

Pre-Convention Discussion Articles

DISCUSSION ARTICLE BY CLAUDIA JONES

IT IS EXTREMELY NECESSARY to examine throughly how our revisionist conclusions, under the name of Marxist-Leninist science, affected our work in all fields, so that we may now draw the correct conclusions with which to arm the working class and all the oppressed in our country for full victory over reaction and fascism.

I want to discuss in this article one aspect of the line we adhered to, namely Browder's thesis, contained in his article "On the Negroes and the Right of Self-Determination," which was included in the Workers Library Publisher's pamphlet, *Communists in the Struggle for Negro Rights*.

That this thesis was first put forth in October, 1943, and published in the January, 1944, issue of *The Communist*, is further evidence of what has already been noted by some contributors to these pages: that our revisionism was not something born overnight, but that it had a history, which must now be self-critically examined by each of us who shared in unquestioning and formal acceptance, without study, thought, or true conviction.

I was one who accepted this thesis as part and parcel of our whole estimate of the relationship of forces on a world and on a national scale.

The thesis on self-determination and the Negro people was thus presented by Browder:

... the crisis of history has taken a turn of such character that the Negro people in the United States have found it possible to make their historic decision once and for all. Their decision is for their complete integration into the American nation as a whole, and not for separation. . . .

The decision of the Negro people, is therefore, already made. It is that the Negro people do see the opportunity, not as a pious aspiration for an indefinite future, but as an immediate political task under the present system of approximating the position of equal citizens in America. This is, in itself, an exercise of the right of self-determination by the Negro people. By their attitude, the Negro people have exercised their historical right of self-determination. . . .

Browder bases his thesis, first and foremost, on the premise that this "decision" had taken "definite form which no foreseeable development could now change." But Comrade

Foster's basic Marxist-Leninist analysis of the revisionist class-peace policy advocated by Browder is utterly upheld in this field by current developments. Witness the vehemence with which the permanent FEPC is being fought, and more recently the scandalous libel and lynch spirit of Senator Eastland's attack upon the 800,000 Negro troops, even before victory has been completely won, which signalize the attempts to rupture the war-time Negro-white relations.

Where are the "decisive forces" reputedly at work for "Negro equality"? It is obvious that any such illusion could only disarm the working class which has not yet been advanced and united enough to compel anti-lynch legislation to be placed on the statute books of the land!

On what was the premise that "the Negroes had made their historic decision" based fundamentally? Was it based on a fundamental appraisal of the present economic, political and social status of the Negro people in the Black Belt, where (only) the question of self-determination holds?

Was it based on the prospect of a long-term alliance of the working class and the Negro people to achieve the "guarantees" of which Browder wrote: "Guarantees that there will not be a disappointment such as was administered by the Republican Party after the Civil War"?

Or was it based on a pious hope that the struggle for full economic,

social and political equality of the Negro people would be "legislated" and somehow brought into being through reforms from on top? (Some nine million Negroes live in the Black Belt under Jim Crow oppression. They are the mainstay of the source of cheap labor for monopoly capital in the United States. Their status is upheld and backed up by the Southern feudalists who are the foundation of monopoly capitalist oppression of the Negro people in the nation!)

It cannot be denied, of course, that Browder's thesis was supported and accepted on such apparent evidences in our national life as the influence of the Roosevelt Administration, which removed to a material degree the deeply rooted official sanction of discrimination against the Negro people; on the growth of unity and political maturity of the Negro people, together with the progressive labor movement; especially as evidenced in the fight for realizing the war-time FEPC; on the first election of Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., to the City Council of New York by the combined votes of Negroes and whites; as well as on the drive for abolition of the poll tax—the touchstone of political disfranchisement of ten million Negroes and poor whites in the South.

Of course, the Negro people ought to achieve equality and to renounce their second-class citizenship status! Does this fact, however, have to lead to a fundamental reversal of

the basic position of the Communists on the right to self-determination? Are the two concepts mutually exclusive?

Definitely not! What is the right to self-determination? It is not basically determined by an "attitude" of an oppressed people. It is a scientific principle that derives from an objective condition and upon this basis expresses the fundamental demands (land, equality, and freedom) of the oppressed Negro people.

