

INTERNAL

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ON THE NEGRO QUESTION

By R. Kirk, Los Angeles

The existence of discrimination against and segregation of Negroes in the U.S. is an historically unique form of oppression and exploitation in that it is a special form which can be identified neither with class nor national oppression. The problem of its elimination from American life is a great challenge to American Marxism. I would hazard that of all the theoretical problems of American Marxism the Negro question is the only one which is especially unique, truly "American."

Certainly, in the heritage of Marxism there is a smaller body of knowledge and thought which bears directly upon this question than any other within the realm of our practical problems. Our analysis of the phenomenon of American imperialism is a direct continuation of the specific studies of Capitalist Political Economy as laid down by Marx, Engels and Lenin. Our principal opponents among the defenders of capitalism, the Stalinists, Social Democrats, the labor bureaucracy, the liberal apologists, all have their historical and contemporary counterparts in Europe.

In the main historical field of our activity, the unions, we have the rich theoretical heritage from the IWW, the early American Communist movement, the first Congresses of the Communist International and the early years of our own movement. And we inherit several decades of practical experience in the leadership of American labor struggles in every movement of consequence.

But in the realm of the Negro question the past movements have left us but little which specifically applies either theoretically or practically, and from which we may learn directly.

Our party does have an enviable record in practical struggle. We have never neglected an opportunity to enter into a struggle against Jim Crow and its various manifestations when it was physically possible for us to do so. When it was impossible for us to engage organizationally in a struggle, our press was tireless in its defense of the Negro struggle and exposed every faker who sought to subordinate it to other "considerations."

Theoretically and organizationally, however, we have yet to solve it in the full sense.

Our theoretical heritage consists largely of the conversations with Trotsky in the late '30s and the Resolution on the Negro Question of 1948. These are two vital landmarks of our development. The first gave us a conception of the fundamental and special role which the Negro people will play in the American Socialist Revolution. It also indicated some of the intricacies of the problem from the theoretical point of view. The resolution gave us an integrated analysis of the basic features of the problem of Negro emancipation and how it must be solved along with the struggle for socialism.

We have made certain propagandistic advances since this time. Most noteworthy is Comrade Breitman's speech on the Moore Case. As such it is a great achievement in portraying in popular form the in-

soluble connection between the struggle against discrimination and the struggle against capitalism and for Socialism.

I believe, however, that it is time for another determined step in the Negro struggle. I am speaking primarily of a theoretical step.

If we cannot aspire to the direct leadership of the millions of Negroes during a period such as this, we must nevertheless become the theoretical champions of their struggle; the vindicators of Marxism as it pertains to the Negro struggle. We must equip ourselves to wage battle against all the opponents of Marxism in the Negro community. To extend the resolution of 1948, explain it, elaborate it, concretize it, to begin to incorporate this program into the flesh and blood of the party. It has been too much only a piece of paper.

I think that the beginning of wisdom on this question for most of us is humility. I mean in attitude toward theory. We tend to assume that because we can repeat and somewhat elaborate a few of the Old Man's formulations of fifteen years ago that we have a profound knowledge of the Negro question. There is a tendency in the Marxist movement for thought to become imprisoned in the framework of old formulations and slogans. And as reality changes we lose touch with it. This is, to a certain extent, what has happened on the Negro question.

Take, for example, the question of self-determination. Trotsky said that it was necessary to keep in mind the possibility that at some time, under certain historical conditions, a legitimate semi-nationalist type of mass movement might develop among the Negroes. This movement, under peculiar conditions such as a fascist victory in the U.S., might demand the right to self-determination. This would pose the problem of "national" separation of Negroes. Under such conditions, he said, we would have to support such a demand and incorporate it into our program.

He made these highly reserved comments on the subject when the memory of the Garvey movement of the '20s was still fresh and when the full social effects of the emergence of the CIO had not yet been felt.

It is necessary to recognize today that history has taken a decisive turn. It is necessary to realize that the growth of the CIO and the beginning of maturity of the American working class movement have created a condition where a degree of solidarity between Negro and white exists as at no time since the Reconstruction. That under the impact of the struggles of the Negroes -- the March-on-Washington movement, anti-discrimination fights within the CIO and through the CIO against employers, and the thousands of episodic struggles -- the Negro people have made serious and significant advances.

