

THE NEGRO QUESTION

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(A DISCUSSION ARTICLE)

IN *Political Affairs* of July, 1946, Comrade Doxey A. Wilkerson argues that we should not revive the perspective of self-determination for the Negro people in the Black Belt. He holds that this position and its related concepts are "un-Marxist" and "undialectical," since they do not conform to American reality and fail to satisfy the requirements of tactics and practice.

Wilkerson recommends an "entirely new approach," based on the perspective of the Negro people moving toward the status of a national minority in the country as a whole, rather than toward further development as a nation.

While our previous position needs to be re-examined in the light of old mistakes and of recent developments, and some revisions have to be made, Comrade Wilkerson's "new approach" should be rejected.

His position fails to assess properly such economic and political changes as have taken place during the great economic crisis and World War II. It fails to take into account the historical and present-day roots of the oppression of the Negro people. It

tends to overlook the role of the Southern semi-feudal system as the source of a powerful stream of reaction that merges with the main stream originating in monopoly capital.

Wilkerson's position would leave us quite unprepared to assume our proper role in the new wave of the fight for democracy in the South and in the nation-wide fight for Negro rights. If accepted, it would return us to the confusion of previous days when the labor and progressive movement proved inadequate to the task of forging an alliance between the working class and the Negro people.

Wilkerson's position confuses the basic theoretical principles of Marxism in relation to the national question, and, therefore, also fails to supply the necessary tactical positions and programs of action required in the present situation.

These are the general grounds for rejection of Comrade Wilkerson's position. I will now show why he is so basically erroneous, beginning with some questions of general approach and then proceeding to questions of fact and interpretation.

I. DIALECTICS AND REALITY

In so far as Wilkerson seeks factual justification for his arguments, he bases his case upon a tendency toward the dispersal of the Negro population out of the Southern Black Belt. In fact, such a tendency has existed since the Civil War, and especially since the first World War

From this historical tendency, and from a superficial examination of some fragmentary statistics, Wilkerson jumps to the conclusion that within the next decades the concentration of Negro population in the Black Belt will disappear and the Negro people will assume the position of a "national minority" in the country as a whole.

WHY THE BLACK BELT?

To understand what is at issue, it is necessary to keep clearly in mind the factors that formed the Black Belt to begin with, and the reasons for its persistence to the present day. These can be summarized as follows:

1. The Black Belt was formed and reached its maximum extension under slavery, as the area simultaneously of Negro majority and of the slave plantation.

2. The democratic revolution of the Civil War and Reconstruction succeeded in one of its main tasks, the abolition of chattel slavery, but failed to accomplish its other main task, the establishment of democracy in the South. A consequence of the reactionary victory in the second phase of the revolution was the retention of the plantation system in which slavery was replaced by sharecropping, an intermediate form between slave labor on the one hand and free wage-labor, capitalist tenancy, or independent farming on the other hand.

The economic survival of slavery in the form of plantation-sharecropping not only bound the former

slaves to the plantation, but also supplied the base for the continuing political power of the former slave-masters, who increasingly had to share this power with industrial and banking capital centered in the North and later, in the era of imperialism, to subordinate themselves to finance-capital.

The continuation of the plantation-sharecropping system during the entire period of industrial expansion, including World War II, is the main factor accounting for the persistence of the Black Belt, as the area both of Negro majority and of semi-feudalism. It provides a continuing base for white chauvinist ideology, handed down from slavery, and also utilized by forces of reaction on a nationwide scale. This social-economic system of the Black Belt South is the main obstacle to the development of the South as a whole. It also radiates out on a nationwide scale the racial prejudice and social practices that operate against the Negro, wherever he may be, to keep him in a position of economic, social, and political inequality.

3. The movement of history is dialectical: it develops in contradictions, and by the solution of contradictions. While the plantation Black Belt persisted, other forces operating simultaneously, since the Civil War and particularly since 1910, tended to weaken and undermine the semi-feudal economy and to broaden the area of Negro freedom. The most important forces operating in this direction are:

(a) Industrial expansion in the North continuing over an extended period sporadically tapped the Black Belt for labor, particularly after the cessation of immigration from abroad, and resulted during recent times in the creation of a Negro industrial proletariat situated for the most part in the North, in close association with the white workers.

