in the north and east.

*The Workers (Communist) Party of America must come out openly and unreservedly for the right of national self-determination for the Negroes, but at the same time the Communist Party must state sharply that the realization of this self-determination cannot be secured under the present relations of power under capitalism. National self-determination for the Negro is a bourgeois-democratic demand but it can be realized only in the course of the proletarian revolution. The abolition of the half-feudal, half-slave remnants in the south will also be only "a by-product" (Lenin) of the general proletarian revolution. It would be a major mistake to believe that there can be any other revolution in imperialist America, in the country of the most powerful, most centralized and concentrated industry, than a proletarian revolution.*

The Communist Party of America must recognize the right of national self-determination for the Negroes and must respect their own decision about the form of the realization of this self-determination. The Negro Communists should emphasize in their propaganda *the establishment of a Negro Soviet Republic.*

### **Against White Chauvinism.**

Not only the labor aristocracy but large sections of the American working class as a whole are permeated with *white chauvinism*. White chauvinism reflects itself in various forms even in some sections of the Communist Party itself. Individual comrades and even some local organizations have yielded occasionally to the racial prejudices of the white workers and retreated, instead of waging a courageous struggle against it. (Gary, Detroit, St. Paul, Harlem). The CEC of the Communist Party of America stated in its resolution of April 30th that "the Party as a whole has not sufficiently realized the significance of work among the Negroes and that such work should be considered not as a special task of the Negro comrades, but as one of the special revolutionary tasks of every communist, of the whole Party."

It is imperative to begin outside and inside the Communist Party a relentless campaign of self-criticism concerning the work among Negroes. All signs of white chauvinism must be ruthlessly uprooted from within the ranks of the Communist Party. In this aggressive fight against white chauvinism, the Party must carry on a widespread and thorough educational campaign within the Party utilizing for this purpose to the fullest possible extent, the Party schools, the Party press and the public platform to stamp out all forms of antagonism or even indifference among our white comrades towards the Negro work. This educational work should be conducted simultaneously with broad campaigns to draw the white workers and the poor white farmers into the struggle for the support of the demands of the Negro workers and tenant farmers.

*The struggle against white chauvinism must be combined with the struggle for genuine internationalism in the ranks of the working class and in the ranks of the Communist Party.* The Communist Party of America must emphasize in all its campaigns the solidarity of the white and black workers. In the ranks of the Communist Party there can be no place for nationalism. The Communist Party must be the Party of internationalism.

### **Tasks of the Communists in Negro Work.**

*The appearance of a Negro industrial proletariat*

on a growing national mass scale makes it imperative that the main emphasis of the Party work should be placed on these new proletarian forces. The Negro workers must be organized under the leadership of the Communist Party and drawn into joint struggle, together with the white workers. The Party must understand how to link up all racial, national demands of the Negroes with the economic and political struggles of the workers and poor farmers. Much more emphasis than before must be laid on the trade-union organization of the Negroes. The Party must penetrate all existing Negro trade unions. It is a basic task of the Communist Party to organize the Negroes into trade unions. In all the work of organizing the unorganized carried on under the leadership of the Communist Party, we must insist upon the inclusion of Negro workers with white workers in the newly organized trade unions. In the existing trade unions, the Party must fight for the admittance of Negro workers. Where the labor bureaucracy refuses to admit Negroes, it is the duty of the Communist Party to organize Negro trade unions. At the same time the principle of one union for each industry, embracing white as well as Negro workers, should be the aim of the Communist Party.

The importance of trade-union work imposes special tasks upon the TUEL. The TUEL has neglected the work among the Negroes, notwithstanding the fact that these workers are objectively in a position to play a very big part in carrying through the program of organizing the unorganized. Greater contact must be established between the TUEL and the Negro masses. The TUEL must become the champion of the rights of the Negroes in the old unions and in the organizing of new unions for Negroes and whites, as well as separate Negro unions.

It is one of the biggest tasks of the Workers Party to extend its activities to the "Solid South," the beginning, of which has been made in the election campaign. The Party was not able to carry on any work among the Negro farmers and agricultural workers of the "black belt." It is the duty of the Party to study and analyze the conditions of the Negro farming masses, to work out demand to meet their situation, to organize special Negro farmers' organizations as well as organizations of the agricultural workers. It is necessary that the Party should establish new district organization in the south, especially in the most impor-

tant industrial centres. The Party organizations in these industrial centers of the south should be the bearers of the educational and organizing work of the Party among the Negro farmers and agricultural workers.

