

# THE NEGRO QUESTION

## THE NEGRO PEOPLE AS A NATION

A DISCUSSION ARTICLE

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IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE\* I showed that the Black Belt is not vanishing, as Comrade Doxey A. Wilkerson assumes, and that, accordingly, his "new" perspective of the Negro nation turning into a national minority is not founded upon reality. Now I wish to discuss other aspects of the "entirely new approach" suggested by Comrade Wilkerson.

### 1. THE "EMBRYONIC" NATION

Comrade Wilkerson starts with this premise:

The Negro people have taken on the characteristics of a nation only in rudimentary form; they are still in a very early stage in their development toward nationhood.\*\*

From this assumption he argues that a combination of circumstances can turn this "embryonic" nation into something else—a "national minority," "one organized community within the general population," a "community of Negro Americans," "an integral part of the larger nation." Therefore, he holds, the principle of self-determination as applied

elsewhere does not apply to the American Negro people. Or, as he places it:

... we are here dealing with a nation in embryonic form, far less developed as a nation than any of the other oppressed peoples for whom Marxists justly raise the demands of self-government and independence as an expression of their inherent right of self-determination.

We will inquire into Comrade Wilkerson's interpretation of self-determination later. For the moment we are interested in his concept of the "embryonic" nation.

I wish Comrade Wilkerson were more explicit as to standards by which he measures stages of national development. As history goes, the Negro people in the United States have developed as a nation at a relatively rapid tempo. They are very young when compared with a nation like the English whose preliminary formation on a common territory extended over many centuries and who achieved national political status almost 300 years ago, at the beginning of the capitalist era. Practically all other contemporary peoples now at

\* *Political Affairs*, November, 1946.

\*\* All quotations from Comrade Wilkerson are from his article in *Political Affairs*, July, 1946.

the stage of full nationhood achieved that status only within the last two centuries. Some reached national unity, their full political cohesion as a nation, only within the last seven or eight decades, like the American nation inhabiting these United States which achieved unification only with the overthrow of the slave system as a result of the Civil War. By other means, Germany and Japan established their national unity at about the same time.

The Negro people is certainly still at a relatively young stage of development as a nation as compared with those nations which, as a result of a combination of historical factors, were able to attain national unity quickly, emerge as dominant powers in the imperialist era, themselves oppress other peoples and retard their further national development, as is the case with the American Negro people. But among contemporary nations still in the process of formation the Negro people are by no means the youngest, from the viewpoint either of the established elements of nationhood or of the level of the national movement.

Thus, if we were to choose the relative stage of *social* development as a basis of comparison among a number of oppressed peoples, the Negro people are at a higher social stage than a number of peoples in Africa who are mainly tribal and whose societies are based on hunting, pastoral, or prefeudal agrarian systems of production, although they are drawn

into capitalist relations superimposed upon the old societies by imperialism. With respect to "community of economic life" as used by Stalin in his analysis of national development, the Negro people are much further advanced than others, especially since the semifeudal Black Belt is encompassed within a very highly developed capitalist economy.

Or if we were to attempt comparison on the basis of continuity and duration of historical development, which to a large extent may determine the stability of the elements of nationhood, we will find that the Negro nation is "old" as compared with some others, for example the Jewish people in Palestine.

Jewish migration into this Arab country during the past thirty years has served the interests of British imperialism, and the present demand of President Truman for continued large-scale immigration is intended to serve American imperialist interests in the Middle East. Nevertheless, conditions have been created within the short space of three decades resulting in elements of a new Jewish nation arising within a country predominantly Arab (today, the Jews are about 32 per cent of the population). Imperialism uses this new situation to divide Jew and Arab, and thus maintain its dominance.

However, a bi-national situation has been created, which has to be solved by the progressive forces on the basis of recognition of the national rights of both Jews and Arabs

and their joint struggle for independence from imperialist powers. With respect to the specific problem we are discussing, we must also recognize that one of the basic elements of nationhood, a common territory for the Jews in Palestine, is being extended artificially, and moreover, in a form which is complex and also disadvantageous to the Arab population. Certainly, from the viewpoint of the stability or instability of basic elements of nationhood and also of the relative period over which these have arisen, the Jewish people of Palestine are more "embryonic" as a nation than the Negro people.

Should we shift the basis of comparison to the national movement itself, to the relative level of the struggle for full and equal nationhood, here too the Negro nation is not as "embryonic" as Comrade Wilkerson imagines. National movements are among the most complex developments of the modern period, and vary greatly from nation to nation, depending upon many specific conditions. They do not always present themselves in "pure" nationalist form, in fact rarely is this the case, and often they are confused by religious, communal, or racial factors. Today this is particularly true in many parts of Africa, in China, and in India, where many national groupings are only now coming to the fore, as the masses of people enter the struggle against imperialism.

