

Book Review

**‘The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans 1917-1936’
by Mark Solomon, University Press of Mississippi, 1998.**

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In 1935, at the time of the Seventh Congress of the Communist International (CI), membership of Afro-Americans in the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) had grown from less than 100 people in 1930 to over 2500!! Through the CI and CPUSA-led International Labor Defense (ILD), the Scottsboro Case and the Angelo Herndon Case had linked the struggle for Afro-American freedom in the USA to the cause of oppressed and exploited peoples throughout the world. At the very core of the Afro-American people’s struggle were the Alabama communists. Almost all Black toilers, most were either industrial workers in the Steel centres in and around Birmingham or Black farmers organized in the now ten thousand strong Sharecroppers Union. The SCU had not even existed five years earlier!

It was the Alabama Sharecroppers Union which fought the sharpest battles – including armed struggle against the repressive Ku Klux Klan-Sheriffs’ power of the state – and continued gaining membership and momentum throughout this period. In November of 1932, the Sharecroppers Union (SCU) had 778 members. In December, at the Battle of Reeltown, armed sheriffs came to the home of an SCU member to collect some farm animals for a debt he owed a white merchant. Several armed SCU members were present to help the man keep his livestock. The sheriffs returned with a posse and a gun battle took place. In the aftermath, an SCU membership list was discovered and a white vigilante gang of 500 was organized that terrorized the Afro-American people of the entire area. Several were murdered. Many were beaten and arrested. Within a few weeks afterwards, however, a demonstration of several thousand Afro-American protesters rallied in opposition to the terror and, in a separate tribute, three thousand mourners followed two caskets draped with the hammer and sickle to burial.

Not only did the Reeltown Battle not stifle the SCU but the union dramatically grew to two thousand SCU members organized in 73 locals by June 1933. In addition, in the same half-year following Reeltown, the SCU organized women’s auxiliaries and youth groups and the SCU began organizing in Georgia. ‘The Party established five new rural units as Reeltown became a hymn of resistance throughout the rural South.’ By the summer of 1935, following a cotton choppers strike which met with violent repression but also with some concrete victories, SCU membership had grown to nearly ten thousand.

Such rural armed struggle for land and freedom in the Black Belt USA was in conformity with the political line which had been developed by the CI with the participation of Afro-American and other CPUSA leaders over a number of years. In 1928 and again in 1930, a major resolution on the theme of *the Afro-American people constituting an oppressed nation in the Black Belt South territory of the USA* was promulgated by the CI in the context of the very militant and aggressive general line against international capital of the Sixth Congress period. But the Seventh World Congress of the CI had to deal with the rising menace of world fascism. A less

aggressive and more defensive posture was established by the CI that included broader coalition work with non-proletarian and even non-revolutionary forces.

In the USA, any necessary rightist tactical corrections of ultra left manifestations, pointed out by the new CI position on the United Front Against Fascism, unfortunately helped to provide opportunist and white chauvinist forces within the CPUSA excuses or even cover up for the liquidation of the Party's strong and developing work on the Negro National Question, especially in the Black Belt South. In pursuit of often illusory Black-white unity, not only among workers and peasants, but even with white petty bourgeois liberals and ultimately the Roosevelt Administration, the SCU was carved up and handed over to bourgeois liberal elements leading predominantly white farmers organizations and social-democratic oriented trade unions also dominated by whites, the ILD mass membership was turned over to the NAACP¹ and the Party shop and neighbourhood units in Birmingham and elsewhere were transformed into larger 'branches' or 'clubs' in which active participation was no longer required. In essence, revolutionary work among the Afro-American people, especially in the Black Belt, was liquidated on the altar of the Popular Front.

Virtually all the facts stated above are documented in 'The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans 1917-1936' by Mark Solomon (University Press of Mississippi, 1998). And the details surrounding these momentous events in US history make the book worth reading.