These advances have been made not in the direction of some possible separation of Negroes from whites but on the contrary all progress is made in the direction of mutual assimilation of Negro and white. The fundamental slogans of the Negro movement are: Against Discrimination, Against Segregation, For Equality. It is along this line that it has advanced. This clearly establishes the direction of motion of the Negro struggle.

Every significant fact of the development of this movement shows inescapably that for the present historic epoch the question of self-

determination so far as the consciousness of the Negroes in the North, West and "Border" states is concerned has been solved. They have definitely and explicitly determined that they want and demand immediate and unconditional social and economic equality and the right to integration as Americans. There is nothing in the Negro movement of the South which can lead us to believe that it will take a different road there.

It would, therefore, be a great mistake upon our part to take a legalistic "wait and see" attitude on this question. On the contrary, because of the notoriety given to the whole subject of self-determination by the Stalinists during the Third Period, if today you're "for" self-determination it is interpreted by the Negroes to mean that you are "for" the separation of Negro and white and the creation of some sort of independent Negro Community or Nation. And that, they may explain to you, is precisely what the whole Negro Community is fighting against.

There is a certain amount of justification for this interpretation. At a time like this, when the expressed desires of the Negro Community are so clear and well known, a legalistic "wait and see" policy amounts to a skepticism of the legitimacy of the demand for immediate integration and assimilation.

When asked if we are for self-determination for the Negroes, our answer should be that as far as we are concerned the Negroes have already determined what they want in American society: equality. We place this demand upon our banner and become its champions. That is, we become the champions of the theory of assimilation; that we justify it theoretically and combat all those who oppose it.

Our ability to do this fully presupposes a body of knowledge and analysis which evidently does not exist in the party in sufficient volume. A careful study of the complete files of the FI and its predecessor for nearly twenty years reveals a rather alarming barrenness of thought in this field -- of almost any thought at all.

It would appear then that there is a considerable educational problem for us which extends from the leadership all the way through the party. I believe that this particular educational shortcoming is more acute than others which could be mentioned because it inhibits our ability to build a large and firm Negro cadre. One solution of the problem conforms ideally to the conception of the Trotsky School and the general idea of fundamental Marxist education: the study of Capital and American history. The problem is also immediate and political and involves the active program of the party.

The direction that our investigation into the Negro question should follow is indicated by the following lines:

1. Reexamination of 19th Century history along the lines indicated in the 1948 resolution: the relation between the Negro struggle and the national crisis which was resolved in the Civil War and Reconstruction.
2. Exposure of the modern advocates of race separation.

a. Booker T. Washington: the classical example.

b. The Stalinists. They have toned down their "Third Period" line considerably. They no longer utilize "self-determination of the Black Belt" or "For a 49th State" as slogans. However, the general proposition remains the same. Now they say: it is true that the Negroes do not realize that their historical destiny is to become welded into a homogeneous social group with national aspirations. However, when the Negroes reach greater political maturity they will inevitably demand self-determination.

c. Du Bois. Most intellectuals in the Negro Community are perplexed at the strange alliance which puts this great scholar in the Stalinist orbit. It is not to be explained merely by opportunism on his part. The main explanation is, I believe, that there is a great programmatic affinity between his new views and the basic doctrine of Stalinism on the Negro question. His peculiar scheme for "organized segregation" through community cooperatives, etc., for the Negro is for him a means of escape from an active struggle for Negro equality. This is one of the forms of social reformism. He sees in the Stalinist program of self-determination a justification and support for his thesis.

3. Exposure of John Dewey's thesis which is the fundamental theme of "The American Dilemma" that "The Negro question in the United States is basically a moral question." This book has become a powerful influence in the Negro Community. Along with the exposure of the spurious "morality" theory comes the task of defending the idea of immediate assimilation while showing that this cannot be achieved either through "moral" means or by capitalist politics.

4. Studies of the "Race" theory in anthropology which show how this entire "science" was prostituted to the requirements of American slavery, the slave trade, and later to its off-spring: modern Jim Crow.