In India, for example, almost a score of distinct peoples until now

considered only as linguistic-cultural groups are beginning to take national form within the general movement of India toward independence. Until recently the Moslems, for example, were aware mainly of religious and communal differences setting them apart from the Hindus, and these differences were utilized effectively by British imperialism to incite and perpetuate internal division.

Only in the course of the past five years has national consciousness among the Moslems developed in such a form as to raise national self-determination as one of the leading political problems of India. While differing with specific aspects of Pakistan (program for Moslem states) as advanced by the Moslem League, the Communists of India advocate the principle of self-determination for the Moslems on a territorial basis, although their majority areas are not contiguous, and although there is a large Moslem minority in other parts of India.

If the national movement of the American Negro people is characterized by a high level of "race consciousness," itself an outgrowth of discrimination and other white chauvinist practices, the Moslem national movement is also complicated by communal and religious enmities which have been accentuated by imperialism. In neither case do these factors obliterate the essential national character of these peoples and their basic national movement.

Finally, I will cite the organized

steps taken in the Soviet Union to speed up the development of peoples into full national status on the basis of socialism, creating conditions which enable these peoples to achieve equality with the other more fully developed nations of the U.S.S.R. Today the youngest nations in the world are to be found in Central Asia and parts of Siberia—among them, peoples lifted practically overnight out of a nomadic existence, provided with a written language and even a stable common territory, and granted regional autonomy within the Soviet republics.

Thus, Comrade Wilkerson is grievously mistaken when he says the Negro people are far less developed as a nation than other nations for whom Marxists justly demand self-determination. Furthermore, Marxists all over the world support the principle of self-determination of nations, at whatever stage of social development, and whatever the level of national maturity, even if the development of a given nation is still only "embryonic," even if the national movement is only now coming to life.

It is even incorrect to apply the term "embryonic" to the Negro people as they emerged from slavery eighty years ago. The formation of the Negro nation began under slavery, as did their national movement of liberation. The Negro people stepped directly from slavery, which they helped overthrow, into a democratic struggle such as this country

had not experienced up to that time nor has seen since.

Thus, also with respect to the national movement, which in the case of the American Negro people has always been identified with the struggle for democracy, the Negro people have a rich and long tradition. *The national movement itself, the struggle for equal nationhood no matter under what form or slogan it may develop, is an essential component of the formation of nations.*

## 2. SELF-DETERMINATION AND SEPARATION

From his mistaken premise that the Negro nation is so "embryonic" that its future does not "lie along the path of continued maturation as a nation," Comrade Wilkerson ends up by denying that the principle of self-determination applies to the Negro people.

In this connection, it is first necessary to rescue the principle of self-determination, as clarified and understood by Marxists, from the distortion to which Comrade Wilkerson subjects it. He argues quite correctly, citing extensive quotations from Stalin to sustain him, that each national problem must be solved in accordance with the specific circumstances of time and place. Then he proceeds to make self-determination synonymous with separatism, giving only this interpretation consistently throughout his article. Thereby, Comrade Wilkerson proves that separation, only one form of self-deter-

mination, is not uniformly applicable, which is correct. He does not prove, as he implies, that the principle of self-determination itself is not uniformly applicable to nations.

Because of his mistaken identification of self-determination with separation, Comrade Wilkerson places the question as if the realization of self-determination is an evil to be avoided at all costs. This mistake is not entirely of Comrade Wilkerson's making, since we have tended in the past to present the problem in such a way as to provide certain grounds for a separatist approach, about which more later. Fear of artificial separation of the races, of a kind of inverted Jim Crow, which no Communist can possibly wish or work for or in any way encourage, has undoubtedly influenced many to question the validity of the principle of self-determination with respect to the Negro people.

Separation is not our solution. We direct our whole struggle against Jim Crow, the present expression of separation—not chosen by the Negro people but imposed upon them with force by the dominant white nation. We neither advocate separation as a general principle nor in its specific application to the Negro people, now or for the future. As Communists, whether Negro or white, we can only welcome and encourage as a development of the highest import the strong sentiment among the Negro people for integration on a basis of equality, a sentiment which has

grown in direct proportion to the development of the Negro working class in close association with the working class as a whole. This has not always been the case, as during the years following World War I, when middle-class nationalist and separatist movements (Garveyism) reflected a broad sentiment among the Negro people, although in distorted form. And, today, side by side with greater Negro-white working-class unity than existed in the twenties, we find that the Negro people maintain and extend their own organizations and institutions in order to advance their specific aims.

Formation of separate Negro organizations can no more be interpreted as a "decision" in favor of separation than it can be said that the desire among the Negro people to achieve equal status within the country is a "decision" for integration. We cannot speak of a people having "decided" to amalgamate with the dominant nation or separate from it, when such a people do not have the freedom of choice or the possibility to exert a collective will freely, and when, moreover, many questions are constantly being decided against them by their oppressors. Individual decisions may be made, and a powerful sentiment may exist for full integration, but this is not self-determination of a nation.