A retired white petty bourgeois radical professor, Mark Solomon is currently a national Co-chair of the Committees of Correspondence which resulted from a split from the right revisionist CPUSA *from the right*, in the aftermath of the demise of the USSR. Solomon has essentially rejected Leninism in favour of social democracy. His goal for the USA is 'a more equitable and democratic distribution of wealth and power' (p. 309). Yet, as a 'leftist' historian, Solomon presents the book as if he is sympathetic to both the Communist Party of the USA and especially to the Afro-American people of the 1917-1936 period. This places Solomon in quite a predicament.

Most if not all of the great gains and accomplishments enumerated in the book result from the following:

1. Positive, and at times, outstanding leadership provided by the Communist International, especially in the theoretical development of the thesis on the Afro-American Nation;
2. Underground Party work;
3. Democratic Centralism in party organization;
4. Armed Struggle as a component part of the unfolding revolutionary process; and
5. Black proletarian and peasant unity as the cornerstone of the Afro-American national liberation movement in the Black Belt South.

Yet, Solomon is opposed to the CI and specifically to the thesis on the Afro-American National Question. He opposes underground party work and democratic centralism, repudiates armed struggle, and longs for the 'defiant inter-racialism' of his youth, with total dismissal of any role in the revolution for the Afro-American peasantry.

Solomon is at his best as an historian in 'Part I The Early Years 1917-1928'. Here he describes in detail the pioneer Black communists – those like Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, Otto Huiswood, West Indian immigrants, as well as Afro-Americans like Lovett Fort-Whiteman, Hubert Harrison, Otto Hall and Hall's brother, Harry Haywood. Before the October Revolution of 1917, a number of them were in the left wing of the Socialist Party. Others, like Briggs, would not join a Party that did not address the Negro Question. Briggs '...merged black nationalism with revolutionary socialism and introduced the twentieth century global revolutionary tide to black America.' He and other Black revolutionaries were also influenced by the national liberation struggle of the Irish people and specifically of the Easter Rising in 1916.

Cyril Briggs established the *Crusader* magazine in late 1918 and announced in its October 1919 issue the formation of the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB). By this time, Briggs' vacillation between support and opposition to President Woodrow Wilson with his and the League of Nation's false promises of 'colonial freedom' had ceased. The anti-Black riots of the Red Summer of 1919, attempting to put the returning Afro-American war veterans 'back in their place', made all the more urgent the fight for Afro-American rights.

Under the impact of the Russian Revolution, these Black pioneers gravitated from these various tendencies toward the new Communist parties formed in the USA with links to Soviet Russia. This was despite the fact that the two new CP's formed in the USA had factional differences, had to deal with questions of legal vs. underground organization, and were largely made up of foreign-born immigrant workers, many of whom hardly spoke English at all. All this made dealing with a 'U.S.' problem such as the Negro Question extremely difficult for them.²

In this light, Solomon correctly points out that, 'The formation of the Third International in March 1919 was a defining event. Its hostility to the veiled colonialism of the League of Nations paralleled Briggs' ...' Solomon continues, 'Lenin's International marked a dramatic contrast with the Second International's ambivalence over the colonial question. In contrast to Wilson's bogus self-determination, the Comintern's manifesto called for the overthrow of colonial exploitation...' (pp. 7-8).

Part I includes much valuable experience of these and other pioneer Black communists as they interacted with Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph and others in the struggle for leadership among the Afro-American people. It becomes clear that the thesis developed in the CI regarding the right of the Afro-American people to self-determination as an oppressed nation within the US multinational state had much of its rudiments in the class struggle experience of these early Afro-American communists among the Afro-American masses.

However, it seems that in order to have his book published by a reputable bourgeois publisher, Solomon must issue a disclaimer about any serious commitment to revolutionary change right from the beginning. Thus, in his introduction, such nuggets appear as, 'Yet, despite the mind bending nastiness and sectarianism of the Third Period from 1928 to 1934, some of the most daring, uncompromising, and ground-breaking battles were waged, especially for African American rights.' (p. xxiv). On the same page, Solomon characterizes the CPUSA's relationship to the CI as 'supposedly deadly obedience to external forces' without qualification. However, a few sentences later he is forced to admit that Comintern 'pressure was decisive in forcing the

U.S. Party to depart from the pattern of neglect and hostility to African Americans that had often characterized their radical predecessors.’ (*ibid.*).

