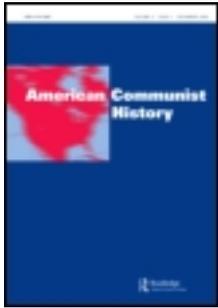


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## “Death for Negro lynching!” The Communist Party, USA’s Position on the African American Question

TIMOTHY JOHNSON\*

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

James and Esther Jackson, along with their colleagues, Edward Strong, Louis Burnham, and others too many to mention, made history. Through their work in the Southern Negro Youth Congress they challenged racial segregation in the U.S. South during the 1930s and 1940s. They organized tobacco workers, agitated for the right of African Americans to vote, and demonstrated against lynching. Yet, in spite of their individual heroism, they did not make history “under self-selected circumstances.” The context of their actions was their membership or association with the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). In the late 1920s and early 1930s the CPUSA highlighted the struggle of African Americans for liberation and equality as an inseparable part of the struggle of the working class. In so doing they broke new ground for left-wing organizations in the United States and created a template that nearly all socialists and left-wing organizations have since followed. How was that template created, what were some of the immediate results which followed?

The political roots of the CPUSA lay within the social democratic movement. The social democratic position on the African American question is often characterized by a quote from Eugene V. Debs in an article written in the *International Socialist Review*. Debs wrote, “We have nothing special to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races.”<sup>1</sup>

Although this statement could be interpreted as rather dismissive, Debs was actually sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, as his more complete statements demonstrate. In the same article Debs added that, “...so thoroughly is the south permeated with the malign spirit of race hatred that even socialists are to be found, and by no means rarely, who either share

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<sup>1</sup> Debs, Eugene V., “The Negro and the Class Struggle,” *The International Socialist Review*, (#5, 1903), 260.



**FIG. 1. Louis Burnham addressing longshoremen and teamsters at a right to vote rally, New Orleans, 1943.**

directly in the race hostility against the negro, or avoid the issue, or apologize for the social obliteration of the color line in the class struggle."<sup>2</sup> Debs' position was that race hatred was a direct attribute of economic inequality created by the capitalist system and would disappear through the process of the class struggle and the eventual triumph of socialism. He argued that since the issue of social inequality was a mere mask of the root problem of economic inequality, all social agitation on this issue was pointless, concluding there was "no negro question outside of the labor question—the working class struggle."<sup>3</sup> While Debs repeatedly expressed his sympathy for the victims of racism and understood its historic roots, he firmly believed that any separate agitation on racism was simply a diversion from the class struggle.

Debs' position was a centrist one within the Socialist Party (SP) at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the issues of racism and African American oppression were rarely openly debated within the SP there were a number of Party activists who took public positions on these issues. At one end of the spectrum were white socialists such as Mary White Ovington, a founder of the

<sup>2</sup> Debs, 257.

<sup>3</sup> Debs, 259.

NAACP, and a number of African American activists. At the other end were SP leaders such as Victor Berger, who were outright racists.<sup>4</sup> In a 1913 article in the *New Review*, Ovington regretfully acknowledged that the only two organizations that had expressed an honest concern for the plight of African Americans were the NAACP and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). She added, "I wish I might cite the Socialist party, the party I so love," but lamented that some of the southern sections were as racist as the Democratic Party. She recognized the solitary resolution on the African American question that was passed at the Socialist Party convention in 1901, but added, "... there has been no word since."<sup>5</sup> The renowned African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, briefly a member of the Socialist Party, also took it to task for its dismissal of racism and African American oppression. "No recent convention of Socialists," he wrote in 1919, "has dared to face fairly the Negro problem."<sup>6</sup> Berger, a Socialist party leader from Wisconsin, was described by historian Sally Miller thusly, "as a unionist he saw the Negro as unorganizable, as a socialist he thought him irrelevant, and as a German he believed the Negro, and indeed all others, to be inferior."<sup>7</sup>

