



## Prologue

### *The CPUSA and Black America, 1919–1928*

*For the duration of the “Red Summer” of 1919, in the midst of the disorder that followed World War I and in the exhilaration stimulated by the Russian Revolution, white radicals in the United States kicked off the American Communist movement. Its birth was accompanied by an eruption of major race riots in this country that signaled a new militant resistance by young blacks to American racial proscription. “New Negro” intellectuals gave voice to this militancy. Some of them, expressing solidarity with the pro-Bolshevik uprisings occurring in Europe at the time, were struck by Bolshevism’s appeal not only to the working class of highly industrialized nations but also to oppressed national ethnic minorities.*

*In spite of this interest, however, few blacks enlisted in the new radical movement. In the early years of the history of the CPUSA in the United States, this new Marxist-Leninist organization claimed few African American members. Most party devotees came from foreign-language federations formerly associated with the Socialist Party of America (SP). Moreover, these immigrant workers from Eastern and Southern Europe did not have much positive contact with black Americans. The source of the negligence can indeed be traced to the Socialist Party.*

*The SP had attracted few African American members in the years before 1919. True, Eugene Debs and other prominent Socialist leaders*

were usually opponents of racial segregation, disenfranchisement, peonage, and lynching. Nevertheless, American Socialists did not emphasize work with blacks, and they often downplayed or ignored white supremacy in the form of their party's allegiance to trade unions that discriminated against non-white workers. Historians generally agree that the SP was unwilling to combat vigorously the racial inequities among American workers.

Communists in the United States, like the Socialists, at first displayed only a slight concern with black workers. They also failed to engage the young black militants who emerged on the scene in the post-war period. By the early 1920s, however, the CPUSA was defining the "Negro problem" in the United States in a global context. As an instrument of world revolution and anticolonialism, the CPUSA approached the racial situation from that broad perspective. Accordingly, black Americans combating Jim Crow and lynching were essentially no different from Africans fighting for national independence and self-determination. Not surprisingly, then, the party proved most attractive at this time to black laborers who displayed internationalist proclivities. In fact, a number of African American members of the CPUSA in the early 1920s were immigrant workers from the West Indies. Understandably, they viewed the struggles of the black working class in the United States in the larger context of non-Europeans fighting against capitalism and imperialism.

During the middle of the 1920s, some leaders of the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), a black Socialist organization that boasted a number of black Jamaican radicals in its ranks, linked up with the CPUSA. A black Marxist organization active during the Harlem Renaissance, the ABB also opposed American participation in World War I and linked the struggle for black liberation in the United States to the battle against European colonization in Africa. In 1918, Briggs started a new magazine called *The Crusade*. The ABB backed the electoral campaigns of the SP candidate A. Philip Randolph and exposed lynching in the South and job discrimination in the North. Briggs believed that the African American's true place was with the labor and that blacks would benefit from the triumph of labor and the destruction of the "Capital Civilization." A secret revolutionary organization, the ABB's purpose and program was the liberation of African people and the redemption of the African race. Its program emphasized racial pride, Black National-

*ism, Pan-Africanism, and an economic analysis of the African American struggle that linked it to colonialism and imperialism. By 1925, the ABB leadership had established close ties with the CPUSA.*

*The following FBI document, which focuses on the ABB and the historical black figure Claude McKay (the FBI worried he was too close to the Communists because of his visits to the Soviet Union), reveals important historical information but no real subversion. Claude McKay (1889–1948), a Jamaican American writer and poet, was an influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance. He was also attracted to communism in his early life; however, he was never a member of the American Communist Party.*



Federal Bureau of Investigation, Freedom of Information  
Privacy Act, File on Claude McKay

*Excerpt from the 1922 Report on the Commission of the  
Fourth Conference of the Communist International*

Individuals

Claude McKay

Negro radical and one of the editors of the “Liberator,” is said to have made the statement recently that this publication may have to suspend publication because of lack of funds, brought about by the embezzlement of \$4000, by one of the employees. McKay, at the same time stated that he is still a member of the Communist Party and intends to rejoin the I.W.W.