5. All-around studies in Negro history, literature, music, folklore, etc., which will enrich our understanding of the U.S. in general and will shed light upon the cultural identity of the Negroes as essentially Americans, rather than Africans or some special cultural group.

6. Defense of the validity of the independent struggle of the Negroes as indicated in the resolution. There are those who claim that it is only a "labor" struggle, to be carried on in and by the labor movement and subordinated to it. Others claim that the essential relation between the labor movement and the Negro struggle is that the Negro people wait until labor moves. Only after labor rises will the Negro movement develop, take another step. I know this belief to be held and expressed in the party. Of course, it would be foolish to ignore the mutual dependence of the Negro and labor movements in the long run and ultimately. Ultimately the Negro movement cannot surpass the bounds of struggle determined by the development of the working class as a whole. The Negro question is too intimately bound up with all other problems of American life to permit an independent solution.

However, the Negroes, as the most exploited section of the population, can and do have a stimulating effect upon the labor

movement, both from within it and from the outside. They tend to break up the national pattern of class collaboration set by the labor bureaucracy and the political rulers.

Actually it is precisely when the labor movement is dormant that the independent character of the Negro movement reveals itself most clearly. The Garvey movement was precisely such a phenomenon. Again, it was during World War II when the labor movement was at its lowest ebb, and when even the CIO became manifestly incompetent to express any of the needs of the Negro people, that the grand March on Washington movement developed -- even in defiance of powerful sections of the labor movement.

The MOW created a much better atmosphere in the country and made it more possible for both white and Negro workers to struggle a little. But had the MOW continued a step further than it did to a real March on Washington, the whole country would have had to line up for or against. A class line would have been drawn throughout the entire country -- in the middle of the War!

The Moore case is another important example. Here, when the labor movement is in its most conservative period since the 1920's, the independent struggle of the Negroes breaks out in Florida. Within a few days this event has so stirred up the labor bureaucracy that in Los Angeles it was forced to protest the Florida terror by means of a large mass meeting. In such cases the class peace is not yet broken. But it was badly bent for the moment.

There are also those who believe that the Negro movement must always and under all circumstances be independent. This, when implemented, results in a form of segregation which is just as intolerable as the ordinary garden variety. On the contrary, the Negro movement arises as an independent movement. But whatever varied and peculiar forms it may take during this historical epoch its object will be the same: equality, assimilation. And one of its effects will be to stimulate the general movement of the American workers against capitalism. For this is an ideal transitional type demand. Equality cannot be achieved under capitalism. Yet, it is a modest sort of a request. Its validity has become universally recognized.

The drive toward assimilation on the part of the Negroes is not something which somebody has cooked up over night. It is a genuine trend which arises out of the material conditions of American life. One reason that the labor movement is so sensitive to the pressure of the Negro community at the present time is precisely because assimilation is its driving force.

I have certain objects in bringing this question before the party in the pre-convention discussion. First, I believe that the general line contained in this article is an elaboration of our fundamental position on the Negro question as stated in the Resolution. But in my own experience in projecting these views I have encountered a considerable resistance in the party. I think we should know how general this resistance is and whether it is based upon more than unfamiliarity and ignorance. That is, whether we have serious disagreements on this question. Certainly, if there are comrades who believe that the Stalinists have a basically correct approach to the Negro question either historically or programmatically they should take the floor.

Secondly, it is important that the party realize that there is an important organizational objective to be pursued in connection with a serious approach to the theory of the Negro struggle. One which is entirely realistic from the point of view of general political conditions in the U.S. I believe that it would be wrong to attempt to recruit masses of Negroes into the party at a time like this. However, it is both possible and necessary to broaden the basic party cadre to include a considerable number of Negro leaders who will become party organizers, writers, teachers and leaders of our mass work.

The key to this lies in our ability to become the proponents of the theory of the Negro struggle. To be able to show the superiority of Marxism to all other systems of thought and programs in the Negro community. To be able to show the insoluble connection between the Negro struggle and the struggle for socialism and the building of the party.