Browder caricatured the whole concept of self-determination when he spoke of the Negro people having made their "decision" for amalga-

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mation, although in reality the Negro people do not enjoy the freedom to make a decision.

In fact, in the work from which Comrade Wilkerson quotes so extensively (*Marxism and the National Question*), Stalin is concerned with proving the very thing Comrade Wilkerson wants to disprove: a nation can establish its right of self-determination—its right to choose some form of regional autonomy, federation, or separation—only as it establishes *its political entity on a territorial basis*. The latter is the only form in which it can exert a political will as a people.

Throughout his book Stalin argued against a position similar to that taken by Comrade Wilkerson who speaks of a "new" perspective for the Negro people in terms of "a definite community of Negro citizens," "a self-conscious community of Negro Americans," and other phrases with which the article is replete and which he uses interchangeably with "national minority." The vague concepts underlying these phrases are very similar to the shapeless slogan of "national cultural autonomy" or "autonomous national communities" about which Lenin once said they are like a "complex of sensations' without matter."

### 3. NATIONAL MINORITY

Comrade Wilkerson is obligated to speak in scientific terms if he takes so serious a step as renouncing a given position as un-Marxist and

proposes a new theoretical position. Harlem, for example, is a "definite community of Negro citizens," and so is a Negro cooperative camp in a summer resort. And such communities are prone to be "self-conscious," in view of the discrimination constantly practised against Negroes. Certainly, Negroes are Americans, having been born and raised in the United States and entitled under its laws to the full rights of citizenship. But these phrases tell us nothing about the present status of the Negro as a people or the tendency of their development.

At another point, Comrade Wilkerson says the "community of Negro Americans" are developing into "an integral part of the larger nation." This would seem to imply that the American Negro people are moving toward assimilation and amalgamation with the rest of the population of the United States. But Comrade Wilkerson assures us that they are *not* moving "toward disintegration, or toward the loss of their identity (as is the case of Polish-Americans or Italian-Americans) through the process of integration and attendant assimilation." In fact, he holds:

The Negro people are building up their national organizations for ever more militant struggles *as a people*. They are becoming increasingly conscious of their oneness as Negro Americans. They are struggling with ever greater unity and power to attain their full stature as a people. The perspective

is for continued development along this line.

Still, Comrade Wilkerson cannot decide what *kind* of a community the Negro people are. He starts off by saying the Negro people in the Black Belt are a nation, and those outside the Black Belt a national minority, and then advances the thesis that the Negro people in the Black Belt are ceasing to be a nation and are also becoming a national minority. But just what he means by national minority remains puzzling, for he uses other vague phrases interchangeably, sometimes implying assimilation, at other times continued separate development as a "distinct community."

It is an inescapable impression that while Wilkerson puts so much weight upon the supposedly separatist nature of the slogan of self-determination, he himself places undue emphasis upon the oneness, the singleness, the inner cohesion of the Negro people, in direct contradiction to his own central position that the Negro people as a whole are in process of "de-evolution" from a nation to a national minority.

Along this line we will find not clarity but confusion, opening the door again to unscientific and un-Marxist concepts, such as the "race," "class," or "class and caste" explanation of the Negro question which prevailed before the Communist Party adopted a national program with respect to the American Negro.

One of the central confusions that must be cleared up in this connection is the distinction between a national minority and a nation. National minorities, such as the Irish-Americans or the Italian-Americans, possess only the *cultural* attributes of nationality which they retain from the old country. They lack precisely those elements that account for the stability of a national grouping: a common historical development upon a common territory. Thus, they are assimilated into the American nation as a whole, although they tend to retain a certain kinship with the home country and even special language-cultural organizations, especially among the more recent immigrants.

The tendency of the national minorities within the United States, which is not territorially contiguous to any of the "old countries" and therefore is not affected by the irredentism characteristic of Europe, is toward complete assimilation, and not toward greater "oneness" as a people which is characteristic of nations. Thus, in fact, the United States is the great "Melting Pot," notwithstanding the reactionary outbursts against foreign-born which dot our history and which we see today, especially in the form of anti-Semitism.

But throughout American history the Negro people have been the outstanding exception with respect to the "Melting Pot," although smaller groups have also been systematically excluded, such as Mexicans, Chinese, and Filipinos. Racial prejudices un-

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doubtedly play a significant role here, especially with respect to the Negro. However, it is necessary to understand the reason for the persistence of white chauvinism, which is not only an ideological remnant of the old slave system but is an excrescence of the very real, concrete, substantial semifeudal agrarian system that still prevails in the South—an excrescence which poisons the whole American atmosphere, and which is beneficial also to monopoly-capital as a means of splitting the workers.