While at Ray Baker’s office, 7 E. 15th Street, Room 401, McKay stated that he supported a true militant class conscious movement, which is not afraid to use guns, and that in the Tulsa riots last year the African Blood Brotherhood supplied the Negroes with the guns and load in the fighting there, which might also be said of other race riots.

He was asked where he secured his information, and stated he has firsthand information of this, but refused to divulge the name.

Baker is a close friend of Claude McKay, and it is believed this is the source of information.

Some months ago while placing Cyril Briggs [another black Communist] under surveillance in connection with the African Blood Brotherhood, mention [redacted] to a house West 133rd Street, with a man who was described at that time, and that Claude McKay was also [redacted] believed that that man is one A. J. Anderson. . . .



*In his classic Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression, Robin D. G. Kelley successfully established that the Communist movement raised black consciousness by placing the Southern racial caste system (the system of segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching) in a global context. The following essay by the black Communist Otto Huiswoud reinforces this historical point.*



Earl Browder Papers, Special Collections Research Center,  
Syracuse University Library

### *World Aspects of the Negro Question*

By Otto Huiswoud\*

*The Communist*, 1930

\*Otto Huiswoud was born in 1893 in Suriname, the grandson of a slave. In 1912 he moved to the United States where he worked as a trader in tropical products and, later, as a printer in Harlem. He then became involved with American socialist and Negro organizations. His earliest known affiliation was with a group surrounding the *Messenger*, a monthly magazine established by A. Philip Randolph (1889–1979) and Chandler Owen (1889–1967) and published from 1917 to 1928. While urging American Negroes to support the Russian Revolution, this group's leaders rejected the Communists' greater emphasis on class struggle, rather than on racism. . . .

UNTIL RECENT YEARS the Negro question and its relationship to the revolutionary working class movement was practically unnoticed, almost completely ignored. Little attention was paid to the

Negro masses in their struggles against imperialist exploitation and subjection, no thought given to their revolutionary potentialities—to the role they are destined to play in the movement for the emancipation of the working class from capitalist domination and enslavement. As a result, little or no attempts were made to draw the Negro workers in the struggle against world imperialism.

Our approach to the Negro question has not only been largely sectional rather than international, but our concept and interpretation of the Negro question was narrow and incorrect. The old Social Democratic notion that the Negro question is only a class question, prevailed with us for a considerable time. We are only now beginning to realize that the Negro question is not only a class question but also a race question. (We are beginning to understand that the Negro masses are not only subjected to the ordinary forms of exploitation as other workers, but that they are also the victims of a brutal caste system which holds them as an inferior servile class; that lynching, segregation, peonage, etc., are some of the means utilized to keep them the underdog in capital society—social outcasts.)

In order to maintain its policy of repression, violence and exploitation of the Negro, the bourgeoisie creates a false racial ideology among the whites and fosters contempt and hatred for the Negroes. The idea of “superior” and “inferior” races is the theoretical justifications for their policy of super-exploitation of the Negro race.

The situation of the Negro masses varies in the different countries and therefore requires investigation and analysis. The concrete application of the policies and tasks of the Communist Parties are dependent upon the prevailing conditions in the various countries. It is of the utmost importance that we note the differences that characterize the position of the Negroes in the different parts of the world. The following territorial division based upon population and certain general common features should be considered:

*The United States and some Latin American countries, in which the Negro population is a minority.*

*Africa and the West Indies, where the Negro population is the majority in relation to the white population.*

*The “independent” Negro nations (Haiti and Liberia), which are in reality semi-colonies of American imperialism.*

While the Negro race everywhere is a subject race and there exists a common bond of interest based upon racial oppression, nevertheless, the conditions of the Negroes are not similar in the above mentioned territorial divisions. It is essential that we distinguish the situation of the Negro masses in the colonies—Africa and the West Indies; the semi-colonies—Haiti and Liberia, who suffer from colonial exploitation, from that of the Negro in America, a racial minority, subjected to racial persecution and exploitation. We must take into consideration the National-colonial character of the Negro question in Africa and the West Indies and the racial character of this question in the United States.

