

# american socialist quarterly

The Conquest of Democracy—Devere Allen

Socialists in the Trade Unions—Jack Altman

Socialists and the Dictatorship  
of the Proletariat—Theodor Dan

The Negro's Stake in Socialism—  
Margaret I. Lamont

"Pie in the Sky"—  
Current Utopian Notions—  
David P. Berenberg

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# The Negro's Stake in Socialism

MARGARET I. LAMONT

THE Socialist Party program in respect to the Negro is brief and simple on its positive side. The platform of the party in campaigns usually calls for full economic, political and educational rights for the Negro, enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, and anti-lynching legislation. The party is not militant and aggressive in its policy in regard to Negroes, partly because it is not now militant or aggressive as a party, and partly because the line laid down by Debs on the race issue has not been altered. When Debs was asked whether the Socialist Party would make a special appeal to the Negro and would have a special program for him, the great leader replied that the Socialist Party would act in the interests of all workers, white and black alike, and that a particularized appeal to Negroes would not, therefore, be in keeping with party principles. As a result of the development of this noble, but perhaps inadequate, party line, the main emphasis of socialists in practical activity among Negroes has been upon a somewhat passive insistence that trade union discrimination against them be removed. It is only recently that the struggle against trade union discrimination has taken on a more active, militant aspect.

Ernest Doerfler, in the "American Socialist Quarterly", expressed the current militant viewpoint on the question:

"The Socialist Party must therefore take the lead in agitating for industrial unions into which the Negro will be freely admitted. Craft unionism with its trade autonomy and isolation will necessarily keep the Negroes separated in occupational groups into which they have been forced by economic circumstances. It is the task of industrial unions to unite the workers and align them solidly against the master class. Political freedom can only come for the Negro when he has achieved industrial equality through the industrial unions. Socialists must by dint of hard educational work and

## The American Socialist Quarterly

example convince the American labor movement that the struggle between white and black workers is suicidal, and that in resisting the economic and social growth of the Negro the unions obstruct their own interests." It has often been pointed out that in trade unions where socialists have had influence, such as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, there has been a more sincere and receptive policy toward Negroes than is true in the field of organized labor in general. In new unions in which socialists have played a part, such as the Building Service Employees Union, Negroes have been admitted without question and given responsibility. This also holds true on the agricultural front, in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, which, like the communist-controlled Share-croppers' Union of Alabama, is organizing white and Negro workers together in the face of grave terror.

Thus the record of socialist activity in the trade unions in respect to racial discrimination can be considered modestly creditable. It must be recognized, however, that many individual socialists in the American Federation of Labor have remained passive or criminally indifferent in the face of open or veiled discrimination against Negroes. Such passivity or indifference cannot be pardoned or justified. Furthermore, in view of the extent and acute nature of discrimination in the A. F. of L., the militant socialist must raise the question of whether the party's agitation on this issue has been adequate to the situation. An honest answer must be in the negative.

What, exactly, is the situation in the unions in regard to Negroes? A study prepared under the direction of Labor Research gives the following information:

"There are at least 26 national unions, including the railway brotherhoods, who by their constitutions or rituals exclude Negroes from membership. Other unions exclude Negroes in practice. Still others, which claim they do not discriminate against Negroes, restrict them to Jim Crow locals and discriminate against them in the distribution of jobs and union offices. Many indirect but equally vicious methods are used by the labor bureaucrats to exclude Negroes. The Plumbers and

## The Negro's Stake in Socialism

Steamfitters Union, for instance, excludes Negroes by means of the license law, forcing all applicants to pass a municipal examination before an examining board which often grants no licenses to Negroes. In other cases . . . (there are) such restrictive conditions for Negro membership that the black worker is discouraged from the start. Where the Negro is permitted to join the union he is Jim-Crowed into separate locals or 'auxiliary' locals and discriminated against on all sides by the white labor leaders, as in the case of the International Longshoremen's Association. . . . So consciously and persistently have the white officials turned the Negro away from the unions that the total Negro membership in all A. F. of L. unions is not more than 55,000 and probably less than 50,000." Spero and Harris, in the "Black Worker", have told in more detail about indirect discrimination against Negroes, not only by license requirements for plumbers, but for locomotive firemen, as in Georgia, and for barbers in many states. The hard conditions laid down for Negro membership in some unions, such as the motion picture operators' union, "show both race prejudice and the desire of white unionists to confine Negro competition within certain limits." The constitution of the International Brotherhood of Blacksmiths, Drop Forgers and Helpers contains restrictions upon the right of Negro helpers to transfer to anything except "another auxiliary local composed of colored members", upon their promotion to the positions of blacksmiths or helper apprentices, upon their admission to shops where white helpers are employed, and upon their right to have their own representatives. Race consciousness is so accentuated by these measures that "the union finds it difficult to organize Negroes when strikes, industrial expansion, or the lowering of old skill requirements by technological changes make their employment possible and their organization, even though difficult, a matter of the union's self-protection." It is clear that the policy of racial discrimination in the unions has serious long-run disadvantages not only for the Negroes who suffer directly and bitterly from it, but for white labor which consents to exclusion and restriction on racial lines.