Race has become an important factor in "ghettoizing" the Negro, in North and South, precisely because the "white superiority" system identifies the Negro people with the help of biological ("race") characteristics as an oppressed nation, "inferior" and "outcaste," to be restricted in whatever phase of endeavor and life from assuming a position equal to that of others. This constant discrimination against the Negro, in which by and large practically all sectors of the white population participate to a greater or less extent, also has engendered among the Negroes a sense of identification as a people, often expressed in terms of "race consciousness." As Comrade Wilkerson says, the American Negro identifies himself as part of his people, whether he lives in Detroit or in an agrarian community of the Black Belt.

It is precisely the white chauvinist system, prevalent throughout the country, a by-product of which is the greater psychological identity among

the Negro people, that has prevented the assimilation of the Negro, denying the Negro people the status of a national minority such as enjoyed by the language-cultural groups in the United States. In this sense, the Negro people cannot be designated as a national minority, the outstanding characteristic of which in the United States is the process of assimilation, historically and at present. Thus, the "new" perspective of the Negro nation turning into a national minority has no foundation in the actual position of the Negro even in the North.

In the past, we have been inclined in our theoretical presentation of the question to a rather schematic division of the Negro people into two sections—a "Negro nation in the Black Belt" and a Negro "national minority" outside the Black Belt. This is misleading and artificial, and also unnecessary from a programmatic viewpoint. It is misleading because the status of the Negro people in non-Black Belt areas is not that of a national minority in the process of assimilation, as distinguished from a Negro "nation in the Black Belt" with a separate existence. Whether as a numerical minority or as a majority, Negro people in North or South are part of the same oppressed nation.

In so far as Comrade Wilkerson objects to this schematicism, I agree with him. But he draws other conclusions that obscure the very real differences between North and South that have to be taken into account



in our immediate program as well as in our general perspective.

From the viewpoint *both* of the oppression of the Negro people and of the perspective for their liberation, it is precisely the special conditions prevailing in the South that give validity to the principle of self-determination with respect to the Negro people, while this principle does not pertain to any other nationality grouping in the United States. The principle of self-determination has no concrete meaning unless it can be applied on a territorial basis where some form of self-government can arise through which the right of self-determination, which is a *political* right, can be exercised. For this reason it makes no sense to speak of self-determination for some nebulous "community" or "national minority" distributed throughout the country, which has not the slightest possibility for consolidation as a nation.

Thus, the special situation in the Black Belt is of the greatest programmatic significance for it provided the essential elements of a solution of the Negro question in the *country as a whole*.

Nor can we avoid recognizing that the semi-feudalism of the Black Belt is a unique phenomenon, to be found nowhere else in the United States. This calls for a special agrarian program aimed at the democratic transformation of the plantation economy, and therefore at the destruction of a hotbed of reaction within the coun-

try, having political consequences on a nation-wide scale as expressed in the Bourbon wing of the Democratic Party. This special situation lies at the heart of democratizing the South, and at the same time provides the progressive movement as a whole with the most impelling reasons for supporting basic agrarian reform.

On the other hand, problems not characteristic of the Black Belt arise particularly in the North and also in the industrial centers of the South, largely outside the plantation area, where the Negro working class has developed, and where the struggle for equal rights presents itself in a different manner. Recognition of these very real differences is not dualism, as Comrade Wilkerson complains, since it is based upon a single approach toward the Negro people as an oppressed nation fighting for freedom.

#### 4. INTEGRATION AND NATIONHOOD

It is erroneous to see a contradiction between integration, as expressed in working-class unity, and the further development of the Negro people as a nation. For the Negro worker does not by virtue of his being a worker and joining a union lose his identity as a member of the Negro nation, himself subject to many forms of discrimination practiced against the Negro people as a whole. Recognition of this by the white workers and the trade unions

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is indispensable to the extension and consolidation of unity between white and Negro workers. But recognition in some general sense is insufficient. It is necessary to see and advance the very concrete special demands of Negro workers—such as equal wages, equal opportunities for advancement, protection against lay-offs, full representation on shop committees and in union leadership. It is impossible to overlook the actual inequalities that exist in all phases of life even in the "freest" sections of the country, even within some of the progressive unions, unless we are blinded by erroneous theories about the Negro people already achieving equality.

It is also wrong to conclude that the Negro worker is becoming less conscious of discrimination against himself and the Negro people as a whole because of his participation in industry and the labor movement. On the contrary, as he identifies himself with the immediate struggles and the historical movement of the working class, he becomes more politically sensitive to the oppression of the Negro people. Political enlightenment of Negro workers as members of the working class places them at the forefront of the struggle for Negro rights and, therefore, of the national movement.

In view of Comrade Wilkerson's great emphasis upon the "oneness" of the Negro people, it is strange that he should bring as evidence against developing Negro nationhood the growth outside the Black Belt area

of the Negro working and middle classes and of Negro culture.

