

The “Colonial” Labour Front

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"The policy of the Communist International on national and colonial questions must be chiefly to bring about a union of the proletarian and working masses of all nations and countries for a joint revolutionary struggle leading to the overthrow of capitalism". In these words the thesis of the Second Congress lays down the goal towards which any special methods applicable in particular circumstances, such as support of national liberation movements, peasant movements etc., are intended to lead up. As clause 11 says, such support (especially on the part of the workers in the Home or imperialist countries) should be given "for the exclusive purpose of uniting the various units of the future proletarian parties there". Clause 12: "The victory over capitalism cannot be fully achieved and carried to its ultimate goal unless the proletariat and the toiling masses of all nations of the world rally of their own accord in a close and concordant union". The supplementary theses say the same. "The masses of non-European subjected countries are inseparably connected with the proletarian movement in Europe, as a consequence of the centralisation of world capitalism" (No. 1). "The mission of the C.I. is to organise the working class of the whole world" (No. 5). "The Communist parties of the different imperialist countries must work in conjunction with the proletarian parties of the colonies" (No. 8).

Not much progress has yet been made in "Colonial countries" with this "United Front" of world labour. The European workers and the workers of subject races or dependent countries are not yet cooperating at all closely. To the delight of the capitalists, they are strangers, even antagonists to each other. Between the workers and the Home or Imperialist countries and those of India or China, for example, there is as yet no real labour union.

In the Pacific the North American and Australian workers are concerned less to cooperate with the Chinese and Japanese workers than to exclude them from their countries as dangerous competitors. In South Africa there is a great gulf fixed between the white and the black workers who jostle together in the country, and local barricades are thrown up entrenching the whites against black competition – and even vice versa. In the United States the negro workers are oppressed and lynched by the whites. Everywhere workers of European race are ready as often as not to take up arms against non-European workers as such. In South Africa, again, we had the strange spectacle this year of white miners on strike instructing their black fellow workers to remain at work, i.e., to scab!

And yet the whites and the non-white workers, when comprised in one country or Empire, may be called not merely fellow workers but fellow countrymen; we may fairly say, for instance, that the workers of the British Empire, "British workmen" in fact, are mostly brown or black men – "natives". Why then the antagonism? The common reply is "colour prejudice". That is certainly potent enough; and the Thesis says "The struggle against deep-rooted petty bourgeois national prejudices, manifesting themselves in various forms such as race hatred, national antagonism and anti-semitism" – we might add "nigrophobia" etc. – "must be brought to the foreground". But actual race prejudice

plays a less conspicuous part where, as in Europe or Australia, the opposing races are not in direct contact with each other; thus in Europe colour prejudice is quite weak. The truth is that the prejudice itself is largely based on economic grounds; it is the result of competition in the labour market, and is most acute where such competition is most keenly felt.

This problem of "cheap labour" of subject or dependent coloured race is the one common feature of "colonial questions", though, of course, it arises also in connection with countries that are not "colonies" such as China and Japan. How can the better paid workers of European race be expected to unite with the cheaper labourers who take the bread out of their mouths? And on the other hand how can the cheap labourers cooperate with the better paid worker who habitually becomes their masters' accomplice in "keeping them in their place", closing various avenues of employment to them and even objecting to give them "equal pay for equal work"? How can the Japanese, African or Indian worker be expected to support a movement of men associated with a "White Australia" policy, a "colour bar", an embargo on Lascar sailors, or an anti-Asiatic immigration law? Not but what these things may be justified, but the coloured workers are not likely to see the point of them readily. Why, even in Soviet Russia today, in concerns involving no exploitation for profit, the employee at say 20-30 millions a month can see no justice in others getting 200-300 millions and "riding" as they say "on our necks". Nor does cooperation eventuate even where the competition is not consciously realised. The European workers, for instance, do not yet fully realise how they are injured by colonial labour competition; but they do not any the more for that combine with colonial labour. British congresses may occasionally wave distant greetings to the workers of India; but they still acquiesce in their grinding exploitation in effect, they ignore the coloured labourers of the world as fellow workers.

How are these obstacles to be overcome? The Supplementary Thesis No. 7 says: "The C.I. and the parties affected must struggle to develop class consciousness in the working masses of the colonies"; and the importance of this is evidenced by the capitalists' profound dread of working class agitation among "natives". But even such agitation or organization does not of itself produce the World United Labour Front, the "joint struggle", the cooperation and "union of the working masses of all countries" not withstanding cumulative disparities of race, colour, language, pay, grade, standard of living and civilisation, such as is required by the C.I. Rather it seems that some atmosphere of cooperation is necessary before propaganda among the subject or dependent races can flourish; at any rate the two things are interdependent. In S. Africa and the U.S.A., at any rate, the majority of the white workers at present show violent hostility to the very idea of communist propaganda among the blacks, making such propaganda almost impossible for want of the white workers' approval; so much so that Communists in South Africa sometimes feel constrained to say;

"Let us leave the natives alone, let them develop on their own lines"; whereas that can only mean "leave them to the sole influence of the capitalists, who will develop them on their own capitalist lines". We cannot leave the coloured workers alone. Men who are good enough to exploit are good enough to organise; especially in view of the enormous proportion of the world's profit that is made from the exploitation of this cheap coloured labour, and therefore the enormous potential anti-capitalist power of such labour – and

under Communism this numerical proportion will be at least maintained: the great majority of the workers under communism will also be "natives". But again, even if the white workers should ask for the cooperation of the yellows or blacks, in some industrial dispute for instance, the latter will not unnaturally suspect that they are simply to be made use of and then left in the lurch again as usual after the whites have got what they wanted out of them. And yet the mutual advantage of industrial cooperation is obvious, for instance, between the workers of Europe and those of the Colonial countries (witness the French colonial scabs at Havre), still more perhaps between European and non-European workers in one country, as in the U.S.A. and South Africa.