## The American Socialist Quarterly

It will be recalled that the total Negro population of the country is about 12,000,000, and the number of Negroes employed in the basic industries in normal times is estimated at more than 2,000,000. The small number of Negroes in the trade unions is at once a reflection of discrimination in racial terms, and of discrimination by the craft aristocracy against unskilled labor in general. In the "Black Worker" we read: "If the spirit of 'job control', 'craft pride', and fear of competition of the newcomers caused the exclusion of white labor from the trade unions, should one expect it to operate differently where Negro workers are concerned? . . . In the first place the Negro has been almost entirely engaged in the unskilled and agricultural occupations. The workers in these occupations, irrespective of race, receive scant attention from craft unionism. Because it is employed in so-called unorganizable occupations, the major proportion of Negro labor, like the white, is . . . excluded. In the second place, the Negro was customarily believed to be unfitted by racial temperament for skilled mechanical work. . . . By refusing to accept apprentices from a class of workers which social tradition has stamped as inferior, or by withholding membership in the union from reputed craftsmen of this class, the union accomplishes two things simultaneously. It protects its good name. It eliminates a whole class of future competitors. While race prejudice is a very fundamental fact in the exclusion of the Negro, the desire to restrict competition so as to safeguard job monopoly and to control wages is inextricably interwoven with it."

It is significant to note that in many of the discussions, bitter, emotional, and shot through with superstition and misconception concerning the Negro's physical and mental capacities, which have raged over the floor in union meetings and conventions, the objections to admitting Negroes to full membership in the unions have frequently reduced themselves to open fear of establishing social equality between Negroes and whites.

In the decade before 1900, the American Federation of Labor took a firm position against admitting unions that dis-

## The Negro's Stake in Socialism

criminated against Negroes. But in 1900 President Gompers himself stated publicly that it was impossible to maintain this position any longer. An almost mortal blow was dealt the effort of certain elements within the trade-unions to forge solidarity of black and white workers. The A. F. of L., desperately trying to gather up its tattered garment of tolerance, evolved the policy of granting Federal charters, directly to colored workers; according to Article 12, Section 6, of the constitution, "Separate charters may be issued to central labor unions, local unions or federated labor unions, composed exclusively of colored workers where in the judgment of the Executive Council it appears advisable". This method of chartering local and federal labor unions had previously been used for the organization of white workers who were not eligible for craft unions, or where the number of workers was small. However, the white men organized in this way were almost invariably absorbed later by one of the sovereign craft unions. The Negro workers organized under Federal charters have almost invariably remained separate, and have thus found themselves in a relatively weak and ambiguous position in respect to bargaining power in the winning of demands from employers. This has been shown, for instance, in the case of the Negro Freight Handlers' Union and the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, which have labored under all the handicaps of isolation and weakness, due largely to lack of a clear relationship with and support from the main body of organized labor. Abram Harris comments on this aspect of the situation: ". . . the economic protection of these bodies must, in the nature of the circumstances, rest with the unions to whose racial proscription they owe their existence."

The American Federation of Labor has refused, time and time again, to be budged from its attitude of smugness and professed belief in accomplishment in regard to the organization of Negro workers. Even during the critical period of post-war migration of large numbers of southern Negroes into northern industry, the American Federation of Labor was not aware of or would not accept the challenge to break through the barriers of discrimination. The record of the