(b) Industrialization in the South, limited at all stages by the semi-feudal economy and restricted by the established concentrations of monopoly power in the North, nevertheless exerted an additional pressure from time to time upon the Black Belt for labor, particularly during periods of high production and limited labor supply.

(c) Directly or indirectly, the competitive position of the share-cropping plantation is weakened by the extension of cotton-growing into regions employing modern machinery and wage-labor, and by the slow and sporadic penetration of these newer methods into some sectors of the plantation South.

(d) Finally, but most important, are the political effects of these developments: the growing integration of Negro workers in the labor and progressive movement; the growth of trade unionism in the South, touching also the sharecroppers; the emergence of Negro middle-class political forces which tend to associate their struggle for equal rights with the working-class movement because of the inner weaknesses and extreme instability of the Negro middle class;

and the rise of a relatively new middle-class liberalism among Southern whites which is directed largely against semi-feudalism in the economic and political life of the South.

THE "BROAD" PERSPECTIVE

Thus, forces are constantly arising and developing that stand in opposition to the backwardness and reaction *simultaneously generated* by the plantation - sharecropping system, which is bolstered by monopoly capital. "Blind" economic forces, such as the penetration of capitalist forms of development in the South, play a significant role, but they cannot be counted upon automatically to modernize the South, especially since they exist in closest association with the backward semifeudal formation. The uprooting of semifeudalism and the establishment of democracy in the South is primarily a political process, the result of conscious activity by the working class, farmers and middle-class allies, directed against the real sources of reaction through all the ups and downs of the economy.

This essential concept of the historical process is absent from the "entirely new approach" suggested by Comrade Wilkerson, whose "dialectics" consist in seeing only one aspect of this process, without the contradictions, conflicts, and richness of struggle. He asks us to rely upon "the broad political perspective," "that the forces of progress will organize the future of our own country and all the world," a perspective within which we are to envision the

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transformation of the Negro people into a "national minority" approaching a status of full equality. Full equality the Negro people are going to achieve, but only if they and their working-class allies fight effectively against the very real obstacles and new out-croppings of reaction which today block the path to progress in the United States.

Indeed, if we are to march straight forward, as Wilkerson imagines, "although serious struggles still lie along the way," it would hardly seem necessary to expend our utmost energies, as we are doing today, to fight the very real threat of reaction which is attempting to present us with an intervening stage of fascism.

It is within the "broad political perspective" of continuous capitalist expansion that Wilkerson sees the dissolution of the Black Belt and the semifeudalism operating there. If the immediate future holds the prospect of the redistribution of the Negro people more or less evenly throughout the country and the dispersal of the Black Belt concentration, then it must also provide the conditions that might make this possible.

Comrade Wilkerson must be prepared to defend the thesis that plantation-sharecropping will soon disappear, and that machine-wage labor production in the old plantation area will become the rule and not the exception. He must convince us that continuing industrial expansion in the South as well as in the North will absorb the displaced tenants and sharecroppers. He must prove that

we are in an extended period of overall national prosperity which will create new opportunities for Negro farmers, small businessmen, and professionals, in all parts of the country. And, not least, he must be ready to hold by the thesis that white chauvinism in all classes will be sufficiently uprooted during the extended Victorian Era of prosperity to accord the Negro people their rightful position as equal Americans.

It is more profitable to stick to the facts of reality in America and the world. During World War I and in the years immediately following, when the first mass migration of the Negro people into the North occurred in the midst of an industrial upsurge, similar predictions about the solution of the Negro question were heard. It was not until 1930, when the economic crisis was in full blast, that the Communist Party began to understand the essence of the Negro question through the fog of wishful thinking generated in the preceding decade. It was only then that we took the first major steps, more important than any previously made by a working-class party, to create an alliance between the working class and the Negro people. Surely, after World War II, we should not need too long a period to re-establish a balanced and effective approach on this question.

