

BACV

PROPOSED POSITION ON BLACK LIBERATION STRUGGLE

A correct communist strategy for the building of a revolutionary movement in the U.S. today must have as one of its most fundamental principles a recognition of the independent revolutionary significance of the Black people's struggle for equality and liberation. The special oppression of Black people as a people has been since slavery and remains today one of the most fundamental contradictions in the American capitalist system and therefore one of the, if not the, greatest wellsprings of revolutionary struggle.

In attempting to arrive at a correct theoretical and practical orientation toward the Black struggle the new communist movement has understandably found this question the most difficult to handle and many sharply differing analyses have developed. This is not surprising since there is no parallel in history or in any other country today to this particular form of class oppression.

and development

While we would agree with the assertion that on no other question is the dogmatism of today's movement more apparent than in relation to this question, we do feel that much valuable clarification of ideas has resulted. In fact, we see no point in duplicating much of that material here. In particular, the pamphlet "Black Liberation Today, Against Dogmatism on the National Question" by the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee does a more than adequate job in most respects, although there are some areas where we have disagreements. To give credit where credit is due, we believe also that the Revolutionary Communist Party, known at that time as the Revolutionary Union, made some valuable theoretical contributions, although they drew some seriously wrong theoretical and practical conclusions.

We should point out that many questions are not fully or anywhere near fully resolved by research and polemics alone but must also involve the development of social experience, particularly the experience of mass and intense political struggle. Unforeseen historical developments often wreak havoc on the most careful analyses. Most importantly, defining correctly the Black struggle is a necessary but certainly not sufficient condition for anyone to learn how to build a revolutionary movement among Black people. Here many more questions enter in, such as correct understanding of strategy and tactics, ability to integrate with and give leadership to the people, the ability to translate correct principles into a correct practical orientation and style of work. With these qualifications, we submit our views for discussion and criticism.

We believe that Black people today do not constitute a nation, in the commonly accepted meaning of the term, and feel that to compare the Black Struggle to that of a plainly "national" struggle can be confusing and harmful. Harmful because the Black struggle is much more integrally tied up with the overall class struggle than such a characterization would imply. Confusing because all sorts of inconsistent assertions have been made to give a false consistency to the definition of the Black people as a nation, particularly by those who feel they must defend the present applicability of the Communist International's resolution formulated almost fifty years ago.

The only justification for calling the Black ~~Struggle~~ people a nation is that of the historical development of the oppression of Black people, which was, in fact, a national development. While we do not believe the fact that Black people were once a nation is a satisfactory reason for continuing to define the question in that way, if, for those reasons, people, particularly Black people, choose to use the word "nation" we don't believe that particularly matters. What is important is the understanding of the aims of the movement, its character, its relationship to the overall class struggle.

We do not feel that to say that Black people do not constitute a nation, in the common understanding of the term, in any way diminishes the revolutionary significance of the Black struggle or has the implication of underestimating the degree of oppression that Black people, as a people, continue to face. Indeed, the most serious and persistent mistake that American Marxists have made in regard to this question has been the tendency to obscure the special and particular features of Black oppression. This mistake dates back to the beginnings of Marxism in this country, was consolidated in the views of the Socialist Labor Party and later the Socialist Party and has recurred many times since. A recent example is the approach of the Revolutionary Communist Party, which we will comment on later.

We will enumerate here a number of points that are necessary to our analysis and which are, in most cases, generally accepted by Marxists or, at least, well proven to our satisfaction in other material. We will not duplicate very much of the relevant statistical material because that can easily be obtained by the reader if necessary, at least in the sources already mentioned.