## The American Socialist Quarterly

A. F. of L. on this issue is not encouraging to contemplate. The socialist who scans this record can have few good words to say for it. What, then, can the socialist offer the Negro who considers the party, observes the A. F. of L. and asks the socialist about the party's position on the Negro in the organized labor movement? The words of a Crosswaith, who tries to convince Negro labor how supremely fair two or three unions have been to the black worker, are not convincing. The statements of militant socialists on the race question are often sound as far as they go, but they frequently dangle in a vacuum, disassociated from the struggle for racial rights outside the organized labor movement. It is not enough to say that the Negro worker will get as much theoretical and practical attention from the party as the white worker, neither more nor less. This is unrealistic in view of the fact that the Negro worker is subject to a double exploitation, because of his economic weakness and because of his race. This truism needs to be emphasized in view of the tendency of some socialists to minimize the importance of the struggle for political and social rights for the Negro. Even Doerfler's statement that "Political freedom can only come for the Negro when he has achieved industrial equality through the industrial unions" carries the implication that there is not much use in fighting for Negro social and political rights before the industrial fight is won. It would be equally absurd to over-estimate the gains that can be made in terms of political and racial rights for the Negro within the framework of capitalism. It is probable that the concessions wrung from capitalism on the legal and political side, especially from southern capitalism, will be small; yet it is necessary to demand and fight for those concessions. Such meagre rights as an exploited racial minority may gain under capitalism will slowly add to the strength and confidence of the exploited group; while the denial of basic rights, brought into sharper relief by struggle, will increase the sense of solidarity within the particular group and with other exploited groups. A militant socialist will make no reservations about standing for full political, legal, and social, as well as economic rights for the Negro here and now, although he will also say



## The Negro's Stake in Socialism

clearly that these fundamental human rights will not and cannot be achieved, except to an insignificant degree, under the present economic system.

While he participates in the struggle for the rights of the Negro before the law and under the constitution, seeing an inch painfully gained here and there, the militant socialist is also involved in the essential job of educating white workers to overcome their unreasoning, bourgeois-fostered prejudices against the Negro; he is trying to build up the trust of Negro and white workers in each other through common action in meetings, demonstrations, strikes, where the results of solidarity will be unmistakable even to politically naive workers. Within and outside of the A. F. of L. the militant socialist calls for the industrial organization of the unorganized workers, of the unskilled whose ranks include millions of Negroes, not only in the basic industries, but in agriculture and domestic service. In newly organized fields, militant socialists will press for the admission to the A. F. of L. of Negro workers on absolutely equal terms with white workers. If this cannot immediately be achieved, then the newly organized workers, Negro and white, should retain an independent, unaffiliated status until such time as the A. F. of L. will come to terms. In the meantime an unrelenting pressure would be brought to bear upon the leadership of organized labor for admission. This is the position that must be taken as the realistic stand between the communist dual union pitfall,—“the organization of special trade unions for the Negro masses”,—and the dangerously slow method of fighting discrimination inside the A. F. of L. while leaving the Negro workers outside untouched and unorganized. This last alternative carries the constant menace of disintegration of the Negro labor movement, and the loss of organized Negro labor opinion in times of crisis. The dual union policy of the Communist Party as it affected the Negro worker was formulated in the 1928 resolution of the Communist International on the Negro question, with directives for waging, at the same time, a “merciless struggle against the A. F. of L. bureaucracy . . . The creation of separate Negro unions should in no way weaken the struggle in the

## The American Socialist Quarterly

old unions for the admission of Negroes on equal terms. . . .” This policy was unrealistic because it obviously cut the Negro unions off from any vital connection with the main body of organized labor in the United States. The directives were to wage a struggle on two separate fronts, and it was not clear how the communists were to be able to build up a trade union movement paralleling the A. F. of L. and at the same time build up sufficient strength within the A. F. of L. to attack reactionary leadership on various issues including race discrimination. The general lack of clarity in the communist trade union line at that time was reflected in the trade union policy with regard to Negro workers. Recently that line has been modified; the dual union policy is slowly being liquidated. It remains to be seen how this change will affect the communist position on the organization of Negro workers. It is almost certain that it will have a favorable effect upon the possibilities of a united front against racial discrimination.

Inside the American Federation of Labor the militant socialist, Negro or white, will bring constant pressure to bear upon the rank and file and through them upon the leadership of the union to which he belongs, for the removal of direct and indirect discrimination against Negroes, for the revision of those union constitutions which embody discrimination, for the withholding or revoking of charters from unions and union locals which practice discrimination against Negro workers. Along with this effort, fundamental education in the necessity for solidarity between white and Negro workers must be carried on, subtly and ingeniously in some unions, boldly in others. There must be no compromise on the part of militant socialists in the field of organized labor with regard to racial discrimination. To compromise on this issue is to betray millions of workers whose wills and energies and mass economic power must be fused to create a militant, inclusive labor movement.

The fight for industrial unionism, pressed ceaselessly wherever socialists have a voice in the ranks of organized labor, has the logic of events, of economic circumstances, of technological development on its side. It is in industrial

## The Negro's Stake in Socialism

unionism that the chief hope of the Negro worker lies. When the jealously guarded sanctity of special crafts disappears, most of the false notions about lack of capacity in the Negro for skilled or semi-skilled work will also vanish. In the industrial union it becomes plain to the worker far more quickly than in the craft union that he has everything to gain by taking his stand with fellow workers of all races and of all degrees of skill, against the common enemy. It does not take long for this conviction of the need for solidarity to wipe out any antagonism that a white worker may have felt toward a Negro or a Mexican as a possible competitor for a job.