Throughout the book, Solomon is in a dilemma. He cannot reconcile the accomplishments of the oppressed with his social democratic and reformist beliefs. At every turn, it is the revolutionary communists and their line and organization that in the face of terrible odds are making advances in the struggle for national liberation and socialism. He loses all objectivity, all perspective.

To denigrate the theory of Self-Determination of the Afro-American Nation: Solomon first states that, ‘Ironically, the power of self-determination lay not in its theoretical validity but in its pragmatic implications.’ Obviously, Solomon has long forgotten Marx’s dictum that ‘our theory is not a dogma but a guide to action’. Secondly, Solomon ‘defends’ the self-determination thesis from the charge that it was ‘made in Moscow’. Saying that Russians were ‘swarming around the issue’ and that Stalin may well have been the source of the thesis, Solomon asserts, ‘To label the prime symbol of genocidal totalitarianism and the failure of the Soviet model as the author of self-determination may, for some, discredit the theory beyond the point of consideration. But that still does not erase serious theoretical and political issues inherent in the concept.’

On the very next page, while describing the arduous life of the early Afro-American students studying revolutionary theory and practice in Moscow, Solomon tells of a meeting called by the Black students of KUTV with top CI leader Dimitri Manuilsky in January 1933 in which Walter Lewis of Birmingham and two students from Harlem complained about degrading characterizations of Blacks in both children’s and adult Soviet theatres. Solomon admits that ‘Cleansing racism from Soviet culture was an arduous job, but by 1934 the students reported that progress had been made.’ Where else but in Stalin’s Russia could that accomplishment have taken place then, or now?!

While spewing all his anti-communist venom and bile on comrade Stalin, U.S. bourgeois professor Solomon, is, however, extremely measured and respectful in his characterization of Jay Lovestone and his henchman, Edward Welsh. Referring to Welsh, Solomon states, ‘He remained loyal to Lovestone and followed him through the byzantine corridors of radical factionalism to the most conservative sectors of the labour movement.’ In the USA today, it is well documented that Lovestone, who, for decades thereafter, played the role of George Meany’s foreign affairs chief at the AFL-CIO, was a major conduit for the Central Intelligence Agency, at times even more rabid in his anti-communism than the CIA itself! Indeed, Lovestone is the man most responsible for it being referred to among working people throughout the world as the AFL-CIA! With friends like Solomon, who needs enemies?

Finally, what does the book’s title mean? What kind of ‘unity’ is the subject of Solomon’s book? Solomon provides the answer to this question and exposes his bias right away. At the end of his lengthy introduction, Solomon expresses nostalgia for the period of his youth in his native New York City in the early 1950’s which he describes as being characterized by a ‘defiant interracialism’. Furthermore, he asserts his belief that ‘had the force of that experience flowed more strongly into the 1960’s and into the present, a far greater degree of black-white unity could have been achieved.’ (pp. xxvii and xxviii) Solomon concludes the introduction by

truthfully admitting: 'That experience, for better or worse, informs this work and shapes the author's point of view.'

This is quite an admission. For, on the one hand, the period he longs for, the early 1950's, was a period of some of the harshest repression against both the CPUSA and the Afro-American people!! And, on the other hand, while the CPUSA has never bounced back to its pre-1950's strength, Solomon apparently fails to notice that the Afro-American people's struggle for freedom made tremendous gains in the 1960's, advancing rapidly from civil rights movement to Black Liberation Movement and Black Power Movement — gaining momentum and strength as it cast aside undue concern for white liberal allies, focused on Black unity, and sought and received international support from Cuba, China, and workers and oppressed peoples especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Clearly, Solomon's goal of 'black-white unity' was *not* the key criterion for success or failure of the Afro-American people's struggle in the 1960's. In fact, the struggle became more successful as it took on an increasingly *national* democratic character.