One of the central characteristics of a growing nation under capitalism is class differentiation within it. In the case of the Negro people this differentiation has been held back by oppression, which retarded the development of working and middle classes. While these classes were retarded, they did develop, to a significant extent only during the past three decades and under the special conditions characteristic of the country—advanced industrialization of the North as compared with the economic backwardness of the South. This circumstance creates favorable conditions, not only for greater unity between Negro and white, but also for the uprooting of the semi-slavery of the South, and therefore for the more rapid maturing of the Negro nation as a whole.

With respect to culture, I am afraid Comrade Wilkerson tends to use this word in a rather narrow sense. Certain forms of culture have had a greater development in the North due to the greater freedom prevailing there and the greater opportunities for Negro education and participation in the arts and professions. On the other hand, the most distinctive folk culture of the Negro people is a Southern product. The life and struggle of the Negro people in the South provide a constant source of inspiration in Negro literature and music. Many, perhaps most, of the Negro institutions of

higher learning are situated in the South, and have much closer contact with the mass of Negro people in the Black Belt than similar institutions in the North. But aside from this, the social and cultural development of the Negro in the North is part of the evolution of the Negro nation, and contributes to the maturing of the people as a whole, whether in North or South.

### 5. NATIONHOOD AND CRISIS

Comrade Wilkerson's erroneous concept of self-determination and his preoccupation with the dangers of separatism lead him into thoroughly untenable positions. One of these is that self-determination may have validity only during periods of reaction, while integration (always misinterpreted by Comrade Wilkerson as standing in direct contradiction to self-determination) supercedes the movement toward self-determination in periods of progress. Thus, Comrade Wilkerson creates a contradiction, not present in life, between self-determination and the fight for democratic rights. He writes:

Apparently on the assumption that this [reaction] is the perspective for America as a whole, and for the Negro people in particular, some observers [who?] caution against discarding the "Self-Determination in the Black Belt" program as the main theoretical approach of the Marxists to the Negro question.

And, then again, after citing some recent gains in the fight for Negro rights:

Thus, our outmoded separatist doctrine of "Self-Determination in the Black Belt" cannot now be supported on the premise of a sharp and long-sustained downward trend in the Negro freedom curve. The perspective is for quite the opposite.

Comrade Wilkerson leans to a rather utopian and one-sided concept of the present political development, and therefore in accordance with his view as quoted above he believes the "doctrine" of self-determination is already "outmoded." But quite aside from his rather loose speculations about the immediate future, is it correct to place the question in this fashion?

If a basic theoretical approach is correct, it must be correct in all passing political situations, whether the "freedom curve" is going up or going down. The latter will influence a position on this or that tactical question; it will also affect the extent of white chauvinism and of separatism, although this will also depend upon the degree of mass resistance to a downward "freedom curve" and the level of class alliances of the popular movement during the upward movement of the "curve." But does it alter the fundamental approach to the Negro people as a nation and, therefore, the validity of the principle of self-determination?

Browder thought it did. The en-

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ture perspective within which he abandoned the principle of self-determination was that the Negro question in the United States would be solved basically, was actually in the course of being solved, as a result of the wartime agreement among the Big Three which "decided for a whole period of history the question of the possibility of national unity in the United States. It determined the possibility of eliminating all the gross inequalities as they manifest themselves in the oppression of the Negro people in this country"\*

Equally un-Marxist and undialectical was Browder's explanation of why the Communist Party adopted the program of self-determination to begin with:

In the late 20's and early 30's, it became clear that the whole world was heading toward a major crisis, the greatest of all history. It simultaneously became clear that the question of the future of the Negro people would be up for reexamination. It was in view of the gathering world crisis that we Communists at that time—in the early 30's—raised the issue of self-determination. At that time we necessarily faced the possibility that the Negro people, disappointed in their aspirations for full integration into the American nation, might find their only alternative in separation and in the establishment of their own state in the Black Belt. . . .

Comrade Francis Franklin was the first to perpetuate this approach

\* This and other quotations from Browder are from *The Communist*, January, 1944.

in the form of a "new" theory in *Political Affairs* of May, 1946, where he was answered by Comrade Max Weiss. Is it not obvious that Comrade Wilkerson is also unduly influenced by this approach, although in some other respects his position does raise pertinent questions for discussion? It seems that Comrade Wilkerson accepts as authority Browder's history of the question, his identification of self-determination with separatism, and also his purely idealistic and fantastic concept of nationhood as a passing phenomenon, existing during a crisis and ceasing to exist when there is a progressive outcome from the crisis.

Of course, Browder did not inform his readers that the national program for the Negro people was adopted only after a very long period of discussion beginning in 1927-1928, before the economic crisis. This discussion took into consideration experiences throughout the world as well as the specific situation of the American Negro people, and rejected erroneous theories current in working-class and bourgeois-liberal circles. The full national program was adopted in 1930, but neither on the supposition that the economic crisis would lead directly into a struggle for socialist power in the United States (although Leftist notions did affect our general program then) or because the gathering world political crisis necessitated such a program for the Negro people.