As we have indicated before, the Negro comrade in the Socialist Party will expect, and will have a right to expect, more in a program of militant action than union activity. It is not pleasant to have to say that socialists have often failed to press vigorously their demands for civil, legal, political and social rights for the Negro. Unfortunately it is true that they have not always been first upon the scene when these rights have been denied or violated. In many cases the failure of socialists to act quickly and decisively has been due to lack of apparatus through which to function, to weak organization in various localities, especially in the south, and to lack of money. However, this weakness can only partially excuse delay and timidity in participating in action to wrest such rights as may be had from a hostile capitalist legal, political and social machine. Socialists must fight for the rights of Negroes, Mexicans, Japanese, Jews and other minorities in any localities or situations where people of these racial groups are subjected to special discriminations. The struggle for rights withheld on grounds of race must go on as part and parcel of the struggle for the basic rights of all workers. Socialists must take an active and militant place in the campaign against lynching, against Jim-Crowing in its innumerable forms, against the flagrant discrimination in education, in the giving out of relief, and in the courts, and against depriving Negroes of the vote. They must be alert to recognize a situation that menaces the Negro, and give assistance and direction before it is too late. Where organizational apparatus through which

## The American Socialist Quarterly

to function is lacking, it must be built up. Even a skeleton organization in the right place at the right time, even one militant socialist in the right place at the right time, is better than none at all. Socialists must be constantly awake to the fact that the allegiance of Negroes in the future will be granted to that political group which shows itself most able to keep faith with the Negro workers in the rigorous conflicts of their day-to-day living.

The primary task of socialists, Negro and white alike, is to prepare the workers to take power and to use it once they have it. A militant Socialist Party calls the Negro to work toward this objective, in free and democratic comradeship within the party, in implacable opposition to the system of capitalist exploitation and oppression. With the main emphasis, in theory and in action, upon creating a revolutionary working-class, the racial issue will take its correct place in that process as a vital subsidiary question. The communist formulation of the question often appears to make activity among the Negroes an end-in-itself. When this happens, as the result of misdirected strategy, it carries the danger of exposing the Negro to increasingly bitter reactionary attacks. When the socialist is in the midst of a situation involving the racial issue, he will try to handle it in such a way that Negroes are not made the unwilling spearheads of revolution against a frontal attack by the forces of chauvinism and reaction. This determination to avoid serious strategical mistakes need not, however, blind the socialist to the valuable positive lessons he can learn from communist alertness in analyzing situations involving the racial issue, and from communist energy and doggedness in exposing racial discrimination and injustice wherever it lifts its head.

Militant socialists and communists must and can work out united front agreements and actions in situations where the race issue is part of the total complex, as in other situations where a divided working class will play into the hands of capitalism in its guise of rising fascism. In the south, where the radical movement, socialist as well as communist, is being driven partly underground, the united front is not only desir-

## The Negro's Stake in Socialism

able but imperative. This does not mean a blanket united front which would publicly commit one party to positions taken by the other. It does not mean a general united front agreement depriving either party of the right to criticize the other. Such an agreement would not be possible at present. The socialists will, of course, retain their right to criticize the communist formulation of the Negro question in terms of a national minority with a definite territorial base; they will continue to point out that valid objections based on practical economic realities can be made to the theory of self-determination in the black belt, and that to set up self-determination as an immediate demand in daily struggle is a dubious policy; they will undoubtedly differ from the communists on many points of strategy. United fronts in the south will be particular agreements to cope with sharply defined situations where the economic factors are clear. The agreement between the Alabama Share Croppers' Union and the Arkansas Tenant Farmers' Union is a case in point.

Socialists who are earnestly trying to forge a realistic left-wing position on any question will find that it is not fruitful to attempt to demolish by invective and cheap sarcasm the positions reached by other left-wing groups. In judging the soundness of a militant socialist program in terms of the needs and rights of the Negro workers of the country, we shall get nowhere by dismissing with contempt the communist program for the Negro, nor by closing socialist discussion with deceptively simple formulas. If we must have a brief formula when elaboration is not possible, we shall say to the Negro comrade what we say to the white comrade: Your stake in socialism is your right to take the revolutionary road to security and justice under a workers' government in a system and society which you yourselves will build and control.

Some back issues are still available. The only complete set is Volume 1, 1932, which may be obtained at 50 cents. Anyone wishing to complete files is urged to write at once since the supply is limited. All other numbers regular price 25 cents.