



**BOOKS**

**BOOKS**

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE POPULARIZATION OF  
THE LENINIST POSITION ON THE  
NEGRO QUESTION

*The Negro Question in the United States, by James S. Allen. International Publishers, New York, 224 pp., \$1.25.*

*Reviewed by A. W. BERRY*

IT is a common fallacy, peddled by bourgeois economists and liberal social scientists, that the Civil War freed the Negro from chattel slavery and introduced him to the status of free wage worker. The reason (as explained by those schooled in bourgeois social science) for the extra hard lot of the Negro under capitalism, as contrasted to whites, is the "stupidity" of the white masses, lack of culture and education on the part of the Negroes, and color differences.

In *The Negro Question in the United States* Comrade Allen exposes the time-worn theses of the capitalist and petty bourgeois ideologues. For, indeed, not only does he prove that the Civil War only partly freed the Negroes, but he also shows the real basis for the spread of color prejudice and race hatred directed against them. This book comes as a welcome answer to all the bourgeois pish-pash and figure-juggling essays on the Negro question.

In the very first chapter, "The Black Belt," it is proved that the Black Belt, synonymous with the old cotton belt, remains today the area of Negro majority after a lapse of 75 years since slavery. The migrations during the War and post-War periods, heralded by many as a means of evenly distributing the Negro population throughout the United States, left a Negro majority in the area of the cotton belt representing 52 per cent of the population. That the migrations had only a temporary effect on the Black Belt population is shown by the fact that in two regions there was an increase of Negro population during the 1920-30 decade. The importance of the population discussion is summarized by Comrade Allen as follows:

*"This is far from being merely an academic problem. For if this [Negro decrease] were the actual tendency it would amount to nothing more or less than that capitalism could still solve within its own confines and in a gradual manner, without the discomforts of an agrarian mass upheaval on the plantations, those very problems which the Civil War of 1861-65 had left unsettled. For the persistence of*

*the area of Negro majority means the persistence of the plantation economy, of which it is a result. The area of continuous Negro majority has only been slightly altered, indicating that those factors which have in the past confined a large portion of the Negro people to the territorial limits set by the slave regime still persist."*

In the chapters sub-titled "The Economic Survivals of Slavery" and "The Nature of Share-Cropping," Comrade Allen places the term "remnants of slavery" in real and concrete settings. It is in these chapters that the basic character of the Negro question, both as an agricultural and a national question, is expounded. Drawing on the writings of Marx and Lenin in the sphere of agriculture and applying these to the Southern American scene, the author points out conclusively that the status of the sharecroppers is *not* that of free wage workers. Sharecropping as a remnant of chattel slavery is exposed here as a form of labor between chattel slavery on the one side and free wage labor or capitalist tenantry on the other. This is the real and concrete form in which the heritage of chattel slavery is expressed in the sphere of economy. The subsequent social and political oppression of the Negroes is an outgrowth of this antiquated labor form. To those liberal professors and labor "purists" who seek to cover and blur over the special nature of the Negro question in America, this section of the book should bring enlightenment.

The role of finance capital in the cotton patch is explained in detail in the chapter sub-titled "Financing the Plantation". American imperialism has attached and nurtured the feudal survivals in the Black Belt. Loans to the landlords are based on crops; crops depend on a bountiful supply of "cheap and docile" labor; crops must provide enough both to maintain the landlord and repay the principal and interest on loans—hence the connection of finance capital with the frightful national oppression of the Negroes and the lack of democracy for the masses generally in the South. It is this which accounts for the special forms of class rule prevailing in the Southland. Nor is the Federal government clean-handed. Both the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations have put their stamp of approval on landlord usury in the Black Belt. Moreover, they have been actual participants in the robbery: the former, through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation; the latter, through the A.A.A. A typical A.A.A. transaction is described by Comrade Allen as follows:

"The government cotton benefit checks were in most cases sent directly to the landlords and absentee owners or to banks, insurance companies or government institutions who held claims against the farmer, and who deducted the debt due and turned the balance, if any, over to the original signer of the plow-under contract."

Beside the part the government plays as assistant to the landlords, it is becoming an important owner of land and mortgages acquired through the Federal Land Banks.

With this knowledge it is easily understandable why the governmental bodies remain discreetly silent while Negroes are lynched at the rate of one every fourteen days. Lynching, it must be remembered, is one of the weapons used to guarantee the supply of "cheap and docile" labor on the plantations in which the finance magnates and the government are so materially interested. The President speaks on occasion against "horse and buggy days" in industry and government; Comrade Allen's book would give him material showing the existence of ox-cart days in that region which he terms his "second home".