- 1) The plantation system in the South represented a barbaric semi-feudal form of class exploitation within the increasingly dominant capitalist world economy. This is not untypical of the relative backwardness of agriculture as compared to industry that in general exists under capitalism for very long periods of time and is still comparable today to the semi-feudal economy of a good part of the world, particularly of the third world countries, who fulfill a certain "division of labor" within the Imperialist world market, i.e. the cheap production of a single or very few crops or a limited variety of raw materials and are thereby relegated to economic backwardness and impoverishment.
- 2) The abolition of slavery did not fundamentally alter this semi-feudal class relationship. Only the breaking up of the plantations following the Civil War (or any time thereafter while the plantation system existed), the fulfillment of the common bourgeois democratic slogan of "land to the tiller", could have ended this semi-feudal class relationship and turned the former slaves into the free people of a democratic republic.
- 3) The need to maintain the great mass of Black people as slaves to the land prompted the deprivation of Black peoples' civil liberties and the imposition, in fact where not in name, of a racist status of inferior second class citizenship. This could only be enforced by the most brutal forms of lynchings and terror.
- 4) The sharecropping or tenant farming plantation economy provided the framework for the development of a consistent and stable community of people in the Black Belt area of the South, a people with a very strong common bond of oppression, geographically isolated and excluded by and large from economic and political participation in the life of the dominant nation, a separate Black Nation.
- 5) As long as the plantation economy dominated the Black Belt a basic bourgeois democratic demand remained of the greatest immediacy and importance—"land to the tiller, break up the plantations."
- 6) A revolutionary transformation of the economy of that time could, almost certainly, only have been accomplished by mass insurrection and the gaining of, at a minimum, a great amount of autonomous political power and perhaps only through state ~~secession~~ secession. The Right to Self-Determination was, therefore, a key programmatic demand.
- 7) Black migration out of the Black Belt area in search of jobs and a more decent livelihood in northern cities began in earnest with the wartime expansion of the economy during World War I, continued during the '20s, was slowed down during the Depression years and then was sped up considerably during World War II and the post-war years that saw the mechanization of agriculture in the South.
At the time of the 1930 Comintern Resolution still more than 75% of the Black people lived in the South and more than 40% in the Black Belt. Today about half of the Black population lives in the South. The trend toward out-migration has apparently stopped because of the industrialization of southern cities in recent years. However, this population is overwhelmingly concentrated in urban areas and only 13% of the Black population continues to live in the Black Belt and Black people today make up 33.5% of the population of the Black Belt.
- 8) The plantation economy of the South has been so decimated by the agricultural mechanization of the '50s and '60s that only vestiges continue to exist. Black tenant farming of all types in 1920 included 704,000 farms. Today the number is 13,000 and rapidly declining. The total number of farms has rapidly declined as well, owing to the effects of mechanization (the smaller farms are bought up or driven out of existence), from 923,000 in 1920 to 90,000 today. In 1940, 74.6% of the farms were still tenant operated, today only 20%.
- 9) The Black Population today is overwhelmingly urban and working class and dispersed throughout the United States. When we speak of sizeable population concentrations, the more significant areas of Black majority or near Black majority are the industrial cities, North and South. Less than 1% of the Black workforce today are farmers whereas almost 90% are working class. (If commercial and technical strata are included such as teachers, social workers, Almost 40% of the Black workforce are industrial workers.)

Does this greater degree of assimilation into the working class and breakdown of territorial separation mean that Black people are now, or are on their way to being, qualitatively no more oppressed than other workers or the white population as a whole? No, not at all. Such a conclusion would reflect a very superficial and mechanical reading of recent history and present day reality.

Black people in the U.S. continue to suffer the effects of their history of slavery and national oppression in very significant and far-reaching ways. To even speak of "assimilation" we have to qualify what we mean.

A very profound cultural separation exists, by and large, between the Black and the white populations. This separation is maintained partly by the enforced segregation patterns and racist attitudes of the dominant white culture. Partly it is maintained voluntarily by the strength of a separate Black culture, especially an awareness of common oppression as a people. These factors, of course, interact on each other. Segregation and various forms of discrimination continue to insure the strength and separateness of Black culture, in both its positive and negative aspects.

The greater public awareness of racism, even in a limited way, that resulted from the heightening of Black struggle in the '50s and '60s seems to have somewhat weakened the hold of racist ideology among many of the white population. While such a trend exists, and revolutionaries obviously should not minimize but welcome such a trend, the busing struggles of recent years have shown a counter-trend of racism consolidating itself among certain sections and taking once again violent forms. Racist ideology still permeates white culture, perhaps most often in more subtle forms, and is experienced to a certain degree by all classes of Blacks but particularly by working class and poor Black people where its effects are most devastating.