We must take note of the fact that the Negro question in Africa has all the characteristic features of the national-colonial question. Some of these features are:

*Majority of population and organized communities.*

*A common language and culture. In contrast to this Negro in America has:*

*No distinct language and culture from the dominant racial group; it is a minority of the population; its only distinguishing feature is its racial origin.*

It is therefore imperative that the concrete policies and tasks of the Communist Parties be based on the foregoing considerations. Only with a clear understanding of these conditions can we apply the correct policies and tactics. . . .

### The Negro in the United States

In the United States the Negro is an oppressed racial minority. The exploitation of the Negro masses in America is of a twofold character—racial and class exploitation. The twelve million Negroes in the United States are the special victims of capitalist exploitation and subjection. Members of a racial minority, they are singled out for the severest attacks and persecution by the employing class.

The development of America required cheap labor for the southern cotton and tobacco plantations. Africa became the source of supply of the much needed man-power. The slave trade, while resulting in the death of millions of Africans, the depopulations on a wholesale scale of the African Continent, and in the most horrible

violence and atrocities against the African natives, produced millions in profits for the slave traders and their bankers.

Chained to the land for over 300 years through the system of chattel slavery, Negro labor produced the basis of the wealth of the United States. Driven with the lash, subjected to the most horrible forms of torture and brutality, the Negro slaves produced untold riches for the ruling class. The many revolts of the slaves against this monstrous system of enslavement and exploitation were brutally suppressed by the wealthy landowners and the State. Following the Civil War, the primitive mode of production of chattel slavery was replaced with that of wage slavery.

However, while the Negroes in the North became wage slaves during the period of reconstruction, the Southern Negro was practically completely re-enslaved on the plantations. The courts enacted innumerable laws which served to keep the Negro under the complete domination of the landowners. Every instrument at its disposal was used by the ruling class to shackle the Negro workers and bind them to the plantation.

### The South

The Negro population is not only concentrated in the South, but the bulk is concentrated in the rural sections. Out of the nearly 9,000,000 Negroes living in sixteen Southern states, about 6,000,000 or two-thirds live in the rural areas. In a number of states the Negro masses form a large part of the population. In Alabama and Louisiana, they constitute (1920 census) 38%, in Georgia 42% and in Mississippi and South Carolina 51% of the total population.

In the South the millions of Negro workers and farmers are largely concentrated within certain areas known as the “Black Belt,” due primarily to the plantation type of agriculture. The Negro tenant farmer, share cropper, and farm worker are virtually slaves on the land. The poor farmer and share cropper can never hope to own the land he tills, due to a credit and mortgage system which chains him to the land and makes him the serf of the merchants, landholders and bankers. Not only the land, but even the implements, crops—everything is mortgaged, placing them under complete domination of the white ruling class. The Negro farm workers are compelled to toil long hours under the most revolting conditions

and for a miserable pittance as wages, receiving in some instances, as in Georgia, as little as \$19 per month. Peonage, debt and convict slavery, vagrancy laws, disfranchisements, segregation, lynching and mob violence are the methods used to mercilessly exploit and oppress the Negroes in the South. These are the methods of double exploitation of the Negro used by the capitalist class in order to extract super profits from their labor.

The migratory movement of the Negroes from the Southern plantations which really began soon after the Civil War and reached its peak in 1923, resulted in the tremendous increase of the Negro population in the Southern as well as the Northern cities. Fully one and one-half million Negroes have migrated to the urban centers between the years of 1910 and 1920. In 1890 less than 1,500,000 Negroes lived in cities. Recent estimates give the urban Negro population as 4,000,000. Between the years of 1920 [and 19]25 the Negro farm population decreased from 5,300,615 to 4,505,796 or 15%. During this same period the white farm population decreased 11% indicating that Negroes were migrating from the farms at a greater ratio than whites.<sup>1</sup> The latest reports give the total number of Negro farmers as 926,708. Of this number 219,612 are farm owners, 2,026 farm managers, and 705,708 tenants. Negro farmers are 14.7% of the total number of farmers. In 1910, 27% of Negro male laborers were farm workers, in 1920 only 16.5%.