The position of the rank and file and local leaders, which may be a more accurate assessment of the tenor of the organization, can be partly assessed through the few discussions on this issue at the Socialist Party conventions. The most sustained discussion on the African American question occurred at the Socialist Party unity convention in Indianapolis in 1901, which marked the merger of the Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Labor Party of America. At that convention a special committee drafted a resolution on the African American question (the resolution to which Ovington referred). The African American members who drafted the resolution noted that they needed a clear statement to assist in their organizing efforts in the African American community. The original draft recognized the "peculiar" position of African Americans as a result of chattel slavery and racial discrimination at the workplace, offered the "heartiest sympathy" of the socialists, and called upon African Americans to join the Socialist Party. However, the fourth clause of the resolution, which contained a condemnation of lynching, proved to be the most controversial. It stated:

Whereas, this position of the Negro has resulted in industrial war being declared against him, this resulting in the persecution of innocent members of

<sup>4</sup> Sally M. Miller, "The Socialist Party and the Negro, 1901-20." *The Journal of Negro History*. 36 (1971), 220-229.

<sup>5</sup> Mary White Ovington. "The Status of the Negro in the United States." *The New Review*. September 1913, 748.

<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Socialism and the Negro Problem," *The New Review*, January 1913, 138. In addition to Du Bois there were a number of other African American intellectual/activists involved with the Socialist party at various times. One of the more prominent was Hubert Harrison. See Jeffery Perry's *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001) and Hubert Henry Harrison, "The Father of Harlem Radicalism". *The Early Years: 1883 through the founding of the Liberty League and the "Voice" in 1917* (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Miller, 222.

the race, their severe punishment for trivial offenses, their lynching, burning and disenfranchisement, contrary to the moral law that all civilized people are supposed to obey, and contrary to the constitutional law of the land . . .<sup>8</sup>

As the discussion of the resolution unfolded, most objections were centered on the difficulties that taking such a strong position against racism would create in attempting to organize white workers. Delegate Simons questioned the veracity of the statement about innocent people being lynched and further argued that if the resolution emanated from the convention,

. . . we are going to force the comrades of the south to debate not the question of the relation of socialism to the Negro, but the relation of a whole lot of social questions to the Negro . . . In other words we are going to force them to debate what we do not want to, that is, debate the race question.<sup>9</sup>

Delegate Costley, an African American and one of the composers of the resolution, insisted that his presentation of the resolution was offered as a socialist, not an African American. He added, "This is presented as a matter of tactics. It will enable the negro organizer to go among the negroes." Directing his comments to Simon, Costley noted, "There is not a word in that resolution that is not absolutely based on fact . . . We don't want that document as anything more than a lever to work among the negroes of the United States."<sup>10</sup> Several delegates argued that the Socialist Party needed to adopt a principled position on African Americans irrespective of the difficulties that might ensue in attempting to attract white workers to the Party. Delegate Hayes noted that, "I as a socialist do not propose to follow the footsteps of the hypocritical Democratic and Republican parties that are always straddling questions." He added,

. . . the proper thing to do is to adopt it as presented by our comrade so that he can go out among his people and get a hearing to present these questions to them. I believe this will be the means or the beginning of making an inroad upon the class of people that we have been unable to reach . . .<sup>11</sup>

Delegate Spring, while adding that he bore no racial prejudice and sympathized with the need for socialist propaganda aimed at African Americans, reminded the delegates that "this document is not going to be confined solely to the Negro population." Spring argued that publicizing the document would lead to problems among southern whites and concluded ". . . when this convention takes the matter up they should take it up so as to follow the line of least resistance between the colored and the white laborers of this country." Delegate Herron retorted, "Without any regard to what we want or do not want, the race question is a fact." He added, ". . . it would be better