Our program rested upon one cen-

tral thesis: recognition of the national character of the Negro question, the status of the Negro people in the United States as an oppressed nation. It is true that we were able to understand this in the early thirties better than previously, because at that time we were in the midst of the great economic crisis, which acted as a catalyst in the ranks of the Party, cleansing it of many opportunist ideas and utopian concepts about progressive American imperialism which had accumulated during the preceding period of expansion. But this is far from meaning that the concept of self-determination is valid only during a period of crisis.

Browder made some feeble efforts to "prove" that the basis for self-determination was vanishing. He cited some wartime progressive developments within the country which were supposed to indicate an advanced level of integration. He also cited the pre-war New Deal program, especially the extension of W.P.A. to the South. According to him, the latter was "the beginning of a deep-going change, a shaking up of the whole semifeudal system of oppression of the Negro," whereas actually the W.P.A. barely touched the plantation system and was often operated at the convenience of the plantation masters as a means of keeping a cheap labor supply at hand.

In practice, this approach led to the complete liquidation of the Communist Party in the South, to the surrender of the perspective of strug-

gle against the hotbed of reaction in the South, and toward complete underestimation of the fight for equal rights for Negroes throughout the country, including the fight against white chauvinism, in the name of the supposed integration of the Negro people into the single American nation.

We likewise find Comrade Wilkerson citing some significant victories in the struggle against discrimination to prove his "new" theory, and also resting his case heavily upon the perspective of a self-vanishing semifeudalism, which in practice, today also, would lead toward the liquidation of our struggle for Negro liberation.

## 6. DEMOCRACY AND THE BLACK BELT

I have already shown in the previous article that in actuality the semifeudalism of the Black Belt is not vanishing, that on the contrary semifeudal elements are even expanding side by side with the penetration of capitalist forms of exploitation. But is it correct to suppose that a successful fight for democracy in the South (including the uprooting of semifeudalism), or significant advances in that direction even during the lifetime of monopoly-capitalism, will result in "undermining" the Negro national majority, or, as Comrade Wilkerson places it, the Negro nation in the Black Belt?

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aming the actual course of development over an historic period. For this purpose, we will take a section of the Black Belt that has shown a greater tendency toward contraction than the Black Belt as a whole. This is that region of the Black Belt which lies in northeast North Carolina, eastern Virginia and the tip of Maryland. In this region the tendency for the Negro concentration to decline extends back to 1880, twenty years earlier than for the Black Belt as a whole. Today (1940 Census) it has a total population of 1,614,373, of which 681,271 or 42.2 per cent, is Negro, as compared with 55.9 per cent in 1860. This region is formed largely around the Virginia Black Belt, which included in 1940 eighteen counties whose Negro majorities ranged from 50.2 to 77.8 per cent.

This is a unique region in many respects. The first Negro slaves to arrive in the colonies were brought here over three centuries ago, and it was here that the first slave plantations were founded upon the feudal land grants of the English King. Crop-producing plantations began to deteriorate in this region even during slavery, due to soil exhaustion, and the more lucrative profits to be obtained by breeding slaves for the fertile cotton plantations of the deep South. After the abolition of slavery, and toward the end of the century, the process of industrial development started in this region earlier than elsewhere in the South, sizable ports and commercial centers having al-

ready been founded within this Black Belt region during slavery. Besides, because of its proximity to the large industrial centers of the North, migrations began at a comparatively early date. Thus, more than other regions of the Black Belt, this area was directly subjected to the pressures of capitalist expansion, and over a longer period.

Today, unlike the rest of the Black Belt (with the exception of a small area in central North Carolina) the proportion of Negroes among all farm operators (40.2 per cent) is less than the Negro portion of the total population. Agriculture is further advanced toward a capitalist formation, also among the Negro agrarians. In 1940, almost 60 per cent of all Negro farm operators owned their land in whole or in part, as compared with about 30 per cent in the rest of the Black Belt. Naturally, the plantation (largely tobacco and some cotton) persists side by side with "independent" small farms, wage-labor farms and capitalist tenancy. But, in this region, only 29 per cent of all Negro farm operators are sharecroppers, as compared with over 48 per cent for the Black Belt as a whole.

Particularly significant for the point under discussion is the fact that the counties with a clear Negro majority are about equally divided between those in which general farming predominates and those in which tobacco and cotton (grown on plantations) are the leading crops. This

suggests that Negro landownership is a powerful factor in retaining Negro majorities on a voluntary basis, even as plantation-sharecropping formed the Black Belt on a non-free basis.