Perhaps, Solomon exposes his renegacy most in the following. Solomon states, 'After 1935 black nationhood clearly faded from Communist rhetoric. The concept was formally interred by Earl Browder in 1943, when he declared that African Americans had exercised self-determination by rejecting it. The concept was revived following Browder's expulsion in 1946, but was again laid to rest in 1958'(p. 86). Near the end of the book, Solomon declares with a dramatic flourish that 'the connection between the events of the 1930's and the movement of the 1960's was not severed.' On the contrary, the fact that the CPUSA had laid the Afro-American Self-Determination line to rest in 1958 meant that the young, courageous Black youth of the 1960's were starting from just about zero ideologically and politically! And the fact that it was none other than Earl Browder, architect of postwar class collaboration of modern revisionism with US imperialism and liquidator of the CPUSA itself who had almost simultaneously liquidated the Afro-American national question at the same time is not worth noting by the bourgeois historian, Mark Solomon.

Solomon's final chapter title: 'Part III The New Deal and the Popular Front' and his decision to end the book in 1936 with an effort to build the National Negro Congress (seeking above class Black unity to be connected to above class Black-white unity in the Popular Front), not only serves to bury the historic significance of the Communist International but places him squarely with the Roosevelt forces and the Browderite conception of United States imperialism. This prettification of US imperialism in the post World War II period, has provided much of the rationale for the rapprochement of Tito, Khrushchev, and Teng Hsiao-peng among others. It has helped lead us to the present Bush-led, US imperialist-led global war of terror against the peoples of the world.

Today, just as in the past, the attitude of the proletarian revolutionary movement toward the Afro-American National Question is a key question in the struggle against international capital, headed by US imperialism.

Does this mean that Solomon's book has no value for the international proletariat and oppressed peoples and for the communist vanguard in the struggle for world socialism? No. On the contrary, Solomon provides valuable historical facts about the early years of the relationship

between the Afro-American people and the communists of the CPUSA, the new Soviet Union, and the Soviet-led Communist International. Despite his social democratic rhetoric, Solomon elaborates enough historical facts that the proletarian revolutionary can discern the following:

1. The Communist International played an outstanding role in helping the fledgling communist movement in the USA to become an effective force in US politics of the 1930's.
2. The Self-Determination Thesis with regard to the Afro-American Nation, developed in the CI, proved in practice to be valid in this same period.
3. The rural armed struggle in the countryside of the US (South), rather than taking away from the contradiction between labour and capital in the cities, complemented it. When the rural armed struggle was liquidated in Alabama and its environs, so too was the contradiction between labour and capital in the cities mitigated and moderated by the CPUSA.

Despite the economic changes that have occurred in the intervening decades, including the disappearance of most of the Afro-American peasantry, the land hunger is still there. And despite the heroic and massive Black liberation movement of the 1960's, the oppressed Afro-American Nation has not been liberated. The task still remains. And so too does its potential for being the Achilles heel of US imperialism.

References:

1. With regard to the dissolution of the ILD, the loyal and exemplary Afro-American communist leader in Birmingham, steelworker Hosea Hudson, stated, that local party leaders had to 'hammer and hammer on our people, especially Negroes, to become members of the NAACP as a mass organization. Before, we just knew it was there, but we didn't go, that was the better class of folks was in the NAACP. A ordinary Negro didn't feel that was his place.' (p. 124, *Hammer and Hoe*, R.D.G. Kelley)]

2. Nevertheless, under the brilliant leadership of William Z. Foster, a successful struggle to organize the vast Chicago stockyards and the packinghouse industry took place in 1917-18 simultaneous with the birth of the Soviet Union. Over 200,000 packinghouse workers including twenty-five thousand Black workers were organized in this campaign. The Irish-American anarcho-syndicalist, soon to become a leader of the new CPUSA, skillfully struggled against both the prevailing reactionary AFL-supported white chauvinism that sought to exclude Black workers and the 'open hostility of Black middle class elements' which 'advocated a policy of scabbing.' In this way, they 'built up the largest Negro trade union membership ever organized in any American city.' (Foster's *American Trade Unionism*, p. 23)