The weight of emphasis in Browder's thesis on "the attitude of the Negro people" as the determining factor, and our acceptance of it, was a subjective and unscientific approach to the question. The end result of Browder's erroneous analysis, in my considered opinion (unless corrected now), would amount to this: If the Negro people made their historic decision for self-determination, through integration, and would inevitably receive freedom "under the existing American system," what need to mobilize and heighten the fight against white chauvinist ideology? What need to mobilize independent and militant struggle against the Hitler-like discriminatory practices (including social exclusion) which still beset the Negro people, despite important gains registered especially during the last twelve years?

Browder's harmful analysis led of necessity to the strengthening of bourgeois nationalism among the Negro people and to an undue re-

liance on Negro reformist leadership.

Instead of fully utilizing the potential of an anti-fascist war of national liberation, which, as Browder correctly states, fired the political maturity of the Negro people, to root out determinedly the white chauvinist prejudices among the American people (and among new sections of our own membership), we did not take that initiative.

It must be borne in mind that the gains referred to were fought for *consciously* by the Negro people and the advanced win-the-war forces in the labor movement. The very fact that each such gain was an incentive to press for new and greater ones should have shown us the temper of the Negro people, and should, likewise, have made us draw far different conclusions than those we did. It was this *conscious* indignation and organized fight that forced changes from on top; they were not granted willingly, but were the "logic" of such protests. That we spoke of the realization of some of these war-time gains as a "military necessity" *only*, was in many cases closer to a true estimate than we realized, insofar as the commitment of bourgeois class forces was concerned. But that concept led to a weakening of the struggle for Negro rights; for we failed to criticize sharply the liberal-bourgeois policies of the Roosevelt Administration (as in regards to Jim Crow practices in the armed forces) and tended to "put a wet blanket" on those win-the-war forces who ag-

gressively sought to press the demands for Negro rights.

The trends for struggle among the Negro people were not fully evaluated by the C.P.A., or, when they were, the full conclusions were not drawn. In fact, many times as a result of an all too formal national unity policy in the day-to-day struggle for the special needs of the Negro people, we ignored and glossed over the deep concern of the Negro people for their postwar status and the shape of the postwar world. This concern was instanced in the Double V slogan (Victory abroad and Victory at home) raised in 1941 in the Negro press. While not applicable at all stages of that period, it was indicative of the instinctive anti-fascist, anti-imperialist sentiments of the Negro people. In the very pamphlet under discussion, in reprints from the *Negro Digest* debate, "Have the Communists Given Up the Struggle for Negro Rights?" leading comrades, Ford, Davis and Patterson, reflected, although to an insufficient degree, the deep postwar concern of the Negro people. The historic struggle of the Communists for Negro rights and the profound trust of the Negro people in our uncompromising fight are likewise evident in the question posed in that debate, despite its heavy load of Red-baiting opponents. The record negative vote of the *Negro Digest* readers shows this to be a fact beyond any doubt.

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To heighten the fight for Negro

rights becomes more important than ever today. It suffices but to mention the chauvinist ideology which still penetrates the core and culture of our national life, rendering many sections of the people susceptible to infection from this social disease.

That Negro comrades accepted Browder's opportunist thesis makes the error all the more grave, because in effect we accepted the false and bankrupt logic of reformism as a solution to the problems of the Negro people. Not only that, we accepted a "less than equal" status for the Negro people for "generations to come"—something "approximating equality."

Only by sharply dealing with this major question shall we be able to overcome the serious errors of this period and fully explain to the Negro people and the white working class the source of our errors. This, too, is the way to guarantee continued enlistment of the strength and organic support of the Negro people to the common goal.

I have one proposal, which I believe to be practical and necessary, to recommend to the National Board of the C.P.A. That is: to set up a Commission to examine our work in this field, with the aim of making a basic appraisal and study of work in Negro communities, especially presenting a factual study and analysis of the status of the Negro people in the Black Belt, in industry, in consumer, industrial and agricultural spheres, and in the trade unions.