Another significant characteristic of this region is the relatively large proportion of the Negro population living in cities, which is not typical of the Black Belt as a whole, since commercial and industrial centers have grown up in the main outside the plantation area. One-fourth of the Negro people of this region live in five cities situated within the Black Belt — Richmond, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Newport News, and Petersburg (all in Virginia). Of the population of these cities, the Negro forms over one-third. While even here the Negro constitutes a much greater proportion of the population on the surrounding countryside, he has become more urban than elsewhere in the Black Belt, although other smaller sections can also be found, as in Georgia and Alabama, where a similar situation has arisen.

What has happened in the Virginia-North Carolina-Maryland region of the Black Belt shows that the growth of capitalist farming and industry does not necessarily result in the disappearance of Negro concentrations. Such concentrations persist even when semifeudalism is no longer dominant in the economy, even when semifeudalism is overshadowed by capitalist forms of development. If we keep in mind that

this has occurred in a region where democracy remains very limited and the oppressive superstructure is little changed, where organized democratic forces intervened but little, then it is possible to appreciate how popular political action can accelerate the transformation of the semifeudal economy, and change the Black Belt prison of a nation into a region of dynamic democratic progress.

It is therefore incorrect to assume, as Comrade Wilkerson does, that Negro nationhood now and in the future depends upon the continuation of the semifeudal economy of the Black Belt. It is true that the slave system "created" the Black Belt and that remnants of slavery are today the underlying cause for its persistence, which also account basically for the oppression of the Negro nation. *But the Negro nation can exist also in a state of freedom from semifeudalism and its offshoots; in fact, that is the condition for its unhampered development.*

We have no right to assume that the base of Negro nationhood will vanish to the extent semifeudalism is vanquished by democratic forces. On the contrary, the Negro people will overcome their oppression and flower as a nation when semifeudalism is uprooted in the South. Therefore, the whole perspective of the Negro people as a nation is founded on the struggle for democracy in the South, which cannot be isolated from the country-wide fight for equal rights.

## 7. EQUAL RIGHTS AND NATIONHOOD

Comrade Wilkerson sees a contradiction between the fight for equal rights, including the fight for democracy in the South, and the program of self-determination. From this he concludes that the growing participation of the Negro people with their white allies in the working-class and progressive movement, including even a third party, would render self-determination completely inapplicable.

The contrary is true. History has taught us, and our present political experiences teach us, that every forward step of the progressive movement, every advance toward the unity of white and Negro workers, and every democratic gain (only tentative under monopoly-capitalism, since each gain must be continually defended) makes self-determination of the Negro people more realizable. At the same time, such developments render separatism in the movement itself less operative and separation as a final choice less likely.

Again, let us turn to actual experience, and first to the great lessons of Reconstruction, the first and only time the South has had a democratic era. The high point of this democratic upsurge was the participation of the Negro people, alongside their white allies, in the struggle for Radical Reconstruction and in the democratic regimes of 1868-1875. On the decisive question, that

of distribution of the former slave plantations among the freedmen, the democratic forces were defeated. This was one of the basic reasons for the incomplete development of political democracy and for its final defeat.

Nevertheless, gigantic strides toward democracy were made, as shown by Negro self-government in many Black Belt counties, by Negro majorities in many of the Constitutional Conventions which presented the South with their first major democratic reforms, by dominant Negro representation in three State legislatures, by leading positions in the State governments passing to Negroes, and by the election of a number of Negro Congressmen.

This was representative government, within the framework of the existing structures of the separate states. The central slogans of the period around which the masses rallied were land and democracy—equal bourgeois-democratic rights. These were incompletely realized in many respects, and the Reconstruction governments were overthrown before the new democratic institutions could be firmly established. Within the limitations of the class alliances of that time, when there was no working class to speak of in the South and when the Northern working class was still in an infant stage of political development, the industrial bourgeoisie then coming to power played the decisive role on a nation-wide scale. Under these circumstances, and at a time when the



Negro people had just stepped out of chattel slavery and were already subjected to semifeudalism on the plantations, the struggle for Negro liberation did not reach beyond the stage of representative government to raise questions of some form of political entity within the region of Negro majority.

However, even during Reconstruction *there was already considerable Negro self-government on a county scale throughout the plantation region*, including all branches of power—county offices, militia, sheriffs, the first public school boards, the local judiciary; and also in non-governmental organizations of power, such as the local Republican clubs, armed defense groups, and churches. Even at that time the advance toward equal political rights as expressed in representative government could not help but bring into being the first local self-governments, because of the Negro majorities in the Black Belt.

Now, if we turn to the problem of Negro-white alliance, we find that this great democratic upsurge in the South did not come about as a result of the imposition of puppet Negro government by a victorious North, as Bourbon historians claim, nor did it arise alone from the efforts of the Negro people acting in isolation. The democratic Reconstruction regimes were coalitions within the Republican Party of the time, representing in the South an alliance between the Negro people struggling for democracy, the anti-slavery white farmers

and sectors of the urban middle class opposed to the rule of the former slavemasters, such working-class forces as existed then, and the Northern industrial bourgeoisie interested in establishing its own hegemony over the country. Even when the latter class sought and obtained an understanding with the plantation masters, the democratic governments were overthrown in most states by bloody coups only after the Southern progressive coalition had been broken by reaction, mainly by splitting the white allies from the Negro people.