II. THE BLACK BELT IN 1940

To support his thesis that the Negro people are becoming a "national minority," Wilkerson leans

heavily upon the "tenuous majority" of the Negro in the Black Belt.

Of course, Wilkerson must recognize that the theoretical validity of Negro nationhood does not depend upon a numerical majority alone. In fact, he does recognize the historical role of the Black Belt as a continuous common territory upon which the Negro people developed many elements of nationhood. But as proof of a present-day "tenuous majority" which becomes more and more "tenuous" with each passing year, he cites the figure 50.3 per cent, which is the Negro majority of the Black Belt in 1930, as defined and calculated in my book, *The Negro Question in the United States*.

DEFINITION OF BLACK BELT

Since this book is now out of print*, and many who have recently joined the Party may not be acquainted with it, it is necessary to explain the method I employed in defining the Black Belt. My main purpose was to prove the following: (a) that the Black Belt was formed over a whole historic period, beginning with the early settlements of colonial days and extending into the present period; and (b) that the area of Negro majority is simultaneously the area of the old slave plantations and of the present-day sharecropping plantations. Once this is established, the main conditions are shown to be present to substantiate the theory that

the Negro people in the United States have developed as a nation and that their struggle for fuller nationhood is integrally connected with the struggle for democracy in the South.

From the location of Negro majority counties as reported by the Federal Census of Population for each decade, and from studies of the plantation economy over a whole period, it was obvious that the plantation area and the area of Negro majority coincide, and that this area is more or less continuous, even if within it there are numerous counties which taken individually do not show a Negro majority. Accordingly, on the basis of the 1930 census, the latest then available, I calculated an area in which the Negro formed just over half the population, and studied the historical and present-day characteristics of this area, as well as of its periphery, which I termed Border Territory.

I purposely chose to calculate a maximum area of Negro majority from the latest census available, for a study of such an area would show most clearly the various forces at work over an historical period that tended to retain or to weaken the basic semifeudal formation. In other words, if I simply wished to show a decided present Negro majority, without regard to the forces tending to reduce it, I could have discarded from the total parts of the Virginia and North Carolina areas, and some isolated and sparsely settled sections elsewhere. The result would have

* The author is now preparing a new edition, which he hopes will be available some time next year.

been a Black Belt in 1930 in which four million Negroes constituted about 60 per cent of the total population.

This would make a much stronger case for the slogan of self-determination mechanically conceived, without regard to the contradictory forces at work and the many elements which must enter into such a solution. It was not my purpose to establish immutable and permanent boundaries for some future new state or political entity corresponding to the area of Negro majority in 1930, as I warned in the very first chapter. If in 1930 such a solution had proved politically feasible, with the necessary class alliances and general political maturity of the country at the required level, the material conditions were present, although boundaries of such a new state would have to be determined not on the basis of population statistics alone.

The most important results shown by tracing the history of the 1930 Black Belt back to 1860 are: (a) the continued existence of the basic Black Belt through the entire period of industrial expansion in the country as a whole; and (b) a tendency for the Black Belt to contract during this period. In other words, if the Black Belt were to be calculated anew for each ten-year period in terms of a Negro majority it could be shown that it was slightly larger for each preceding decade back to 1900. Or, to put it in another way, it can be shown that the area in which the Negro people number more than

half the population has tended to become smaller since 1900, when the pressure of capitalist expansion in the country as a whole began to affect the Black Belt. This tendency continued right up to 1930, the latest census data covered in my book.

POPULATION IN 1930-1940

To complete the record up to 1940, I have now analyzed the population statistics of the last census for the area in which the Negro people were in a majority in 1930. The net result is shown in Table I, which also traces back to 1860 the population of the area included in the 1930 Black Belt.