The fight against segregation, lynching, and political disfranchisement of the Negroes, must be organized. *It is necessary to help the Negro masses to organize themselves for active resistance and self defense against the lynching terror of the Ku Klux Klan* and similar terroristic gangs of the white bourgeoisie. The ILD, which so far has almost completely neglected work amongst the Negro masses, must hereafter put in the forefront of its propaganda, agitation and activities, energetic campaigns against lynching and juridical oppression of the Negroes.

*The communists must participate in all national liberation movements of the Negroes, which have a real mass character.* The existing national organizations and movements of the Negroes are today under the domination of the Negro petit-bourgeoisie and even their bourgeoisie. *The aim of the Communist Party must be to fight for the hegemony of the working-class elements in the national liberation movement.* The basic task of the communists is to form working-class organizations for the Negro proletariat and agricultural workers, and farmers' organizations for the Negro farmers and to turn these organizations into energetic integral forces of it whole class struggle. The communists must not forget for moment that *the struggle for the national liberation of the Negro includes the relentless struggle against the Negro bourgeoisie and the struggle against the influence of the petit-bourgeoisie over the Negro proletariat.* It is permissible to form a united front (for example in the form of a Negro Race Congress) of the working class elements with the petit-bourgeois elements. The policy of the communists within this united front must be:

- (a) To free the working class from the ideological and organizational influence of the petit-bourgeois elements.
- (b) To begin the struggle for the leadership of the working class.

The communists must bear in mind that the alliance of the Negro working class with the Negro petit-bourgeoisie can be maintained only under the following conditions:

(a) A revolutionary fight of the petit-bourgeoisie for Negro race demands against American imperialism.

(b) No obstacles by the petit-bourgeoisie against the special class demands and organizations of time Negro workers and exploited farmers.

The communists must under no circumstances merge their organization with the petit-bourgeois organizations and must reserve for themselves fullest rights of criticism and propaganda.

The American Negro Labor Congress which is still very weak, must be reorganized and activated. The communists working within this organization should try to make it serve as an *intermediary mass organization, as a medium through which the Party can extend its work among the Negro masses and mobilize the Negro workers under its leadership.* After careful preparatory work which must be started at once, another convention of the American Negro Labor Congress should be held. For this convention a carefully worked-out program should be prepared. It should contain not only demands of the Negro workers, but also the agrarian demands of the farmers and agricultural workers.

The Negro miners' relief committee and the Harlem Tenants League are examples of united front organizations, which may be set up as a means of drawing the Negro masses into struggle. But these organizations can be considered only as a beginning. The communists working within these organizations should try to broaden them, and similar committees should be organized in other Negro centers. In every case the utmost effort must be made to combine the struggle of the Negro workers with that of white workers and to draw the white workers' organizations into such united front campaigns.

*One of the greatest shortcomings of the work of the American Party among the Negroes is the lack of sufficient Party cadres among the Negro comrades.* The next and most important task of the Party in this respect is the selection and education of a cadre of Negro communist workers. The proletarian character of the Negro

Party leadership must be brought forward more clearly than before.

At the same time the proletarian Negro intellectuals must be utilized to the full. It is imperative to utilize all Party schools in the U. S. A. and abroad to train Negro comrades as leaders and for special work among the Negro farming masses.

*The activities of the Negro comrades should not be confined exclusively to the work among the Negroes, but they should participate in the general Party work.* Simultaneously white comrades must be specially trained for work among the Negroes. The Negro Champion must be published regularly. Every effort must be made to develop it into the mass organ of the Negro workers and working farmers. The general Party press must be utilized to its full extent for propaganda among the Negroes. A regular Negro news service must be built. *The utmost effort must be made to attract Negro workers and Negro agricultural laborers as members into the Communist Party.* The present Negro membership of the Communist Party is inadequate to fulfill the great tasks before it. A special recruiting campaign for Negro workers should be initiated in connection with the general economic and political campaigns of the Party. In the present election campaign, wherever possible Negro communist candidates should be nominated in the important Negro centers.

The Negro question in the United States must be treated in its relation to the general international Negro problem. The question of a Negro World Congress should be considered but it can be realized only if a Negro working-class leadership in the Congress can be secured. One aim and purpose of the work among the Negroes in the USA should be to organize them as the champions of the Negroes all over the world, against imperialism. A strong Negro movement in the USA will be able to influence and direct the Negro movement in all those backward parts of the world where the Negroes are oppressed by the various imperialist powers.

*Transcribed by John "Birdman" Bryant.*

*This transcription originally appeared in html format on the website [www.thebirdman.org](http://www.thebirdman.org)  
Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2005. • Free reproduction permitted.*