<sup>8</sup> Socialist Party of America, Papers, 1897–1963. Series I, Part D, National Convention Proceedings. July 30, 1901. (Glen Rock, NJ: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1975), 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

for the socialist movement to lose the votes and the support of the white men in the South than to evade this race question.”<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately the resolution was amended to drop the reference to lynching and was passed by the Indianapolis convention. Two years after the convention Debs wrote, “. . . permit me to express the hope that the next convention may repeal the resolution on the negro question. The negro does not need them and they serve to increase rather than diminish the necessity for explanation.”<sup>13</sup> As Miller summarized the Socialist party position on African Americans:

The American Negro for the Socialist party was, as aptly described by Ralph Ellison, “the invisible man.” The party did not reject Negro membership—it stood for Negro suffrage when the issue arose—yet with the exception of a vocal minority, it doubted Negro equality and undertook no meaningful struggles against second-class citizenship.<sup>14</sup>

The Socialist Party seemed incapable of adequately grappling with the issue of African American oppression. Their ideology of class struggle politics did not make them immune from the racism that afflicted the country at large. The African American membership was too small to wage an effective fight to push for an appropriate position and, finally, there was no countervailing pressure from any other source that could force the party to commit itself to a program that recognized the special oppression of the African American people. These circumstances would change with the victory of the Bolshevik Party in the Russian Revolution, the founding of the CPUSA, and with the founding and organization of the Communist International.”

The victory of the Bolshevik Party in the Russian Revolution of 1917 had a dramatic impact on socialist parties across the world. Most parties split, with the left-wing allying themselves to the new Soviet government and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Left-wing socialists in the United States were divided into two parties (the Communist Labor Party and the Communist Party of America) and endured a long faction-driven process overseen by the newly formed Communist International to unite into one party.

The composition of the Russian Empire, characterized by Bolshevik leader V.I. Lenin as a “prison of nations,” had long presented Russian socialists with the task of creating a political program to incorporate the experience and demands of oppressed nations and nationalities into the socialist revolution. In addition, the Comintern operatives included a large number of revolutionaries from colonial countries. Given these two facts, along with the Comintern’s vision of fashioning itself as the headquarters of world revolution, it was only natural that the Comintern would turn its attention to the question of the oppression of African Americans.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>13</sup> Debs, 260.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, 221.

<sup>15</sup> Much of the literature claims the push for a change in the CPUSA’s line came from the Soviets. While the Soviet Communist Party undoubtedly held ideological sway within the Comintern, there were a number of other Communists who agitated for a clearer line on the African American question. Among

The Bolshevik position on the national question, the issue of oppressed nations and nationalities, was outlined in numerous works by Joseph Stalin, himself a member of the oppressed Georgian nation, and Lenin.<sup>16</sup> Under the Bolshevik position, oppressed nations and nationalities were viewed as critical allies in the working-class struggle. Communists were duty bound to support the right of oppressed nations to determine their own collective destiny (the right of self-determination) and to the rights of national minorities to be accorded formal equality under law. Under the leadership of the Comintern, communists from across the world gathered to discuss the African American question and sought to devise a program that was consistent with revolutionary Marxism. Ultimately their discussions led them to the view that African Americans were best categorized as an oppressed nation who were deserving of the right to self-determination. This oppressed nation, the Comintern reasoned, was located in the Black Belt area of the South, where African Americans composed a majority of the population.

The importance of placing African Americans within the categories of an oppressed nation and nationality was that they were no longer viewed as a “race” (with its implied hierarchies) distinguished from other minorities only by the severity of their oppression. Instead they were looked at as critical allies in the working-class struggle. Thus, viewing them as an oppressed nationality heightened the importance of political work by communists in the African American community. Unlike the Socialist Party, which largely viewed the “negro problem” through the prism of organizing white workers, communists were to make the struggle against national oppression an uncompromising plank in their program. Rather than viewing the struggle for African American rights as a hindrance to the struggle of organizing the broader working class, the communists recognized that there would never be an effective class struggle if it did not wage a fight against racism and national oppression. Lenin himself stated that “Nothing so much holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity as national injustice.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the struggle against national oppression was seen as indispensable in the struggle for proletarian revolution.