The forms of discrimination against Black people are not entirely, or even most fully, described by racist ideology however. Ideology serves to justify economic necessity. This was true under slavery and it is still true today. Racist ideology today is not simply the carry over, among more backward thinking people, of an unfortunate past, as apologists for the present system would have us believe. Racist ideology, in fact, continues to serve ~~as a~~ as a justification for the special oppression of Black people that is necessary for the functioning of the capitalist system today.

JOB One of the most basic features of Black oppression is the relation to the job market. Black people are very thinly represented in the professions and within the more highly qualified technical jobs. The Blacks who are in these categories make even less money ~~than~~ in relation to their white counterparts than do Black workers as compared to white workers.

Skilled trades have traditionally been closed to Blacks and this is only beginning to break. Many other large areas of employment continue to be either virtually closed to Blacks or Blacks have been greatly under-represented. Recent Supreme Court rulings against "reverse discrimination" threaten to stop this gap from narrowing altogether.

Black people today represent sizeable percentages of the workforce in many basic areas of the economy, such as steel, auto, textiles, ~~and~~ transportation and construction. Even in the industries or areas with a high concentration of Blacks however, Black people are often still the relative newcomers and are the first laid off when the economy slows down. Racist ideology also, many times, serves to keep Blacks in the hardest, dirtiest and lowest paid jobs.

These factors, combined with discrimination and community location that keep many jobs inaccessible to Blacks, and combined with the shrinkage of the unskilled section of the workforce due to automation have simply provided a job market that is incapable of assimilating Black people to any adequate degree.

Unemployment rises and falls somewhat with the expansions and retractions of the economy but after each recession a higher level of unemployment remains. Continually a level of unemployment is accepted by the ruling class that would not have been previously considered tolerable and this trend exists in almost all capitalist countries. In the United States, a special consequence is the extreme poverty of the Black population in particular and the lack of any thoroughgoing assimilation into the dominant economy and culture.

Segregation

Very much related to the restriction of Blacks to certain sections of the job market and relative exclusion from the job market is the pattern of forced segregation into isolated communities.

The development of suburbs, especially in the period since World War II, has played a significant role. Single-family homebuilding and the attendant debt financing, have provided the greatest opportunity for domestic expansion of the economy since the war. Industry moved to the suburbs because of cheaper land, lower taxes, easier access to transportation. The white workers who could afford to follow industry and escaped the over-crowded life of the cities, sometimes with racist motives as well, leaving a solid concentration of Black and other minorities in the central cities in the midst of a rapidly declining job market.

Discrimination in housing as well as rapidly rising rents throughout the cities restricted Blacks to ghettos within the cities. Ghetto landlords had a captive market and charged high rents for dilapidated housing. The effects of unemployment on these communities insured a population dependent to a great extent on social

services. After the Civil Rights Movement and the Black rebellions of the '60s, services were considerably expanded, job programs established, community colleges expanded and open admissions programs developed.

Given the problems created for the economy by inflation that resulted from the military spending of the '60s as well as the increased domestic spending, (for services but also for expansion of the government role in the economy), efforts began in the late '60s to cutback on these programs. After the recession of '70-'71 and especially after the recession of '74-'75 and the financial chaos that resulted in the nation's cities (see our pamphlet on "Crisis in the Cities") the government on all levels began a vicious all out attack on the social gains that had been won during the '60s. The conscious policy of neglect and impoverishment of the unemployed populations of the cities today is, in large measure, the policy toward Black and other minority poor. Why spend money, so the reasoning goes, on schools in Black communities when these people are not really needed in the economy anyway? Police, Black and mainly white, are given the responsibility of maintaining law and order in these communities so they, not surprisingly, resort to terror and intimidation.

The relative impoverishment of the Black population in the U.S. today is so great that it cannot, just as the oppression of the working class in general cannot, be resolved short of the overthrow of capitalism. Black oppression is bound to give rise to a powerful revolutionary current. The struggle will encompass and focus on issues that are not, in as great a measure, of the same urgency and importance to the working class in general. Black organizational forms are bound to develop to concentrate on and deal with the many aspects of oppression that are particular to Blacks. This was true in the heightened struggle of the '60s and it will most certainly be true again.

Relationship to Working Class Struggle.