If we are able to equip the party sufficiently well along the lines indicated here there is little doubt possible of our ability to build a strong Negro leadership in all levels of the party organization. This I believe to be a necessary condition for a healthy development of the party in the U.S.

June 7, 1952

(Note: The following letter is being made available to the membership at the suggestion of the P.C. and in agreement with the writer, Comrade Ryan. Any comrade wishing to participate in the discussion on the questions he raises is free to avail himself or herself of the facilities of the Internal Bulletin for this purpose).

A LETTER ON THE BOLIVIAN REVOLUTION

June 1, 1952

The Secretariat, SWP

Dear Comrades,

This letter is a request for clarification on the program and policy of the POR of Bolivia. The POR has been presented the opportunity of leading a revolution and thereby rendering a great service to our international movement. Our movement, and not least the SWP, has the duty of giving the Bolivian comrades all possible aid, both material and political. It is only natural that we in the United States should be extremely anxious that the Bolivian comrades pursue a policy that will bring them success.

The interview with Comrade Guillermo Lora, carried in The Militant of May 12 and May 19, raises some serious questions about the program and policy of the POR which, I believe, should be resolved as soon as possible. The questions raised in the interview, and not satisfactorily answered by Comrade Lora include:

1. The class character of the government;
2. The character of the MNR;
3. Our attitude toward the compromisers;
4. The revolutionary transitional program for Bolivia.

Let me comment briefly on the manner in which Comrade Lora appears to answer these questions.

1. I think it is incontestable that the present Bolivian government is a bourgeois government, whose task and aim is to defend by all means available to it the interests of the bourgeoisie and of imperialism. It will, if it can, harness and disarm the working class, smash its revolutionary vanguard, and rebuild the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, which has been shaken but not destroyed by the first phase of the revolution. This government is therefore the deadly enemy of the workers and peasants, and especially of the Marxist party.

Comrade Lora does not take up explicitly the question of the class character of the government. The closest he comes is the following:

"The Paz Estenssoro government, dominated by its reactionary wing, shows all the characteristic features of 'Bonapartism,' operating between the proletariat and imperialism."

Does this imply the bourgeois character of the government? Perhaps. I hope so. But this is a question that will have to be answered, and not by implication or inference but directly.

One thing does appear clearly: Comrade Lora does not regard this government as an enemy of the working class and of the POR. "One cannot exclude the possibility," he says, "that the right wing (of the government) faced with the sharpening of the mass struggle against it, will ally itself with imperialism to crush the so-called 'Communist' danger." This formulation is wrong, very wrong! This is an error which, if it actually represents the position of the POR, can have tragic consequences for the very physical existence of the cadres of the Bolivian Trotskyist party.

This is the warning the leaders of the POR must give the working class and above all its own supporters: We must expect with absolute certainty (not merely "not exclude the possibility") that the government (not merely its right wing) will ally itself with imperialism and try to crush the mass movement and first of all its vanguard, the POR, which is the real (and not "so-called") communist danger.

"It is beyond doubt," concludes Comrade Lora, "that the new government is now being subjected to enormous pressure by the feudal bourgeoisie (this term is no doubt the result of a faulty translation) and by imperialism to make it capitulate or to destroy it. Under such conditions the POR defends the government with all its strength and by means of mobilization of the masses. . . Today, far from succumbing to the hysteria of a struggle against the MNR, whom the pro-imperialists have baptized as 'fascists,' we are marching with the masses to make the April 9 movement the prelude to the triumph of the workers' and peasants' government."

Three separate questions seem to be mixed up here:

a. The Marxist political opposition to a bourgeois government; a government which, because of its weakness, is forced to maneuver with the working class and appear to have not yet "capitulated" to the bourgeoisie. Comrade Lora seemingly is taken in by the appearance of impartiality.

b. The opposition of the more open pro-imperialists to the government as "fascist." This opposition is not basic but is more in the nature of a division of labor. This opposition aims at strengthening the hand of the government against the working class or at overthrowing the government or both. This opposition has nothing in common with the Marxist opposition from the left; and Comrade Lora is guilty of a serious error in confusing the two when he says that the POR is "far from succumbing to the hysteria of a struggle against the MNR."

c. The technical and material cooperation and aid which Marxists would give the MNR government against a Kornilov or Franco-type coup. This must be sharply differentiated from political support, which we would never give. We would continue to struggle against the government -- with means suited to the situation, naturally -- even while striking together with it against a military overthrow.