The African American question was discussed at a number of Comintern congresses. At the Second Congress (1920) U.S. Party leader John Reed

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(footnote continued)

them was Harry Haywood, an African American former member of the African Blood Brotherhood who was in Moscow as a student, and two foreign Communists with experience derived from living in the United States. See Harry Haywood’s *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist*, (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978); V.B.Karnik’s *M.N. Roy: political biography*, (Bombay: Nav Jagriti Samaj, 1978); Hyman Kublin’s *Asian Revolutionary; The Life of Sen Katayama*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question: selected writings and speeches*. (NY: International Publishers, 1941) and V.I. Lenin, “Critical Remarks on the National Question,” *Collected Works*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), Vol. 21, 17–51.

<sup>17</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 273.

spoke about the African American situation. He described the extreme oppression and exploitation of African Americans in the South and the North, but denied that national consciousness was a critical factor. He argued that:

The Negroes do not pose the demand of national independence. A movement that aims for a separate national existence, like for instance the 'back to Africa' movement that could be observed a few years ago, is never successful among the Negroes. They hold themselves above all to be Americans, they feel at home in the United States. That simplifies the tasks of the communists considerably. The only correct policy for the American Communists towards the Negroes is to regard them above all as workers.<sup>18</sup>

Although Reed, representing the U.S. Communist Party, still saw the African American question as only an aspect of the broader class question, his comments did reveal that the communists had taken major steps forward from the position of the Socialist Party. His condemnation of racism, approving comments of the work of A. Philip Randolph and *The Messenger* magazine, and appeal for white workers to reject racism signified that the communists were prepared to take a new approach to African Americans. At the Third Congress (1921) the South African Communist Party suggested that the African American question be put on the next agenda.

At the Fourth Congress (1922) the decision was made to apply the "Theses on the National and Colonial Question" to the African American situation and a statement was issued that categorized the African American question as "an important part in the liberation struggle of the entire African race, and a "vital question of the world revolution."<sup>19</sup> Lenin's "Theses on the National and Colonial Question," submitted to the Comintern and slightly amended by the Indian communist M.N. Roy, was an attempt to provide the international communist movement with an orientation to the struggle of oppressed nations and nationalities.

At the Sixth and Seventh Congresses (1928 and 1930) the Comintern issued two major statements on the African American question. Both statements were framed by the "Theses on the National and Colonial Question," which were submitted to the Comintern by Lenin in 1920. The second of Lenin's theses statements read, "The Communist Party, as the avowed champion of the proletarian struggle to overthrow the bourgeois yoke, must base its policy, in the national question too, not on abstract and formal principles but, first, on a precise appraisal of the specific historical situation . . ."<sup>20</sup> In his preface to the theses Lenin requested additional information from Comintern delegates with information about specific national questions, included the question of "negroes in America." With Lenin's theses as a framework the Comintern

<sup>18</sup> Philip Foner and James Allen, eds., *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History, 1919–1929* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Degras, ed, *The Communist International, 1919–1943, Documents*. Vol. III (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1965), 399–401.

<sup>20</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, 145.

attempted to concretize a communist position on African American oppression and exploitation.<sup>21</sup>

The 1928 Comintern thesis reiterated the finding that African Americans constituted an oppressed nation and that self-determination was the correct demand for the Black Belt South. It stated,

While continuing and intensifying the struggle under the slogan of full social and political equality for Negroes, which must remain the central slogan of our Party for work among the masses, the Party must come out openly and unreservedly for the right of Negroes to national self-determination in the southern states, where the Negroes form a majority of the population<sup>22</sup>

