

On the Question of the African-American Nation in the Black Belt

Lenin and the Comintern unambiguously supported the idea that there existed a black nation in the black belt in the US with the right to self-determination. Rightists like Lovestone and Browder (and later Bill Bland and Hari Kumar) did not accept the communist position. Comintern suggested that the rejection of the existence of the black nation with a right to self-determination constituted white chauvinist stands. Here we give an exchange on the social media on this question.

I am always impressed at the clarity and farsightedness of the Comintern Resolutions in many ways. However, the Black Nation Thesis is certainly wrong today and was certainly wrong by the 1970s when many anti-revisionist MLs in the USA were still defending it. The Thesis made very clear that the material basis of the Black Question was the agrarian question in the US South. Obviously, that is no longer the case.

Furthermore, the genius of Harry Haywood, notwithstanding the demand for a separate nation has never been popular among the vast majority of Black Americans, who have always fought for the right to be both Black and American in the USA, with all the equal rights this entails, not for a separate Black Nation.

In fact, the petty bourgeois black nationalists who have achieved large followings at one time or another (e.g., Marcus Garvey's UNIA, the Nation of Islam) have shown themselves willing to negotiate with the KKK and other white racists (including the American Nazi Party) to secure some separate "Black nation" (really a Bantustan). So, separatism has been viewed not just as unrealistic, but (correctly) as capitulation to white supremacy.

Reply

I think there are a number of mistakes in the position of the comrade.

First, I visited parts of the Black Belt, particularly in Louisiana, during the 1980s and 1990s when I was working with a group of Marxist-Leninists there, mainly black but not at all nationalist. I remember that we went along the road from New Orleans to Baton Rouge (the site of one of the largest slave rebellions, in 1811). My comrades pointed out that many of the families there were direct descendants of the slaves who had worked there cutting sugar cane, but today they were working in pharmaceutical and other small industries.

It is true that at the time of the Comintern resolution, the agrarian question was at the heart of the question of the Black Nation. It is equally true that this has changed, as industry (including the service industry) is now predominant in this area. However, this is not essentially different from the situation in many oppressed countries, in particular in Latin America. The relations of production there are no longer agricultural but are mainly dependent capitalist. But no one would claim that these countries are no longer dependent on imperialism, especially US imperialism.

There is also confusion on which are objective questions and which are subjective. Whether there is a Black Nation in the south is an objective one, not a matter of the will of even members of that nation. There is no doubt that there have been some changes in the territory of the nation, as many black people have migrated to the north, but also to major cities in the Black Belt itself (Atlanta, Birmingham, Houston, etc.). But this does not change the fact that there is still a predominantly black territory in the area. (To make another comparison, there are now more Puerto Ricans in the United States than there are in Puerto Rico, but that does not change the fact that Puerto Rico is an oppressed nation, in this case a colony, of the U.S.)

If one is a Marxist and recognizes the existence of a nation in the Black Belt (and again this is an objective question), then one must acknowledge the right to self-determination of that nation. But this does not in any way mean that we have to call for secession of that nation. As Lenin pointed out, we call for the right to divorce but that does not mean that we think that couples should actually divorce. There is no doubt that the great majority of black people in the U.S. today want equal rights (including the right not to be killed by police), not for independence.

However, if here comes a time when the movement among people in the Black Belt becomes much advanced than in the rest of the country, the question of independence of the Black Belt could become a practical issue.

Finally, Garvey's UNIA never called for a separate Black nation in the South— they called for a movement "Back to Africa," which gave them a common base with the KKK which also wanted to get rid of Blacks from the U.S. We do not have to follow behind other nationalists such as the Nation of Islam, which incorrectly saw the question of the Black nation as meaning five states (which included areas that are not part of the nation and excluded areas that are part of the nation). We must take up this question as Marxist-Leninists, not as nationalists.

I hope this clarifies some of these questions.

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