The Communist Parties in the various countries, with the C.I. as the guiding hand, must therefore pay special attention to bridging this weakening estrangement, exactly as the estrangement in the U.S.A. between "100% American" workers and the cheap immigrant workers from South or Eastern Europe, or between skilled and unskilled workers anywhere, must be bridged. Solidarity and comradeship must be established for common effort against the common enemy. But now we hear the cry: "What, would you make the natives equal to the whites?" – for even that, and not merely making the white equal to the native, is objected to. Well, although questions of "social" equality may be dismissed as petty bourgeois, reactionary and irrelevant, because real equality can only be achieved after, not before, the revolution, yet there can be no doubt that in-as-much as inequality is a bar to cooperation, an attempt must be made before, not after, the revolution to mitigate it so far as necessary to facilitate cooperation, – and by levelling up rather than levelling down which means that higher paid workers must support every demand of the cheaper workers for better pay. But, says the cheap coloured labourer, I too must live, whereas if I stipulate for nothing less than the white man's wage, I shall not get a job; to which the white worker retorts, if you come into my job (or my country) on a competitive basis, you can always bring my wages down and actually undercut me and take my job away – you are actually doing it all the time – and I too must live. Such obstacles, though mutually inconsistent, are not easy to surmount. But it is impossible to achieve a United Front by ignoring them and leaving each section to concentrate on entrenching itself against the other, with all-white trade unions on the one hand, and all-black trade unions (languishing for want of European support, as in South Africa) on the other. Admitting that it is not possible under capitalism to level up all wages, and that even if it were, the revolution cannot wait for such world wide equality, yet neither is it possible under capitalism to maintain the present glaring wage inequality and prevent the higher from being pulled down by the lower. The Communist movement is less concerned to seek measures designed to make capitalism tolerable to one or another section of workers than to marshal all possible forces for attack on the ruling class.

With this sole object before us, we should patiently and persistently promote conferences between the conflicting elements all over the world with a view to mutual recognition, popularisation of propaganda and organisation among the coloured workers, and in particular, some approach to a modus vivendi purely in order to facilitate a joint plan of campaign and a wholehearted and militant cooperation in the fight. The modus vivendi will be based probably on the principle of equal pay (at European rates) for equal work – not a Communist principle, but we are dealing with a fighting front

under capitalism. Absolute "fairness" will be impossible even on this basis, but at least the ice can be broken. And if concessions are to be given, they should, as the Thesis says, be given rather to the underdog, so as to remove his distrust; e.g., sympathetic strikes should be called first in support of the coloured rather than the white workers' demands. And again, "proletarian internationalisation demands the subordination of the interests of the proletarian struggle in one country" (e.g., Australia, and, we might add, "in one section of the workers" e.g., the white workers of South Africa) "to the interests of that struggle on an international scale". Of course it is only when accompanied by a revolutionary outlook that any such *modus vivendi* can succeed. The point is not equality but solidarity.

A start is being made in the right direction with the Pacific Labour Congress next year. Similar foregatherings should be developed both on a small local scale and, say, within the British, French and Dutch Empires (Home and Colonial workers) respectively, and finally on a world scale. Negro Congresses and Oriental congresses as such no doubt serve a useful purpose, but more useful still for the object now in view is the confronting of these elements with the workers of the imperialist races, the yellow, brown and black with the whites, the common labourers with the "aristocrats of labour" who, often the more servile and ignorant of the two from a proletarian point of view, have the most to learn and unlearn at such mixed conferences.

In cases like South, West and East Africa, or the Pacific taken as one unit, or the United States, where a real national liberation movement of the coloured races is hardly practical politics and a peasant movement with any hope of success hardly exists among the coloured peoples, the only revolutionary movement of the subject races is the movement of their workers organised as workers. At least that movement must be stressed as an additional weapon, and not necessarily one to be postponed in order of time, for the Labour movement nothing comes first, all arms must be brought into action at once. And as the Supplementary Thesis says, "we must in any case struggle against control by bourgeois democratic national movements over the mass action of poor and ignorant peasants and workers for their liberation from all sorts of exploitation."

"Only a Soviet regime can give the nations real equality". National liberation movements, only stepping stones at best, and relevant only because in the countries to be liberated there are workers being exploited, are often destined, even if successful, to prove disappointing, besides failing to attract, if not alienating, the sympathy of the workers of other countries. It is as workers that whites and natives find their point of contact as well as of repulsion. The proletarian movement is, or eventually becomes, the strongest revolutionary weapon in every country; it is the One "Feste Burg", now and hereafter, of the oppressed and exploited of the whole world.

From: [South Africa's Radical Tradition, a documentary history, Volume One 1907 - 1950](#), by Allison Drew