

The National Question and the Black Struggle: A Discussion led by Monica Moorehead

[Sections and pauses for discussion with read-aloud sections are highlighted.]

1. I would like to read several paragraphs written by comrade Sam Marcy, late chairperson of Workers World Party, who wrote a lot on the national question. This particular article, “The right of self-determination and the class struggle,” was published in Workers World newspaper in Dec. 1983, during the electoral campaign of the civil rights leader, and protégé of Dr. King, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was running for president as a candidate within the Democratic Party formally, but in essence, his campaign was challenging the entrenched racism of the Democratic National Committee. WWP helped raise rank-in-file support for Jackson by reaching out to mainly white trade unionists who had a tradition of succumbing to racist ideas traced back to the days of slavery as my essay on explores. (Read aloud the first four paragraphs of Marcy, “The right of self-determination and the Black 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.

2. There are many historical examples of the national question that we will be studying over the weeks, months and years when it comes to Latinx nations, Indigenous nations, Asian nations, Arab nations, etc. The experiences are very diverse but the essence is the same, in terms of races of people who have faced super-exploitation and super-oppression, whether in their land of origin (colonialism and neo-colonialism) or in the imperialist centers as is true of the African-American population.

But before we get into any specifics, there are some general themes that we must acknowledge first and that includes development of the slave trade that led to capitalist expansion. The primary word for capitalist expansion is imperialism. (Have someone read aloud the paragraph on the five basic features of imperialism from p. 3 of Lenin's "Imperialism-a popular outline, from *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. From chapter VII)

(1) the concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life; (2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this "finance capital", of a financial oligarchy; (3) the export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance; (4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves, and (5) the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed. Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed.

As the great African socialist, Pan-Africanist leader, Kwame Nkrumah stated in a title of a book: *Neo-colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*.

3. One cannot understand the significance of national oppression or the national question without having a basic understanding of imperialism, which is rooted in colonialism and neo-colonialism. So let's first review the basic features of imperialism as outlined by Vladimir Lenin's groundbreaking book, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Keep in mind that this book was written in 1916, a year before the Bolshevik or Russian Revolution. Lenin — up until his death in 1924 — was not only the leading Marxist theoretician on the national and colonial question but was able to put that theory into practice by legalizing through the Revolution the right to self-determination for the formerly oppressed nationalities (known as the "prison house of nations") who suffered tremendously under Czarist Russia before the Revolution. It was Lenin who expanded the slogan first stated by Marx and Engels in the "Communist Manifesto," written in 1848 when capitalism was under an early stage of development. The original slogan of Marx and Engels was "Workers of the world unite!" which Lenin expanded to "Workers and oppressed people of the world unite!"

4. We want to concentrate mainly on the last theme for our discussion: How the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed. This led to carving up of Africa by the European imperialist powers starting in the late 1880's. (Review the map of "Africa in 1914," of resources and colonies in Africa as a frame of reference.)
5. Before we discuss what makes Black people in the U.S. in the belly of the beast, and outside the U.S., not only a nation but an oppressed nation, do we agree that in general there is a global working class? Do we also agree that there are inequalities that exist within the working class? (Have participants give examples.)
6. Why is it important for Marxists not to make the mistake of characterizing a country today as just a nation? Maybe hundreds of years ago we could say that a country like Sweden, or even France or Italy was a nation but why not today? (Have each candidate read a paragraph from page one of Moorehead's "What is a nation?" and ask for further thoughts or comments on this section.)

What is the definition of a nation? People seem to take for granted that the U.S., France, and Britain, for example, are nations. Are not most of us indoctrinated from day one with the idea that the U.S. is "one nation under God with liberty and justice for all"? But this view ignores the fact that there are millions of people living within these countries who suffer consistent oppression, not just because of their class — what they do for a living and what they own — but simply because of who they are.

Some might say a nation is a group of people who share a common language, common heritage, and common borders. But this gives only a partial answer. V.I. Lenin, writing from the experience of building a revolutionary multinational workers' party in czarist Russia, taught that there are nations within nations. There are nations that oppress and nations that are oppressed.