TABLE I. POPULATION OF THE BLACK BELT, 1860-1940

Census Year	Total Population	Negro Population	% Negro of Total
1940	10,256,289	4,993,612	48.7
1930	9,525,865	4,790,049	50.3
1920	8,968,132	4,806,565	53.6
1910	8,387,958	4,842,766	57.7
1900	7,498,900	4,488,991	59.9
1890	6,465,307	3,866,792	59.8
1880	5,750,410	3,466,924	60.3
1870	4,431,597	2,560,263	57.8
1860	4,362,009	2,461,099	56.4

The following facts are immediately ascertainable from the table:

1. The tendency beginning in 1900 for the area of Negro majority to become smaller continued through the decade 1930-1940. Within the area in which there was a bare Negro majority in 1930 the Negro population was slightly below half, 48.7 per cent, in 1940.

2. At the same time, the rate of

contraction of the Black Belt was less than at any time since 1900.

The latter is shown by the following, which can be checked in the table:

(a) In the decade 1930-1940, the proportion of Negroes in the total Black Belt population declined by only 1.6 points, as compared with 3.3 points in 1920-1930, 4.1 points in 1910-1920, and 2.2 points in 1900-1910.

(b) During this decade, the Negro population of the Black Belt increased by 4.2 per cent, from 4,790,049 in 1930 to 4,993,612 in 1940. *This was the first time since 1910 that the Negro population in the Black Belt had increased*, although the rate of increase remained below the ratio for the Negro population in the country as a whole, which stood at 8.2 per cent for the decade 1930-1940.

(c) The white population of the Black Belt increased by 11.1 per cent, *the lowest rate of increase since the decade 1870-1880*, although above the national average (7.2 per cent) during 1930-1940.

This slowing down of the contraction of the Black Belt is to be ascribed primarily to the effects of the great economic crisis, which reached its lowest point in 1932, slow recovery from the crisis extending through most of the remaining decade, including a relapse in 1938, before the transition to war economy started.

Among other things, the crisis halted the movement from the land into industry, for a while reversing this tendency as more people migrated to the countryside than city-

ward. Negro migration from the Black Belt ceased, and the slow industrialization of the South was suspended. Thus, while many tenants and sharecroppers were ousted from agricultural production, there was no place for them in other sectors of the economy, and most remained in the rural areas or towns. During the period of recovery in the last half of the decade, migration cityward was resumed, but at a very slow pace. Between 1935 and 1940, the net migration of Negroes out of the 12 states in which the Black Belt is situated was only 107,243. Net Negro migration into 14 selected cities of over 100,000 population in North and South was only 26,471*.

SHARECROPPING IN 1930-1940

The crisis, of course, also directly affected the plantation economy. From study of the 1940 Agricultural Census it becomes immediately apparent how extensive was the eviction of tenants and sharecroppers from the land during the crisis. While the Negro population of the Black Belt rose by 4.2 per cent, *the number of Negro farm operators declined by almost one-fifth between 1930 and 1940*. The number of white farm operators remained about the same. This development brought down the proportion of Negroes among all farm operators in the Black Belt from 60.3 per cent to 54.4 per cent.

Thus, while many Negro tenants

* 16th Census, Population: "Internal Migration, 1935 to 1940, Tables 15 and 17, Washington, 1946.

and sharecroppers were evicted from production, Negro farm operators still remained in a decided majority. Furthermore, the decline of Negro farm operators occurred mostly among the tenants. Of the total loss of 116,184 Negro farm operators in the Black Belt between 1930 and 1940, 63 per cent were tenants other than sharecroppers, 35 per cent were sharecroppers, and the remainder were landowners.

From the viewpoint of the persistence of the economic slave survivals, the most important result of the period of the crisis was the increasing role of sharecropping, which is the best indicator of semifeudalism. *In fact, it can now be shown that the tendency for sharecropping to in-*

crease has existed for at least a period of 15 years before 1940, as can be seen in Table II. We cannot trace the movement back beyond 1925, because that was the first year in which the census listed sharecroppers separately from the various categories of tenants.

