

Letter from I. Amter<sup>1</sup> to D.I. Jones,  
10 May 1922

NEGRO QUESTION (DISCUSSION IN ANGLO-SAXON GROUP  
MEETING 10TH MAY 1922).

Comrade Ivon Jones,

Comrade Katayama says that the Negro question has been repeatedly brought forward and discussed in Comintern circles,<sup>2</sup> and nothing came of it. Now we have the proposal for a Negro Congress in Moscow. We should ask ourselves 'Why has nothing come of it?'. I think it is because we approach the question from the wrong side, we approach it as a race question. We propose a Negro race Congress in Moscow. You say, 'No, a Congress of negro communists'. Nevertheless, it is a race congress. Negro militants drawn from various parts of the earth, Communists drawn from various parts of the earth because they are Negroes. Now, why has nothing come of this proposal? Because the Negro race question is not a revolutionary factor. No race questions can be a revolutionary factor. After the revolution, no doubt, when the world has settled down to an International Soviet Republic, we shall have our hands full of such work, sending 'missionaries' out to the backward peoples and cleaning up the mess made by capitalism, or continuing on the plane of humanity the revolutionary role of capitalism. But now, before the revolution, what vitality has this question of the negro race as such for the attack on capital. Very little. It is true that the Negroes are mentioned in the thesis on Colonial and National questions. But we have many opportunities of intervening and demonstrating for the Comintern as a universal human champion such as we tried to do in our draft appeal on the South African revolt. In this way we can intervene in the Negro question. But that appeal was never sent out.

As an abstract race question we are trying to do something quite new in the present proposal. This is not on a par with the Chinese question or the Indian question. The Chinese question is not a race question. The Indian question is not a race question. These are national questions. This is a question who shall rule India, the Indian people or the British Imperialists; who shall rule China,

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1. The letter is unsigned but the name 'Amter' appears on the back of the original.
  2. The 'Negro question' was part of the debate on the 'national and colonial question' at the 2nd Congress of the Comintern in 1920. The discussion focused on the United States. At the 3rd Congress in 1921 D.I. Jones raised the 'Negro question' again. On Jones' initiative the Congress passed a motion requesting the ECCI to devote attention to 'Negro movements and proletarian movements among Negroes as an important part of the 'Eastern question'. It would seem that this debate led to the 4th Congress of the Comintern adopting 'Theses on the Negro Question'.



the Chinese or the International Capitalists. The issue of this question is a vital factor in the revolution. But the negro race question has no such basis. The negroes everywhere find themselves more or less intermixed with white populations, and are drawn into the white class movements on one side or the other. The Negro race question is of doubtful revolutionary value, and can be of distinct counter-revolutionary effect like Zionism. 'Back to Africa' is the racial slogan used in America to divert the Negroes from their class interests. 'Remember your brothers in America, don't listen to these Communists', that is the counter-attack to our propaganda among the Bantu workers in South Africa. Race solidarity is used for counter-revolutionary purposes among the Negroes, and differs radically from Indian, Chinese, Egyptian, Korean National solidarity against Imperialism.

Because of this I feel that a Negro Race Congress in Moscow at present before the preliminary work has been done by the local Communist Parties, would have a retrograde effect. What we should do is to endeavour to include negroes in the Communist delegations to the Comintern Congresses. We should approach this question as a Colour question. As a colour question dividing the working class and bringing sections of the working class into conflict with each other to the detriment of the general movement, it is a question that demands the immediate attention of the Comintern. When approached from this side all that has been said by Comrade Katayama and others on the racial aspect of the Negro question falls into the right place. We see in the South African revolt how the capitalists managed to camouflage their attack on the standards of the workers under the colour issue, and to pose as the champion of the Negroes against the white workers, instigating pogroms of natives in the slum areas. Here we had an apparent clash of two sections of the workers with right on their side, and the capitalists placing both in the wrong. This Colour question is going to become more acute. We have it looming up also in Australia. Here is Barwell the South Australian Premier coming out openly for the importation of cheap coloured labour into the Northern territory. The Australian capitalists are beginning to feel the intolerable pressure of the good conditions enjoyed by the Australian workers upon their profits in the present crisis of capitalism. In the past the old sectarian Socialists have derided the cry of a 'White Australia', and on the basis of a pseudo-Internationalism they have refused to take a stand against the capitalist proposal to import cheap coloured labour under indenture to Australia. What is behind this slogan of 'White Australia', it is a demand for the maintenance of decent standards of life. And this is behind all the colour prejudice affecting the Negroes among white workers in America and Africa, producing colour slogans. The very men who stand for a 'White Australia', the Australian Seamen's Union for instance, have no colour bar in their membership. They allow Lascar and other colour seamen to sign on under Union conditions. We as Communists should have a clear line on this issue in Australia, South Africa and America, and not put the weapon of Internationalism on the side of the

Capitalists, and identify Communism with an attack on the workers conditions of life. The most militant leaders in the Johannesburg revolt for example were the most noted champions of the negro workers among the white workers.

I believe that the Negro race question is peculiarly one for the local sections of the International, to draw in the negroes into the class movement – irrespective of colour. This is the slogan on this question for both Negroes and whites, 'The solidarity of labour irrespective of colour'. That is the line we have taken in South Africa. When a Trade Unionist in the Transvaal takes up this slogan he thereby declares himself a revolutionary, and renounces all hope in capitalism, for the idea is not realisable under capitalist conditions. And I am glad to say that an increasing number of white workers are accepting the principle, and more will come to it as a result of the last events. Comrade Katayama mentions that the Communist Party in America cannot so easily approach this question as the Comintern, because it will prejudice itself in the eyes of the workers especially in the South. But this slogan, irrespective of colour, will prejudice no one that is with us, or is not against us in principle already. In South Africa we found it a very good way of separating the sheep from the goats. It is a good slogan for finding out the Mensheviks.<sup>3</sup> The Reform Pacifists, although they like to pose as Liberal Negrophiles, they shrink from the idea of class solidarity with the downtrodden black masses, who have no votes. Perhaps we should make an inquiry as to how much the respective parties, working near Negro populations actively take up this question, and use the question to judge of their soundness. The African Blood Brotherhood in America is a pro-Bolshevik organisation of Negroes working in touch with the Communist Party of America and combating the influence of Garvey. I think we have to encourage these movements, although they are tinged with racialism, the racialism of the oppressed. So long as they are directed against the Capitalist class and not against the whites, as the Garvey organisation is. The Negroes are a race of labourers, and their race solidarity is not necessarily opposed to class solidarity if controlled by the Communist motive.

I think that as a colour question which divides the working class the matter demands the immediate attention of the Comintern. But not as a race question uniting the Negroes.

RGASPI, 495/155/3/9–10.

Original in English.

Typed. Copy.

3. Part of the Russian Social-Democratic Party which split into two groups, the Bolsheviks (the majority) and the Mensheviks (the minority), in 1903. The Mensheviks who later on constituted the majority of Russian Social Democrats were non-Leninists, while the Bolsheviks constituted Lenin's following in the Party which in 1918 finalised the split emerging as a separate Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). Here: a euphemism for socialists or communists who did not support the Comintern or the Bolshevik methods.