Shortly after the Sixth Congress, *The Communist*, the theoretical journal of the CPUSA, published its first major article on the African American question. Written by John Pepper, this article attempted to specify the Comintern directives on African American work by placing work among African Americans at the center of Party work. “The Communist Party,” Pepper wrote, “cannot be a real Bolshevick Party without being also the Party of the liberation of the Negro race from all white oppression.”<sup>23</sup> The article analyzed the class structure of the African American community, looking at the role of the working class, farmers, and the petit-bourgeoisie and highlighted the importance of the struggle against racism within the Communist Party. On the issue of self-determination, Pepper wrote

The Workers (Communist) Party of America puts forward correctly as its central slogan: *Abolition of the whole system of race discrimination. Full racial, social, and political equality for the Negro people.* But it is necessary to supplement the struggle for the full racial, social and political equality of the Negroes with a struggle for their right of national self-determination. Self-determination means the right to establish their own state, to erect their own government, if they choose to do so.<sup>24</sup>

Pepper even went further than the Comintern and asserted that “The Negro Communists should emphasize in their propaganda *the establishment of a Negro Soviet Republic.*”<sup>25</sup> At the Seventh Congress, the Comintern issued a more detailed analysis of the African American question. It criticized the Party’s

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<sup>21</sup> Although Lenin wrote no detailed study of African Americans, he had noted in one essay that, “In the United States, the Negroes . . . account for only 11.1 per cent. They should be classed as an oppressed nation, for the equality won in the Civil War of 1861–65 and guaranteed by the Constitution of the republic was in many respects increasingly curtailed in the chief Negro areas.” He went on to draw a distinction between African Americans and European immigrants, noting that Europeans were being rapidly assimilated into the American nation. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, 245.

<sup>22</sup> Degras, 399–401.

<sup>23</sup> John Pepper, “American Negro Problems,” *The Communist*, Oct. 1928, pp. 628–638. Pepper was a pseudonym for Joseph Pogany, a Hungarian communist and Comintern operative who was sent to work with the CPUSA in the early 1920’s. He engaged in the debate on the African American question at the Sixth Congress and this article is presumed to be the substance of his presentation. See Foner and Allen, p. 178 and Bryan D. Palmer’s *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 188–195.

<sup>24</sup> Pepper, 629.

<sup>25</sup> Pepper, 632.

understanding and implementation of the Sixth Congress position. Specifically it accused the CPUSA of an “underestimation” of the African American question and an overall “lack of clarity” on the right to self-determination.<sup>26</sup>

The Seventh Congress thesis sought to reemphasize the concept that the African American question was of a special type due to the peculiar history of the United States, including chattel slavery and legal segregation. “This whole system of ‘segregation’ and ‘Jim-Crowism,’” the statement continued, “is a special form of national and social oppression under which the American Negroes . . . suffer.” It argued for communists to struggle for all democratic rights for African Americans and (interestingly, in light of the Socialist Party’s vacillation on the issue of lynching) added that “One of the first Communist slogans is: Death for Negro lynching!” It placed the struggle for equal rights for African Americans as “one of the most important parts of the proletarian class struggle in the United States”—adding that it was also the responsibility of white workers to be in the leadership of this struggle. And, in a concept well ahead of its time for a multi-racial organization, it supported the right of African Americans to engage in armed self-defense against the terrorism of racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, it attempted to clarify the slogan of the right to self-determination. The Comintern noted that self-determination was one of three demands in the Black Belt. The other demands were for the redistribution of land by confiscating it from plantation owners and turning it over to landless sharecroppers and the establishment of a unified political system within the Black Belt, where African Americans constituted a majority of the population. However, it was the demand for the redistribution of land that would make possible the other demands. It argued “Without this revolutionary measure, without the agrarian revolution, the right of self-determination of the Negro population would be only a Utopia or, at best, would remain only on paper without changing in any way the actual enslavement.”<sup>28</sup>

For the next several years, *The Communist*, the CPUSA’s theoretical journal, followed the Comintern decision with a series of articles addressing various aspects of the political line on the African American question. These articles represented the most significant attention the Communist Party had given to this issue. The thrust of the articles were aimed at correcting mistaken notions about the new policy, arguing against misinterpretations of the policy, and raising the importance of the struggle against white racism (chauvinism) within the party. Joseph Prokopec contributed an article that sought to demonstrate that African Americans were not a race, but a national minority. Alternately quoting from the Comintern thesis and enunciating party policy, he drew distinctions between a “race” and

<sup>26</sup>“Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States,” *Political Affairs*, 10 (#2, 1931), 153–167.