This confusion by Comrade Lora of two different types of "opposition" and two different types of "support" appears to parallel the potentially disastrous March-April (1917) policy of the Bolsheviks, who in the absence of Lenin declared their support to the Provisional Government "insofar as it struggles against reaction or counter-

revolution." But it does not appear to parallel the policy of Lenin in the struggle against Kornilov. Lenin wrote:

"It would be the profoundest mistake to imagine that the revolutionary proletariat is capable, so to speak, out of 'vengeance' upon the SR's and Mensheviks, of refusing to 'support' them against the counter-revolution. . . . We ought not even now to support the government of Kerensky. That would be unprincipled. You ask: But mustn't we fight Kornilov? Of course, yes. But that is not the same thing. There is a limit here. Some of the Bolsheviks are crossing it, slipping into compromises, getting carried away by the flood of events."

2. What is the character of the MNR?

Comrade Lora answers this question as follows: "The MNR is a petty-bourgeois party which bases itself on the organizations of the masses." I think this is wrong, and is the basis for a conciliationist attitude toward the MNR. The MNR is a bourgeois party, which politically exploits the masses. The majority of its members, as in all mass parties, are no doubt workers and middle-class elements; but that does not determine its class character. It is controlled not by its majority but by its tiny minority, and the absentee controllers, the capitalist class. How else explain the composition of the government which, as Comrade Lora says, "is weighted with the most reactionary elements of the MNR and particularly the Freemasons. . . the most effective agents of imperialism"?

Is this the type of government the POR meant when it raised the slogan: "The MNR to Power"? The composition of the government is in complete conformity with the character of the MNR. I think it was wrong to raise this slogan. Unless our comrades retrieve their error by reconsidering their characterization of the MNR, they will inevitably suffer along with the MNR when the masses, through their own experience, begin to see the real class character of this bourgeois party.

3. Our attitude toward the compromisers.

Toward the labor leaders in the government, Comrade Lora takes an unequivocal attitude; he supports them, and presents no criticism of their role. The textile workers, he recounts, obliged the MNR to accept working-class elements into the cabinet. Did the POR support this demand? The presumption is strong that it did. Comrade Breitman quotes the New Leader as saying that Comrade Lora is Lechin's Secretary; and Breitman does not contradict this report. If true, would not this place the POR as a subordinate, ex-officio member of the bourgeois coalition government? And if the report is not true, the situation is not decisively different. Suppose the POR had been strong enough to force its way into the cabinet? Suppose, as we all hope and envisage, the POR gains more mass support in the future, will it then enter a bourgeois coalition government? This is the logic of the position outlined by Comrade Lora.

The Marxist attitude has always been and will continue to be one of hostility toward the compromisers; to call on them to break with the bourgeois politicians and form a workers and farmers government. According to late reports, Lechin is capitulating to the right wing of

the government on the question of nationalization of the mines. This should be no surprise to us. It was inevitable. How much would the POR have gained in the confidence of the masses if it had predicted this capitulation? How much has it lost by its support of the compromisers?

Of course the POR would thereby have lost Lechin's friendship. But Lechin's is a treacherous, and undependable friendship. Lechin will capitulate again, and again. He will help disarm the workers. He will help smash the POR, no matter how it may try to placate him. And Lechin's betrayal will be facilitated if the POR continues to support him.

4. The revolutionary transitional program.

The independence of the revolutionary party is an absolute law in a revolutionary situation. But this does not fall from the sky. It arises out of the Marxist theory and the program of the party. The central slogans put forward by our party, according to Comrade Lora, were as follows:

- "1. Restoration of the constitution of the country through the formation of an MNR government which obtained a majority in the 1951 elections.
- "2. Struggle for the improvement of wages and working conditions.
- "3. Struggle for democratic rights.
- "4. Mobilization of the masses against imperialism, for the nationalization of the mines, and for the abrogation of the UN agreement."

