

The right of self-determination and the class struggle

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Of all the great domestic political problems facing the working class and the oppressed people, none surpasses in importance the relationship of national oppression to the class struggle.

Indeed, one may say that it is at the heart of the basic social problem in the United States. It touches every form of social existence, and no sector of society is free from it.

For Marxists in particular it is the acid test of the correctness of their general political program. It is also a test of the revolutionary integrity of the party, in particular as this is manifested in day to day practical application. Probably nowhere else is theory so severely tested by practice as in the field of the national question.

Upon the solution of the national question may very well depend the destiny of the working class in the struggle against capitalism as well as the future of socialism.

The national question, or as it is sometimes called the race question, has for centuries been covered up by a plethora of lies and deceit. The intent is to convey the impression that it does not exist, or if it does exist it is being solved, or at least its significance is diminishing due to the glory and virtues of the democratic processes of monopoly capitalism.

The deepening of the capitalist crisis, notwithstanding the current ephemeral recovery, is bound to intensify national oppression in the U.S. This will be so not only because of the growing unemployment, of which the oppressed people bear the brunt, but also perhaps of equal importance because of the direction of U.S. foreign policy toward military adventurism on a global scale unprecedented in history.

The burden of all this is bound to become more and more intolerable for the working class the oppressed peoples.

The ruling class can be relied upon to desperately attempt to divert the course of the struggle of the workers and the oppressed into divisive and frustrating channels, while reaping a huge harvest in the form of super-profits for itself.

The many millions of the oppressed and exploited masses meanwhile find it more difficult to gather their huge and invincible forces into a united front against the ruling class — the most monstrous and dangerous ever to inhabit this planet, who keep it in constant peril of utter destruction.

National vs. class struggle

To many in the progressive and working class movement the relationship between national oppression and class conflict appears as a choice between two supposedly contradictory phenomena.

To socialists of the pre-World War I generation and to many avowed Marxists of that period (and even of decades later), choosing or giving priority to the national question, or as some put it, “giving priority to the struggle against racism,” meant the abandonment of the class struggle and a surrender to bourgeois nationalism.

Needless to say such a view of Marxism, in addition to being an error in principle and a violation of basic Marxist theory on the national question, was mostly propounded by whites, even those who saw themselves as adherents of socialism and even of Marxism.

Early socialist movement

Notwithstanding the avowed anti-capitalist struggle of the socialists of that period, their propaganda for socialism, their espousal of the class struggle, and even the militant class battles between the working class and the capitalist class that they led, this type of pursuit of the class struggle tended to completely ignore the very existence of the semi-slavery, oppression, persecution, and disenfranchisement of the Black people.

It goes without saying that the struggle of the Native people was completely disregarded by them, to the point where it seldom if ever occupied any part in the struggle of the socialists of the time or in their political polemics or discussions.

In Marx's time the struggle against capitalism was seen primarily as one in which the working class as a whole was conducting the socialist class struggle against the bourgeoisie and winning democratic demands not only for itself but for all others deprived of democratic rights.

However, it was understood at that time that as long as capitalism existed only minor reforms could be won, not only for the workers as a whole but for those who were disenfranchised and denied democratic rights. Socialist propaganda emphasized the overall objective of the abolition of the capitalist system. It pointed out the acute and insoluble contradictions under capitalism, the slavery of the wage system, the impoverishment of the farmers, the disappearance of small industry in favor of monopoly.

Just as the socialist struggle could not really bring lasting and basic reforms to capitalism, so it could not solve the racial, that is the national question, under capitalism. The latter would have to wait until the victory of the socialist revolution.

It was then thought that fighting for the enfranchisement of the oppressed nationalities – Black, Latino/a, Asian and Native – was important, as was women's suffrage. But only successive electoral victories culminating in the ultimate overthrow of the capitalist system would attain social and political equality.

It is not to be wondered at, then, that on the eve of 1916 when there were already dozens of socialist mayors throughout the country, there was scarcely even one Black representative nominated for the hundreds of city, county, and state offices to which socialists were elected.

Clearly such Marxism could not have much appeal to Black and other oppressed nationalities. It was also inevitable that a large section of the rightwing of the Socialist Party, led by Victory Berger of Milwaukee and Morris Hillquit of New York, would be invested with what would today be regarded as outright racism.

The left wing, headed by Eugene Debs and Big Bill Haywood, was eloquent in its defense of Black people. But it was utterly incapable of influencing the course of the Party's struggle at the time in a progressive direction on the national question, as well as on other political problems.

Impact of Russian Revolution

It was not until the arrival of the October Revolution in Russia and the ensuing years of revolutionary struggle on a world scale that a theoretically correct appreciation of the national question in relation to the class struggle found its way to the U.S.

Lenin's long years of struggle on the question of the right of nations to self-determination and his relentless exposure of chauvinism as arising from the failure to correctly apply this right constituted a virtual treasury of new thinking that was soon introduced here and in other metropolitan imperialist countries.

In addition to writing voluminously on the right of nations to self-determination, Lenin reformulated Marx's world-famous slogan about united the working class of the world.

In Marx's time the slogan, as stated in the Communist Manifesto, was, "Workers of the world unite."

Lenin updated this to reflect the changed character of capitalism. So-called progressive, peaceful, competitive capitalism had evolved into monopoly, which not only required vast expansion at the expense of oppressed peoples around the world but also exacerbated and intensified every type of national oppression at home.

To the slogan "Workers of the world unite!" Lenin added the oppressed peoples. So now it reads, "Workers and oppressed peoples of the world unite!"

It introduced a substantial difference in the approach to the oppressed peoples abroad and, no less important, the super-exploited and oppressed people at home in the internal colonies.

While many decades have passed since Lenin's formulation of the question, it now more than ever needs a proper application since the assault of monopoly capitalism becomes ever more onerous and threatening day by day.

No political equality

What was not understood by the early socialists, and remains a mystery to this day to many who proclaim themselves Marxists, is that the bourgeois revolution so far as it pertained to Black people everywhere in this country was never completed politically or even judicially. There is still no real political equality between Black and white in this country.

This is not only attested to by the wide differential between Black and white in income and social status generally, but is especially evident on the parliamentary front and is made very obvious during electoral campaigns.

It may be formally true that Black people generally have the same right to vote as whites do. There are any number of elected Black officials in various cities, counties, and state subdivisions. But by and large there is a glaringly wide discrepancy between the political effectiveness of whites during national elections and that of Black people.

One merely has to take a look at the U.S. Senate. It has 100 Senators, but not one is Black.

And out of 435 Representatives in the House, there are scarcely 30 Black and Latino/a people put together.

This glaring inequality as expressed in the bourgeois parliamentary system attests to the fact that the bourgeois democratic revolution begun in the 1860s has not yet been completed. The same bourgeois democratic rights which white workers have been entitled to for two centuries are still not available to Black workers and Black people generally.

Marxists can ignore this only at the risk of losing their historic revolutionary mission in capitalist society. One cannot reduce the question to one of mere racial discrimination which, as the saying goes, is diminishing with the passage of time.

On the contrary, the mere passage of time does not guarantee a gradual evolution to full political rights, that is, to the democratic rights won by white workers and white people generally.

The centuries-old prevalence of social and political inequality attests to the fact that Black people in the U.S., like Native people, constitute a nation. The struggle against inequality thus has to be viewed politically in the context not merely of waging a fight against racial discrimination but of the right to self-determination. ■