<sup>27</sup> The African Blood Brotherhood, composed of African American’s and Caribbean Americans (many who later joined the Communist Party) had called for armed self-defense years before, but this may be the first time a non-Black organization issued such a call.

<sup>28</sup>“Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States,” *Political Affairs*, 160.

a “nationality,” arguing that to “view African Americans as simply a racial group was to accept bourgeois theories of race and ignore the social and economic consequences of national oppression.”<sup>29</sup> While attempting to clarify the right to self-determination he noted, “just as in the case of any national revolutionary movement, so in the case of Negroes in America, the slogan for the right of self-determination cannot be an isolated slogan of struggle.” He added that programs supported by the party “should include not only the economic, social, political, and national demands of the Negro masses, but ‘especially the agrarian demands of the Negro farmers and tenants of the South.’”<sup>30</sup> N. Nasonov wrote an article reemphasizing the national aspect of African American oppression and criticized the Party’s previous position. Quoting John Reed comments at the Second Comintern Congress (cited above), that African Americans “feel at home” in the United States, Nasonov rhetorically asked, “Since when has John Reed, a talented artist of the October Revolution, become the exponent of the yearnings of the Negroes?”<sup>31</sup> Invoking the authority of Lenin, Nasonov concluded that “Lenin referred many times to the Negroes as an oppressed nation, and, what is more interesting, Lenin refers to the Negroes often when speaking about Ireland.”<sup>32</sup> Harry Haywood also contributed several articles in the early 1930’s.<sup>33</sup>

The articles cited above show that the Party actively campaigned to educate the membership to see the importance of the African American struggle and to urge their participation in it. The constant polemics about viewing the African American question as a national question rather than as a race question was an attempt to break with the Socialist Party pattern. In short, what the party was attempting to do was to create a political culture within the CPUSA that would have zero tolerance for racism and would place the importance of the African American question near the top of the political agenda along with the class struggle.

The Party’s intervention in the struggle of the African American people met with some success. They helped the defense of the Scottsboro defendants, organized steel workers in Birmingham, and led the struggle to organize share croppers in Alabama struggle. In the North they became active in the struggle for the integration of neighborhoods, and against employment discrimination.

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Prokopec, “Negroes As an Oppressed National Minority.” *The Communist*. March 1930, 9(3), 244–245. B.D. Amis makes a similar point in “For a Strict Leninist Analysis on the Negro Question.” *The Communist*, October 1932, 14(10), 944–949. Amis notes, “To maintain that the Negro question is a ‘race question,’ or that the oppression of Negroes is based upon the ‘color line’ is to blur over its social and economic essence; in other words, to capitulate to bourgeois race theories.”

<sup>30</sup> Prokopec, 244–245.

<sup>31</sup> N. Nasonov, “Against Liberalism in the American Negro Question,” *The Communist*, April 1930, 9(4), 307.

<sup>32</sup> Nasonov, 308.

<sup>33</sup> See “Against Bourgeois-Liberal Distortions of Leninism on the Negro Question in the United States.” *The Communist*, August 1930, 9(8), 649–712 and “The Struggle for the Leninist Position on the Negro Question in the U.S.A.,” *The Communist*, September 1933, 12(9), 888–901.