While sharecropping increased, tenancy other than sharecropping tended to decrease. Between 1910 and 1930, Negro tenancy in the Black Belt, including sharecropping, rose from 80 per cent to 83 per cent of all farm operators. But between 1930 and 1940, the first decline occurred, from 83 per cent back to 80 per cent. However, this is due to the declining role of tenants other than sharecroppers, as shown by Table II.

TABLE II. NEGRO TENURE IN THE BLACK BELT, 1925-1940.

	1925	1930	1940
Negro Farm Operators	548,785	592,687	476,683
Tenants and Croppers	445,643	493,844	379,619
% of Farm Operators	81.3	83.2	79.6
Tenants	207,873	223,239	149,554
% of Farm Operators	37.7	37.6	31.5
Croppers	237,770	270,605	230,065
% of Farm Operators	43.6	45.6	48.3

WAGE-LABOR IN 1930-1940

If sharecropping is a good indicator of semifeudalism, the extent of wage-labor is a reliable index to the penetration of capitalist methods of exploitation into Black Belt agriculture. I know there will be some who will cite the large decline of Negro farm operators as proof that machine-

wage labor production is replacing sharecropping on a large scale. As already stated, this decline is due primarily to the evictions during the crisis, and this conclusion is further substantiated by the fact that cotton production fell by 22 per cent between 1930 and 1940. We have also seen that the role of sharecropping has increased during this period.

In addition, we find that the number of farm wage-workers declined for the whole ten-year period—covering the crisis as well as the economic recovery—by less than one per cent for Negro workers and by 24 per cent for white workers. The fact that the number of Negro wage-workers remained about the same while the number of Negro farm operators dropped by one-fifth, would not necessarily indicate that wage-workers were replacing tenants and sharecroppers on any important scale. Negro workers may simply have taken the place of white farm workers during this period.

I do not wish to minimize the important effect of machine-wage labor production upon the semifeudal economy, or the potential development in this direction. There has been a slow penetration for some time of capitalist farming into the Black Belt, and this will undoubtedly continue. But it is obvious that *semifeudalism is the most pernicious obstacle to the modernization of agriculture*, and it is illusory to expect decisive expansion of machine-production in the plantation area, under present conditions. Actually, as Table II indicates, sharecropping can continue and *even expand*, side by side with the growth of machine-wage labor production, if such growth occurred during that period.

DISTRIBUTION OF NEGRO PEOPLE

As can be surmised from the data already cited, the tendency towards

wider distribution of the Negro population, which has existed since the abolition of slavery, was also slowed down during the decade 1930-1940. In the 50-year period beginning in 1860 and ending in 1910, the proportion of the total Negro population of the United States living in the Black Belt (as of 1930) fell from 55.4 per cent to 49.3 per cent, while the proportion living in the North (including the West) increased only from 13.6 per cent to 16 per cent. During this period the ratio of the total Negro population that lived in the non-Black Belt South (Border Territory and the remaining areas of the 12 Black Belt States) rose faster than the ratio for the North.

With the mass migration of over one million Negroes from the Black Belt to the North during the period of World War I, an important shift occurred. Between 1910 and 1930, the percentage of the Negro population of the United States living in the Black Belt was reduced to 40.3, while the portion living in the North rose to 26.1 per cent. For the non-Black Belt part of the South, the relation was changed very little.

In the decade 1930-1940, this tendency towards wider distribution was slowed down considerably. In 1940 38.8 per cent of the Negro people remained in the Black Belt (as of 1930), 19.6 per cent lived in the Border Territory, 13.0 per cent in other portions of the Black Belt states, and 28.6 per cent in non-Southern territory. Thus, in this decade the proportion of the Negro people living in the

Black Belt decreased only by 1.5 percentage points, as compared with a decrease of 5.4 points in 1920-1930 and of 3.6 points in 1910-1920. At the same time, the portion of the Negro people living in the non-South increased by only 2.5 points, as compared with 6.5 points in 1920-1930, and 3.6 points in 1910-1920.