The rapid industrialization of the south is drawing ever larger numbers of Negroes into the southern industries. The process of rationalization, speed-up, etc., affects most sharply the Negro workers. Fresh from farm labor, they come into industry for the first time at a point where the most terrific drive for production is taking place. Driven at a terrific rate, at long hours, and miserably low wages, terrorized and victimized, Negro labor in the South is not only cheap labor, but virtually slave labor. The south depends to a very large extent upon Negro labor for the production of its wealth. The heaviest, dirtiest tasks are performed by Negro workers. The turpentine, lumber, fertilizer, tobacco and cotton industries use largely Negro labor. Over 50% of the more than 100,000 lumber workers in the South are Negroes. Nearly three times as many Negroes are whites

<sup>1</sup>These figures are national, but the Negro farmers are mostly in the South.



are in the steel industry working ten hours and more per pay. Over 50,000 are in the coal mining industry. The tobacco and cotton industries employ tens of thousands of Negro workers, paying them as low as ten dollars per week. The vast majority of waterfront workers in the South are Negroes. The textile industry is increasing using Negro workers. One textile plant in Durham, N.C. employs 700 Negro workers.

Negro women and children are used to further worsen the conditions of the male workers. Negro women and children are employed largely in the tobacco and textile industries, slaughtering and meat packing houses and the canneries. Twenty-nine and one-half percent of Negro women in canneries earn less than four dollars per week. The average wage for tobacco workers is seven dollars per week. In the cotton waste mills 81% of the Negro women employed toil ten hours per day for a miserably low wage.

Segregation into the worst sections, compelled to live in flimsy, dirty shanties, jim-crowed at every turn, the Negro masses are bitterly exploited and live in the most abject poverty. They are disfranchised and subjected to violence if they dare assert their rights to vote in elections. Intimidated and brutally lynched by the Ku Klux Klan, the Night Riders and various other terroristic agencies of the capitalist class, the Negro masses in the South are unable to resist their oppression and exploitation, because of the lack of organization and the prejudiced attitude, not only of the employers, but also of the white workers who are saturated with the idea of race “superiority.” Blinded by race hatred, deliberately fostered by the capitalist class, the mass of white workers fail to see the common interest between them and the Negro workers. (Despite this racial antagonism, the worsening of the conditions of the white workers practically to the level of that the Negroes, and the organizing and propaganda activities of the left wing unions and the Communist Party are laying the basis for the united action on the part of black and white against their common enemy—the exploiters.)

## The North

Soon after the Civil War, a slow but steady migration of Negroes from the South to the North began. Thousands of Negro peasants abandoned the plantations for the Northern cities. The demand for

labor in the war industries and the check on foreign immigration provided the basis for a huge mass movement from the South to the North, involving hundreds of thousands of Negroes. The Negro population of the North increased tremendously. The following table will show a partial picture of the increase of the Negro population in some of the industrial states:

| <i>States</i> | <i>1870</i> | <i>1920</i> |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| Pennsylvania  | 65,294      | 284,568     |
| Ohio          | 63,213      | 186,187     |
| New York      | 52,081      | 198,483     |
| New Jersey    | 30,658      | 117,132     |
| Illinois      | 28,762      | 182,274     |
| Indiana       | 24,560      | 80,810      |

Turning their backs to the oppressive conditions of the South, with its intense exploitation, low wages and long hours, peonage and terrorism, the migrants flocked into the North. In his efforts to escape the open terrorism, Jim-Crowism and serfdom in the South, the Negro soon discovered that the conditions in the North are only little better than those from which he escaped. In the North he is the special object of intense exploitation and proscription. He is confronted with discrimination and Jim-Crowism in restaurants, theatres and other public places. He is the special prey of the landlords and real estate sharks. The segregation of Negroes into restricted areas, forcing them to pay rents forty to fifty percent higher than white tenants pay for similar accommodations, is one of the methods of double exploitation utilized by the bourgeoisie against the Negro. Both white and Negro landlords reap a harvest of profits through this system of segregating Negroes into districts notorious for their unsanitary conditions, thereby causing a shockingly high death rate of the Negro workers. Racial separation, through segregation, is an effective means of reducing the Negro to a social outcast.

The Negro farmhand of yesterday has become an industrial worker in the North. Absorbed into various industries, the two million Negro workers are an important factor in the basic industries, such as steel, coal, iron, automobile, railroad, etc.