Will the application of machinery to cotton culture undermine the plantation? Many of the professors answer this question in the affirmative, and

ferently. But what with acreage reduction and chronic unemployment leaving already too many idle hands, hands to be secured almost free, on the Southern countryside, the landlords cannot be expected to make a needless outlay of capital for machinery. Even granting the introduction of the picking machines in the western cotton areas, it would only mean more rigorous exploitation of the tenants and croppers in the Black Belt. Before granting that the machines will be used in the western areas, it should be noted that there has been a tremendous decline in farm machinery generally. In many cases in the Black Belt this has taken the extreme form of substituting mules for the oxen. There have been instances even where the work of draft animals has been done by human beings.

So, in the sphere of technological improvements, sharecropping, plantation economy, Negro oppression, remnants of slavery, coupled with the general crisis of capitalism, form the modern feudal barriers to bourgeois "progress".

However, the increased use of machinery in the western areas, while not effecting a change in Black Belt feudal relations, would cause a more intensified exploitation of the toilers there. In this sense the introduction of machinery would hasten the ultimate upheaval in agriculture which would destroy the power of the landlords.

Just as agricultural machines will sharpen the class struggle in the South, so has Southern industry affected the dynamics of the class struggle. It has brought into being a Southern proletariat, Negro and white. Not to industrialization but to the working class falls the task of organizing and leading the struggle to destroy feudal reaction in the South.

The role of Northern industry in further developing the dynamics of the class struggle in the South is discussed in a special chapter. Here, too, Comrade Allen points to the mistakes of those who turned to this source as an accepted savior. For the real contribution of Northern industry to the solution of the Negro question was the transformation of nearly two million Negroes into industrial workers, laying the basis for black and white labor solidarity. But even this solidarity could only be obtained by a struggle against the "shadow of the plantation" which had followed the Negro north. For, as the book under discussion points out:

*"Capitalism has given a new base and new life to these survivals of the past, prolonged them in the North as well, by utilizing them to even greater advantage than the national differences among the immigrant workers. Color offered a convenient peg on which to hang lower wages, the worst jobs, prejudice as a weapon with which to prevent working class solidarity."*

Three highly important chapters in the book are sub-titled: "The Negro Bourgeoisie," "The Right of Self-Determination," and "The Right of Self-Determination: A Reply to Critics".

Tracing the development of the Negro bourgeoisie, Comrade Allen shows it to be a "parasitic bourgeoisie", developing only under the wing of American imperialism. Though this section of the Negro population wields strong ideological influence over the Negro people, it cannot lead the liberation struggles of the Negroes because of its peculiar development and position. Yet this bourgeoisie does not escape the national oppression under which the Negroes as a whole are suffering. For, in addition to social ostracism, finance capital has played havoc with these model bourgeois enterprises among the Negroes and shattered the basis for business as a solution of the Negro question. All of these factors accentuated during the crisis have awakened many of the middle class Negroes to the necessity of turning to the working class.

Up to this point Comrade Allen has proved his major thesis: that the Negro question is a national question; that American imperialism, by nurturing the remnants of slavery within a modern capitalist state, has left to the working class the task of completing the bourgeois-democratic revolution (either as a by-product, or as a prologue to the proletarian revolution)—therefore, the necessity of an alliance of the Negro people and the working class in the struggle for Negro liberation. Here we have the concrete historical development which provides the basis for the people's front among the Negroes—a front which must embrace a majority of the Negro people, but led by the Negro working class. The development of class unity of Negro and white workers further increases, stimulates, and strengthens the growth of the Negro liberation movement. The Negro workers provide the link between the Negro liberation movement and the working class.

But what is the final objective of the Negro liberation movement? What single demand sums up all of the issues involved? *The demand and struggle for self-determination*, answers Allen. He then proceeds in the last two chapters to explain the meaning and content of the slogan, and to refute its critics. Both from the viewpoint of democracy and the proletarian revolution, the right to self-determination is the slogan which would guarantee to the Negroes in the Black Belt those basic rights which came with the development of capitalism. It would destroy the basis for the oppression of the Negroes throughout the country by uprooting the plantation system. The national rebellion coupled with the agrarian revolution would result in a Negro republic in the Black Belt with a "democratic people's government" whose "power would lie in the hands of the overwhelming majority of the people". The revolutionary forces generating the overthrow of the landlord regime are the working class, sharecroppers, tenants, and poor farmers. Far from resulting in jim-crow, the rule of the Negroes would come as a result of their composing the majority of these revolutionary forces, and, consequently, the most revolutionary force for spreading true democracy throughout the plantation area.

This book has as its aim the popularization and explanation of the Leninist position on the Negro question in the United States. Its purpose is to make clear the tasks confronting the Negro and white toilers in connection with the struggle for equal rights and full liberation of the Negro people. It is this reviewer's opinion that the book fulfills this purpose thoroughly and brilliantly. It should become a standard work in its field for every person active or interested in the American labor movement and the Negro question.

An appendix, containing charts and maps, and a carefully worked out index, add to the value of the book as a standard reference work.