

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

[Sections for discussion and read-aloud sections are numbered and marked in yellow.]

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. (#1) (Read aloud the first four paragraphs of Marcy, "The right of self-determination and the Black struggle.")

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 nations 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. (#2) (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.") As the great African socialist, Pan-Africanist leader, Kwame Nkrumah stated in a title of a book: "Neo-colonialism is the highest 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. (#3) (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? (#4) (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.)
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? (#5) (Read from "What is a Nation?" starting on page 5 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.)
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 about social equality to previously enslaved peoples on the par with whites, in general, under a bourgeois democracy. The areas to bring about this full equality included 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. (#6) (Have someone read Marcy's paragraph on last page of Moorehead's essay and then discuss.)
11. Lenin wrote an essay answering anarchists like Rosa Luxemburg 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."

\*Assign the following reading for one or two people to read and prepare a presentation in the next class.

**Reparations and the Black Struggle:** Sam Marcy, "Bussing and Self-Determination: The NAACP Rally" (1975)  
<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/marcy/busing.html>