Take France, for instance. France has historically colonized and plundered whole areas of Africa, oppressing African nations. However, within France today there are also vast communities of oppressed people who were forced to migrate from those former colonies to seek a better life — people from Mali, Algeria, Ivory Coast, and Vietnam, for example. Their status of being members of an oppressed nation does not change just because they have moved geographically to the inside the oppressor nation.

The question of national oppression is not just about Third World nations and not just about skin color. National oppression grows out of the expansion of capitalism worldwide and its built-in drive for super-exploitation. Therefore, the struggle against national oppression hits at the heart of imperialism.

The Irish have been nationally oppressed by the English ruling class for over 800 years. The Basque people have been trying to win political recognition of their national identity from Spain, and many have supported an armed struggle against the oppressor. Imperialist Japan in 1910 annexed all Korea as its colony. Before World War II it seized part of China, and set up colonial administrations in much of the rest of Asia that supplanted European colonizers — Britain, France, Holland, and Portugal — as well as the United States.

The United States even today has outright colonies in Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands — in addition to its domination over scores of other countries through economic control and military pressure. These nations are oppressed in relation to imperialism. But what about inside the U.S.?

7. During Marx's time there was the national question in Ireland—Irish people have been super-exploited by the English ruling class for over 800 years. For hundreds of years there has been armed struggle in Northern Ireland for national independence. [For more, see Marx and Engels, Ireland and the Irish Question: A Collection of Writings (International Publishers, 1972)]
8. Before imperialism developed into the worldwide system during Lenin's epoch over a century ago and today, other historical developments came into play, which were pivotal. One was the theft of millions of Indigenous lands by genocidal methods, starting with the landing of the butcher, Christopher Columbus in 1492 and other of his ilk who followed. Then there was slavery, the theft of millions of African peoples brought to the Americas to make profits for the plantation system. Three-fourths of Mexico was stolen by the U.S., leading to the expansion of slavery and super-exploitation. In the U.S., there were an estimated 4 million enslaved African people, whose bodies were owned by the slave master, not just their labor power. They did not have the choice to work or not, as the workers (or wage laborers) have today. Slavery as an economic system in the Deep South existed side-by-side with the emerging capitalist system in the North fueled by a small but growing working class dominated by whites. Before the Civil War brought these two class systems into conflict, which eventually led to the military defeat of the South, what was the response of

white workers to the enslaved people? (Read from “What is a Nation?” starting with the sentence “And what was the relationship of the white workers in the North and South to the slaves?” through the following 5 paragraphs.)

And what was the relationship of the white workers in the North and South to the slaves? In the North, industrial capitalism was on the rise and a trade union movement was in formation. Many of these workers were first-generation immigrants escaping poverty and oppression in Europe.

Some white workers were very sympathetic to the plight of the slaves; many became active in the abolitionist movement. But even in the North, there was much racism toward the slaves and the free Black people who had managed either to buy their freedom or escape from slavery.

Many white workers in lower-paid, menial jobs viewed Black people as competitors and accused them of driving down wages. Unfortunately, most leaders of the craft unions then in existence did not instill within the workers a class view that the Northern industrialists and the slavocracy were both their enemies and that their fight should be not only for the abolition of slavery but for the full equality of Black people.

These white workers were ignorant of the reality that it's the bosses who drive down wages, not oppressed Black labor. During the 1830s, before the Civil War, a number of race riots took place. In Cincinnati and Philadelphia, Black people were killed by racist mobs. Many freed slaves emigrated to Canada to escape this repression.

On the other hand, some white workers who had come from England and Germany were more class-conscious on the question of fighting the slavocracy and understood the need for class solidarity with the slaves. Many of these workers had been influenced by the 1848 revolutions and brought those experiences to the U.S. In fact, the First International Workingmen's Association, based in England and founded by Karl Marx and others, came out militantly against chattel and wage slavery.

It was Marx who made the famous statement, “Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.” [5] In other words, the struggle against capitalism as a system of wage slavery is inseparably linked to the political and economic emancipation of Black people.