Recently there has developed a new scholarship of the early civil rights movement that sheds much light on communist participation in the African American struggle.<sup>34</sup> However, scholars writing on the issue of the communist's call for the right of self-determination have nearly unanimously agreed that the Comintern position had no practical utility.<sup>35</sup>

That is only accurate if the slogan of self-determination is artificially separated from the demands for the redistribution of land. First, it must be remembered that two of the principle activities of the Party in the South during the 1930's was organizing workers in industry and organizing tenant farmers. The organizing of tenant farmers was a necessary precursor to the demand for the confiscation of plantation lands, which the Party believed was a necessary prerequisite to any serious consideration of implementing the right to self-determination. Secondly, the only way to initiate the fight for agrarian reform was to begin to organize tenant farmers around day-to-day survival issues.

In a 1932 speech printed in *The Communist*, party leader Earl Browder attempted a summation of the party's activities among African Americans:

In the midst of the Scottsboro campaign we made another political step forward, in the struggle of the Negro sharecroppers in Camp Hill [Alabama]. This battle was the first struggle directly resulting from our penetration of the Black Belt, of the agrarian population. It brought out the basic question of the Negroes as a nation, the question of land and land-tenure, the question of the agrarian revolution, the overthrowing of the semi-feudal agrarian relationships. While immediately Camp Hill was only a struggle for certain partial demands, and correctly so, it threw a bright light upon the basic problem of the land, and thereby became a political milestone in the development of our Negro work.<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, there has been no major study of the Alabama Share Cropper's Union.<sup>37</sup> An early article by John Beecher does suggest there may be more of a link between self-determination and mass organizing. Beecher quotes an article from the 1933 *Birmingham World*, an African American paper, in which the reporter comments: "Meetings were held in houses. Sometimes literature was distributed. Self-determination of the Black Belt was mentioned at the meetings. Nobody knew very much about the details of the idea,

<sup>34</sup> See Martha Biondi's *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Robert Korstadt's *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> See Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 17–19 and Harvey Klehr and William Thompson. "Self-Determination in the Black Belt: origins of a Communist policy," *Labor History*, 30, 1989, 366.

<sup>36</sup> Earl Browder, "For National Liberation of the Negroes! War Against White Chauvinism!" *The Communist*, April 1932, 11(4), 299.

<sup>37</sup> Robin Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1990), includes a chapter on the Share Cropper's Union. However, like most other historians, he alleges "The slogan demanding self-determination in the black belt did not inspire Birmingham's nascent communist cadre to initiate a rural-based radical movement," 37–38.

folks in Tallapoosa County say, but all were eager to work for a chance to escape from poverty and fear.”<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps future studies of the Share Cropper’s Union and analyses of the *Southern Worker*, the CPUSA regional newspaper, will shed more light on this era and bring us to a clearer understanding of how the CPUSA’s theoretical positions affected its practical work. What is clear is that knowledge of communist strategy and tactics, i.e., understanding the relationship of agitation on the right to self-determination to day-to-day organizing around immediate needs is crucial to understanding communist activities and the relationship between communist theory and practice.

Spurred on by the notion that African Americans had the right to determine their own destiny, were entitled to equality under the law, and by an unshakeable belief in interracial solidarity, the Communist Party entered Southern politics in the 1930’s. They entered a region of the country that seemed not to have noticed that the South lost the Civil War. African Americans were wantonly murdered for even advocating an assertion of their Constitutional rights, with their abusers never having to fear punishment. The lives of whites who advocated equality were just as precarious. So inextricably connected were the notions of “communists” and “racial equality” in the white Southern consciousness that thirty years later, when the modern civil rights movement erupted, most Southern whites – and many non-Southern whites – were convinced it was a “communist plot.”

Yet this lawless area was the terrain in which James and Esther Jackson and their colleagues chose to stand and fight. Inspired by the then-radical ideas of racial equality and justice they struggled to build a movement that – in the long run – helped to transform U.S. society. That so many of the ideas they stood for and the vision they projected have now become largely non-controversial is a testament to their ambition, work and life.

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<sup>38</sup> John Beecher, “The Share Croppers’ Union in Alabama,” *Social Forces* 13 (1, 1934), 127.