As already stated, the great majority of Black people today are workers or unemployed workers. Blacks are particularly concentrated in the basic industrial sectors and oppressed service sectors of the proletariat. This fact necessarily has effects on the character of the struggle for Black Liberation. It means that whereas the Black struggle has to a certain degree a life independent of the working class struggle as a whole, at the same time it has a strong tendency to be very much interconnected with the overall working class struggle.

It will tend to be interconnected because 1) Black workers have basically the grievances as workers that are shared by workers of all nationalities. They are a part of the working class and will reflect the outlook of the working class. This will be increasingly true as the working class as a whole faces sharper struggle for its survival; 2) Black workers are bound to play a militant and politically conscious role within the overall class struggle and raise its political level; 3) Black people and the working class in general have a common direct enemy, U.S. capitalism, and a common direct solution to their oppression, proletarian revolution.

To make the point clear, we could contrast the Black struggle to even the struggle of the Puerto Rican people for independence from U.S. control. The Puerto Rican struggle is not unrelated to the level of struggle in the U.S. It can be greatly aided by the support of those in the U.S. and, in turn, it can provide a powerful exposure of U.S. Imperialism. However, its overall goal, Puerto Rican independence, is not the same as that of the U.S. Working class, the nature of its struggle takes a different and entirely separate form.

The Black Peoples Movement for Liberation is, however, part and parcel of the internal struggle to overthrow U.S. capitalism. Its aims can be achieved in no other way. This is why Mao said that the black people's struggle was "bound to merge" with the struggle of U.S. workers. As such, it has far greater revolutionary significance than the Black people's struggle once had when its principal aim was to overthrow the oppressive plantation system and divide up the land between the tillers. Incorrect Views of the Black Struggle

Others ~~who~~ have tended toward the view that Black people are no longer a Nation and have emphasized that the Black struggle is an integral and inseparable part of the ~~the~~ class struggle to overthrow capitalism. However, they have tended toward two mistakes. The first and the far more serious has been to downplay the independent significance of the Black struggle. The Revolutionary Communist Party, for example, concludes very wrongly that almost the only significance of the Black struggle is that it has become part of the working class struggle. They have tended, over the last couple of years, to treat all democratic demands of the Black masses to the single criteria of what demands will most likely be supported by the working class in general. They wishfully overestimate the potential for multi-national unity and underestimate the struggle to gain the support of the white working class and the white population for the special and just demands of the Black people.

The sharpest example of this has been their position on the busing struggles where they have white-washed the racist character of the anti-busing movements and, in fact, emphasized unity not with the justified demands of the Black masses

but with the backwardness of the white anti-busing movement.

This incorrect approach is also expressed in the RCP's tendency to oppose any form of separate Black organization. They point to the ~~thead~~advantages of multi-national organization and the need to overcome divisiveness and the tendency toward narrow nationalism.

The tendency toward narrow nationalism definitely ~~exists~~ exists and is articulated particularly by petty bourgeois reformist and careerist elements. Much of the Left, particularly its more petty bourgeois sections, have catered to nationalism and uncritically supported many incorrect positions at times out of a tendency to simply "follow third world leadership". The need to be critical of narrow nationalism should not however in any way obscure the special needs and demands and the special problems of third world struggles. White communists should be particularly sensitive to the questions raised by Black communists in regard to the requirements of the Black struggle.

~~Self-Determination.~~

Some third world communist organizations have also, and we think incorrectly, summed up their previous development along national lines and sometimes even the existence of separate third world mass organizations as a nationalist deviation. This, we believe, is a very mechanical one-sided approach of neglecting the particular features of the development of ~~the~~ Black struggle. Ironically enough, some of these groups such as the Revolutionary Workers League cry the loudest about "abandoning the national question" if anybody questions something such as the Black Belt Nation theory.

Self-Determination.

Another tendency has been to deny that the Right to Self-Determination has any application to the Black struggle. Self-Determination has played a very different role in various historical circumstances. In Russia, for example, where great nation chauvinism played a great role and national disunity was very strong, defending the right of oppressed nations to self-determination played a key political role. In China, on the other hand, the protracted fight of all nationalities against a comprador regime and against foreign aggressors created a strong ~~enough~~ enough basis of unity so that the right to self-determination, in the sense of the right to separation, never even arose as a serious question. In an anti-colonial struggle, in relation to the oppressor nation, the right to Self-Determination is what the revolutionary movement is all about.