The industrialization of the Negro workers can best be appreciated when we take into consideration not only the increase of Negro

population in the industrial areas of the country but also the large numbers who have entered into some of the basic industries. The role and importance of the Negro proletariat in the North can easily be seen from the following figures, though incomplete:

| <i>Occupation</i>      | <i>1890</i> | <i>1910</i> | <i>1920</i> |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Trade & transportation | 145,717     | 334,442     | 452,888     |
| Extraction of minerals | —           | —           | 73,229      |
| Mfg. & mechanical      | 207,588     | 522,581     | 886,810     |
| Textile                | —           | 11,333      | 24,734      |
| TOTAL                  | 353,305     | 898,336     | 1,437,661   |

Taking his place side by side with the white workers in the gigantic factories, mills and mines, subjected to capitalist rationalization, wage cuts, speed-up and unemployment, with its consequent radicalization of the masses, the role of the Negro proletariat will play in the sharpening class struggles can no longer be ignored.

The Negro workers are largely unorganized as a result of the A.F. of L. policy of outright refusal to organize the mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. The reactionary bureaucracy in control of the craft unions bar Negroes outright or practice gross discrimination against them. With their policy of racial separation and hostility, they play the game of the employers. The A.F. of L. and socialist leaders constantly betray the Negro workers in their struggle, as in the waiters' strike in Chicago in 1922, the calling off of the scheduled Pullman porters' strike and the issuing of a "Federal Charter" to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, thereby jimmecrowing and weakening the organization, leaving the workers at the mercy of the Pullman Company. In spite of the treacherous policy of these labor "leaders" there are nearly 200,000 Negro workers organized in the trade unions.

The sharpening class differentiation within the Negro population must no longer be ignored. The segregation of the Negro masses creates the basis for the development of a group of real estate brokers, merchants and bankers. Under the deceptive slogan of "race loyalty" the Negro bourgeoisie has been able to establish an ideological influence over the Negro masses.

The Garvey movement and the N.A.A.C.P. are classic examples of the reformist movements exerting considerable ideological

influence over the Negro, diverting his militancy into reformist channels, betraying the Negro workers in their struggle against capitalist exploitation.

A basic task before the Communist Party and the revolutionary unions is the winning over of the Negro masses in America and in the colonies for their struggle against world imperialism, under the leadership of the Communist International.

The recent revolts of the natives throughout Africa are indicative of the readiness of the African workers to fight against the brutal exploitation and oppression of world imperialism. The colonial slaves in Africa and the West Indies must be organized and drawn into the world-wide revolutionary movement for the overthrow of world capitalism.

In the United States the proletarianization and the growing radicalization of the Negro masses provide us the basis for organizing the Negro industrial workers in the new revolutionary trade unions under the leadership of the Trade Union Unity League. The attendance and active participation of sixty-four Negro delegates at the Cleveland Convention of the T.U.U.L is a sign of the awakening of the Negro workers and their readiness for joint struggle with the white workers against capitalist rationalization and enslavement.

The Communist Party must throw all its energy; mobilize all its forces for the winning of the millions of Negro workers and farmers for the revolution. The peculiar forms of racial exploitation of the Negro masses provide the basis for a race liberation movement which must be actively supported by the Communist Party. Our slogan of race equality as well as political and social equality must be translated into action and the Party must become the champion and the active organizer of the oppressed Negro race for full emancipation. Gastonia proves to us the possibilities of smashing the age-old Southern traditions and prejudices, mobilizing the white and black workers for common struggle against exploitation and oppression.

The danger of another imperialist war and of a war against the Soviet Union, into which thousands of Negroes will be drawn and sacrificed to appease the greed of world imperialism in their scheme for the re-division of the world, must be utilized to mobilize the Negro workers for struggle against world capitalism.

It is the duty of our Party to mobilize and rally the masses of white workers in defense to the Negro workers, linking up the struggles of the white with that of the black workers through all of its campaigns and activities.

A determined fight must be waged against every manifestation of white chauvinism among the broad masses of white workers and a campaign to stamp out all neglect and indifference among our white comrades toward Negro work

The Party must intensify its work among the Negro masses, drawing them into the Party, aiding in the strengthening and building up of the American Negro Labor Congress and mobilizing the Negro Workers under our leadership.