IS THE BLACK BELT VANISHING?

We now have the pertinent facts before us for an objective judgment of Comrade Wilkerson's theory that the Black Belt is vanishing, together with its semifeudalism, and that the Negro people as a whole are becoming a "national minority." We find that instead of being accelerated, the tendency towards dispersal of the Negro concentration in the Black Belt has been considerably slowed down during the thirties. Plantation-sharecropping, which is the gauge of semifeudalism and the index to special exploitation of the Negro people, has continued to rise over a period of fifteen years at least. This period includes not only the crisis, but also the phase of expansion preceding the crash and the period of recovery from the depth of the crisis. No over-all shift from sharecropping to wage-labor took place, although there and there some plantations changed over to machine-production. All very well, it may be asked, but did not the tendency toward dispersal continue during the crisis, albeit at a reduced tempo? And are we not

to expect that a decided acceleration of this trend occurred during World War II on a scale comparable to World War I?

With respect to the first question, the surprising thing is not that the tendency continued, but that it slowed down so sharply after thirty years of constant increase of tempo. I say surprising, because the Black Belt and its dominant semifeudal economy is situated in the midst of the most highly developed capitalist economy in the world, and is subjected to pressures much greater than any colonial economy where pre-capitalist forms of exploitation prevail.

Yet, despite this, the economic survivals of slavery stubbornly persisted in association with the system of developing monopoly capital over a period of 80 years, including phases of industrial upsurge and of crisis in the country as a whole. In the past 30 years alone the Black Belt continued not only through a number of lesser crises and the great depression, but also through three great periods of expansion—World War I, the advance of the twenties and World War II.

Over the entire period since the Civil War, the closest approach toward uprooting semifeudalism and establishing democracy occurred during the great popular upsurge of Reconstruction. *It is only in terms of a similar upsurge, under new conditions and taking different forms, that it is possible again to approach the fulfillment of the tasks left incomplete by Reconstruction.*

WORLD WAR II

As concerns developments during the period of World War II, sufficient preliminary data is on hand to indicate the following:

1. Significant migrations out of the Black Belt occurred, but these did not approach the level of the great migratory movement of World War I. The direction of this movement was also significantly different in that many Negro migrants from the countryside came to the centers of temporary wartime industry in the West and also to cities and towns in the Black Belt and along its periphery, where many wartime plants and extensions have already shut down.

2. The extent of wartime industrialization of the South was not very substantial, although undoubtedly some of it will remain. Its limited extent is indicated by a War Production Board estimate that 93 per cent of the new industrial capacity was located in the previously existing manufacturing areas, only a very few of which were located in Southern regions.

3. Preliminary data from the Agricultural Census of 1945 indicate that in some portions of the Western Black Belt, particularly in Mississippi, machine production has made significant inroads into the plantation economy. This trend can be expected to continue, perhaps at an even faster pace, as long as the postwar boom lasts, but it can be expected to diminish and even reverse itself as large surpluses of labor again accumulate

in the plantation area, forcing living standards back to previous levels and making it more economical to employ sharecropping.

4. At the same time, the number of Negro farm operators is again increasing in the Eastern portions of the Black Belt, and it is there particularly that sharecropping continues to decrease.

These factors and trends influence the Black Belt, but they cannot be expected to alter it basically. More important are the political developments that occurred during wartime and that provide a new impetus to the democratic movement in the South. The extent of the Black Belt and the distribution of the Negro people will continue to fluctuate, but more or less around the relationship already established. This is what we must start from, and not from speculative theories built up on a one-sided and unscientific approach to historical and present-day development, an approach that ignores the most essential conditions for democratic struggle and advance.

Thus, on the basis of facts and the actual process of development, we must reject Comrade Wilkins' "new" theory, which actually is not new since it has been present in one form or another during the past century. If his position cannot stand up against the facts, then his whole theoretical and tactical contribution also collapses. To this aspect, as well as to other questions of perspective, program, and slogans I intend to turn in a subsequent article.