Thus, coalition was necessary to establish democracy and to defend it from reaction. The firmer the coalition the greater the democratic advance, which also accelerated the growth of the Negro people as a nation, although their demands could not have been presented at that time in national form.

This lesson of coalition, emphasized by every subsequent struggle in the South into the present day, must always remain in the forefront of our program and at the heart of our tactics. But it is not true, as Comrade Wilkerson claims, that the struggle for democracy in the South (or elsewhere) stands in direct contradiction to developing Negro nationhood. On the contrary, the fight for democratic rights has been historically, and is now a necessity of Negro liberation, which can be advanced today only through alliance with the working class.

We must understand fully that the

Negro people, especially in the South, realize that an isolated movement by themselves is doomed to defeat, and they will not take a position if they can help it which would isolate them from their actual and potential white allies. Whether it be in the organization of sharecroppers or workers, in the fight for the ballot or for representation on an election ticket, they step into the forefront of the struggle most effectively when they are assured of white allies. It remains for the white workers and progressives of the South to learn thoroughly the lesson that no movement against reaction can be successful without the leading participation of the Negro people.

This identification of Negro and white in common struggle is the first necessity of political integration, which becomes more and more possible as working-class organization spreads in the South and provides the new driving force for democracy. As the Negro people enter upon this struggle, as greater agrarian and working class masses are swept into the fight for democracy, the greater will be awareness of their own rights, the greater their national consciousness. This is the experience of all national movements of oppressed peoples which start primarily as agrarian and democratic movements.

If we identify self-determination with separation, or see it as a preconceived pattern imposed by some external force upon the South instead of a development arising from

the living movement, then we will frighten ourselves with nightmares of "race" war and rout ourselves even before reaction has an opportunity to cry "Negro domination."

*Self-determination will become a decisive force, as Comrade Wilkerson claims it is, only if we make the mistake of raising it as a general and abstract slogan without regard to the present stage of the struggle and the basic alliances that have to be forged to assure a democratic South.*

In the past we made such mistakes, which tended to give a separatist connotation to our program and also created certain doubts and confusion. In the early thirties, for example, we included the slogan of self-determination in our programs of action, and attempted to create mass organizations on a similar basis (Presidential elections, League of Struggle for Negro Rights). We corrected this Leftist mistake, but did not make the corresponding correction in our theoretical position. This applies particularly to our assumption that complete state unity of the Black Belt in the form of a single "Negro Republic" was the only possible form under which self-determination could be exercised. This has undoubtedly contributed to encouraging the erroneous conception that separatism is the only form of self-determination, because of a mechanical approach which did not recognize the richness and variety of the living movement.

We are not at the stage where self-

determination appears as a concrete question of the day, nor are preliminary forms of self-government taking shape. In life today, the national aspect of the movement in the form of national slogans has not yet come forward. The agrarian and democratic demands of the Negro people are uppermost. A new wave of the political struggle is arising in the South, and its objective is representative government, while in the country as a whole the fight for equal rights is assuming a sharp character. Specific national slogans may arise sooner than we expect, such as self-government on a local scale, as the breadth and intensity of the movement grows.

At this time we should not attempt to prescribe the exact form, out of a variety of possible forms, in which self-government may arise. Eventually, a single Republic, based upon a coalition in which the Negro people play the leading role, may prove the most effective form. But other forms, perhaps in intermediary phases or even as a long-range solution, may also appear—such as more than one state entity, regional autonomy or autonomies, bi-national regional governments or bi-national federal representation on a territorial basis, or even other combinations which we cannot at present envision.

These questions will become clearer as the movement itself brings the shape of a solution into focus.

For the present, let us not be frightened by fears of separatism and division when the struggle against semi-feudalism and reaction involves the Negro masses on a broad scale, raising the basic democratic issues of the South, including the agrarian issues. This will also accelerate the development of the whole progressive movement, which today contains within it the basis for a much firmer coalition with the Negro people than existed in earlier periods.

Between our practice and theory there is no contradiction, as Comrade Wilkerson claims. The "practical" needs of the present struggle are to weld firmer unity of Negro and white worker and to arouse the whole progressive movement to the fight for equal rights in the country as a whole and for democracy in the South. This practice opens the way to a solution along the lines of self-determination, and in such a manner as to strengthen the forces working against separatism. The contradiction between theory and practice is to be found, not in our approach to the Negro as a nation, but in the "new" perspective proposed by Comrade Wilkerson, since it is not founded on reality.

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