What the correct application of the right to self-determination has in common is that it is a justified demand of an oppressed nation in regard to what it might take, given its history of oppression, for its national equality to be attained. That is, separation might be considered, rightly or wrongly, as a possible or necessary solution. Further, that even if ~~self~~ separation is not desirable from the long range interests of the proletariat, the right must be maintained to insure voluntary, not forced, multi-national unity.

BACU maintains that even though a Black nation cannot be said to exist in the U.S. today, the special oppression of Black people is so related to their history of national existence and oppression that recognizing the right for Black people to separate, and, in fact, become a nation again could be of great political importance in building voluntary multi-national unity.

The practical political fact of the matter is this--can Black people achieve real and complete equality without separation. Assuming any degree of unity is developed in the revolutionary struggle, hopefully the answer will clearly be "yes, it will ~~take~~ take a struggle, but it can be achieved and the reasons for unity far out-weigh those for separation."

Could separation be achieved, if that is the demand of the majority of Black people? Yes. If, in fact, ~~is~~ so great a racial disunity continues so that such a demand is actually raised, how could or why would communists want to rule a discussion of separation out of the question?

Also, although communists would almost certainly oppose separation, we should not in principle determine this position in advance. Circumstances are conceivable where separation might be necessary, or felt to be necessary. We have been talking of circumstances after the overthrow of capitalism. If the demand for secession is raised by the masses of Black people against the capitalist state, although the winning of this demand short of the overthrow of capitalism is very unlikely, it is not at all clear that communists should oppose such a demand. The pressure for such a demand under capitalism could only have the effect of weakening our ruling class.

More on the "Nation" theory.

Stalin's well known criteria for a nation are not, as has often been pointed out, the endall for defining a nation under different circumstances. (Those who would naturally take the position that they are still a completely adequate definition, ironically again, fail completely in applying these criteria to the Black Belt Nation). Generally speaking, however, many of Stalin's points are applicable. It is very unlikely, for example, that a nation could be said to exist that is dispersed geographically and has no common territory.

The Palestinian people are an exception to this rule but an exception that proves the rule. The Palestinian people have been forcefully driven off their land, cut off from their land which means their ability to earn a living and to a great extent continue to exist in refugee camps on the periphery of Palestine within several countries. The only foreseeable solution is to retain their national identity and fight ~~to~~ to regain their homeland.

This has not been the nature of the breakdown of the Nation in the Black Belt. This ~~dispersal~~ dispersal was forced in the sense that economic compulsion never really offers people choices. It was primarily a voluntary dispersal in search of a better life. The political effects of this dispersal, as well as the direct effects in the lives of the people, have been positive. It is positive that the great mass of Black people have become a strong politically conscious element within the U.S. working class. It is positive that, despite the unemployment for so many, most Black people have escaped from the wretched hand to mouth existence of sharecropping. For the Palestinians dispersal was not progressive in any sense so they seek to reverse this reactionary process and return to their homeland. For Black people, as we indicated, reestablishing a nation would also not be outside the realm of possibility but there is good reason to believe that it will remain a fairly remote question, not at all at the heart of or necessary to the fulfillment of Black people's demands. We communists should not attempt to shape reality to political concepts, that is turning things upside down.

Even more untenable is the argument that there continues to exist a separate Black economy. The existence of a number of Black owned small businesses that cater to Blacks is virtually irrelevant. The mass of Black people work for GM etc. They do not work for funeral parlors or corner grocery stores. Just as a separate territory would have to be created, an economy for a separate Black Nation would have to be built, almost from scratch. (This was not the case in the 30s when taking over the plantations would have provided the basis for a separate Black economy, although a backward peasant economy.) Impossible, no, but all of this speaks to the unlikelihood of such demands becoming central to the Black struggle and, given the development of a good level of multi-national unity, the undesirability of such demands for separation becoming a central question.

It is much more likely that the Black working class and the Black unemployed and poor will be welded into a powerfully united and conscious leading force for the entire class struggle in its ~~struggle~~ ^{battle} to overthrow capitalism and simultaneously for the achievement of equality for the Black people as not a separate and distinct slogan but as a central slogan of the proletarian revolution.