Points 2 and 3 are clearly insufficient to differentiate our party from other tendencies in the labor movement. They are too general. The question how we carry on the struggle must be elaborated, and in such a way as to form a part of the revolutionary transitional program.

Is the demand for nationalization sufficient to differentiate the Marxist program from those of all other tendencies? I don't think so. Both the right and left wings of the MNR are for nationalization. And there is no compelling reason to suppose the MNR cannot accomplish it to one degree or another. Cardenas, Mossadegh, Peron, have carried through nationalizations without thereby giving up an iota of their bourgeois character.

Nationalization does not change the class character of the state. Nationalization itself has a class character, deriving it from the class character of the government that carries it out. Of course, we do not oppose such nationalizations; we defend them against imperialism. But the decisive question remains: Which class has political and military control? Is the state power in the hands of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat? And the bourgeois power can be removed only by proletarian revolution.

Comrade Lora apparently does not draw this sharp line in the class character of the state. By his designation of the present govern-

ment as "Bonapartist" operating between the proletariat and imperialism, by characterizing the MNR as a petty-bourgeois party, and by his emphasis on nationalization, he seems to regard the present regime as a transitional regime having no fixed class character.

"It is now necessary," says Comrade Lora, "to fight for the nationalization of the mines, the key industries, and the land. This struggle will be intimately connected with the development of the mass upsurge, with the involvement of new working-class sectors in the struggle in such a way that it assumes nationwide scope, and finally with the constitution of a workers and farmers government." An elaboration of this statement would of course result in the projection of a transitional program. I hope it will be so elaborated.

But how does this square with the demand for restoration of the bourgeois constitution? I well remember how sharply the French right wing Trotskyists were castigated (and very correctly) for voting for a bourgeois constitution. They defended themselves by pointing to the fact that the working-class organizations were for it, while the reactionaries were against. Is this the justification of the POR? This would make Marxist policy very simple: Look at what the extreme right is doing and do the opposite.

But the masses were fighting under the slogan of restoration of the constitution? Marxists can participate in the struggles of the masses without accepting their wrong slogans. True, they would then be a minority; but that is the penalty we must pay for pointing out the objective necessities which the masses do not yet completely understand. The Marxists must patiently explain.

Comrade Lora points to the influence which the POR gained in the left wing of the MNR. Worthless influence, it appears to me, if it is achieved by adopting the program of the MNR. A united front with a bourgeois party with the aim of establishing a bourgeois constitution and placing the bourgeois party in power is not a united front but a people's front.

The united front that the Marxists advocate aims to unite the workers and peasants on a minimum program embodying a stage of the revolutionary transitional program. This united front, in a revolutionary situation, turns into the workers and peasants soviets. And even in the soviets the struggle goes on. Far from accepting the conciliationist program which may be imposed on the soviets, the Marxists advocate their own program, calling on the soviets to break with the bourgeoisie, their parties and their government, and take the complete power, establishing a workers and peasants government.

But Comrade Lora does not raise the question of a break with the bourgeois government. The workers and peasants government he advocates appears as some ultimate conclusion to a gradual reshuffling of the personnel of the bourgeois government, whereby the right wingers will be forced out and the cabinet take on a more and more left tinge.

In a revolutionary situation the slogan of a workers and farmers government is not an ultimate goal but an immediate demand, inseparable from a break with and overthrow of the bourgeois government. The work-

ers and farmers government can be realized in actuality only as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

* * *

This letter, comrades, is based on one interview with one leader of the POR. I realize -- rather fervently hope -- that I have not a sufficient basis to characterize the policy of the POR. I have therefore restrained the tone of my criticism to the utmost. But there is a danger, or at least the possibility, in the midst of a great struggle, of being carried away by the flood of events. Without dictating to the Bolivian comrades their specific tactics, the leaders of our party must help the POR base its tactics strictly on the revolutionary Marxist program, the only hope of victory.

I hope you will view this letter in the spirit in which it is written: more an inquiry than a criticism.

With warmest greetings,

(signed) S. Ryan, Los Angeles

cc: Los Angeles LEC through Murry Weiss.