9. The issue of national question in the U.S. may have begun with seizure of Indigenous lands and the introduction of slavery. But the issue of the national question didn't end with the military defeat of the Confederacy either. The ten-year period of Black Reconstruction was a radical effort in the U.S. top attempt to

speed up the process of bringing political equality to previously enslaved peoples on the par with whites, in general, under a bourgeois democracy. This attempt was especially made in the arena of political representation, along with education, land distribution (under the demand of 40 acres and a mule), self-defense and more. The violent racist counter-revolution that destroyed Reconstruction is a well-known fact, but let's spend a few minutes to review what has happened since this period that has led us to the present: (Have people brainstorm some of the conditions set in motion by the counter-revolution, starting with the Black Codes, semi-slavery of sharecropping, contract labor, etc.)

10. Let's talk about the principled right to self-determination for oppressed nations. At the end of my essay, "What is a Nation," I quote Sam Marcy, from an article he wrote in 1984 on Black nationalism and white chauvinism. (Have someone read Marcy's paragraph on last page of Moorehead's essay and then discuss.)

Sam Marcy really said it best:

A working class party such as Lenin tried to build should promote every right that a Black person is deprived of that a white one has achieved. We promote and must propagate the right to self-determination. but which road to take for liberation must be decided by the oppressed nation itself. A revolutionary working- class party promotes class solidarity irrespective of which option an oppressed nation chooses. The neutrality of the party in this respect is the strongest pillar of working-class multinational solidarity in the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. The bourgeoisie denies and closes the road to both separatism and integration. They neither wish to complete the bourgeois democratic revolution for political equality nor allow social and economic equality. Nor will they permit the development of a movement for an independent separate state.... [T]he whole struggle of the working class as well as the oppressed people and their allies everywhere is to recognize that there can be no real independence, freedom, or equality as long as the monstrous system of capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression remains. The struggle for any and all concessions must and will go on, and each concession won is a building block in the struggle for emancipation from imperialist finance capital. [14]

11. Lenin wrote an essay answering anarchists like Rosa Luxembourg on this question of self-determination in 1914: "What should be understood by that term? Should the answer be sought in legal definitions deduced from all sorts of 'general concepts of law'? Or is it rather to be sought in a historico-economic study of the national movements? Consequently, if we want to grasp the meaning of self-determination of nations, not by juggling with legal definitions,

or ‘inventing’ abstract definitions, but by examining the historico-economic conditions of the national movements, we must inevitably reach the conclusion that the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state.”

12. Many leaders on the African, Latin American, Asian, continents applied Lenin’s theory on the national question and self-determination to their national liberation movements — from Amilcar Cabral to Mao to Fidel to Ho Chi Minh. In Lenin’s thesis on national and colonial questions (Second International 1920), he stated: “The age-old oppression of colonial and weak nationalities by the imperialist powers has not only filled the working masses of the oppressed countries with animosity towards the oppressor nations, but has also aroused distrust in these nations in general, even in their proletariat. The despicable betrayal of socialism by the majority of the official leaders of this proletariat in 1914-19 — when ‘defense of country’ was used as a social-chauvinist cloak to conceal the defense of the “right” of their “own” bourgeoisie to oppress colonies and fleece financially dependent countries — was certain to enhance this perfectly legitimate distrust.

On the other hand, the more backward the country, the stronger is the hold of small-scale agricultural production, patriarchalism and isolation, which inevitably lend particular strength and tenacity to the deepest of petty-bourgeois prejudices, i.e., to national egoism and national narrow-mindedness. These prejudices are bound to die out very slowly, for they can disappear only after imperialism and capitalism have disappeared in the advanced countries, and after the entire foundation of the backward countries’ economic life has radically changed. It is therefore the duty of the class-conscious communist proletariat of all countries to regard with particular caution and attention the survivals of national sentiments in the countries and among nationalities which have been oppressed the longest; it is equally necessary to make certain concessions with a view to more rapidly overcoming this distrust and these prejudices. Complete victory over capitalism cannot be won unless the proletariat and, following it, the mass of working people in all countries and nations throughout the world voluntarily strive for alliance and unity.”