

## Chapter 11

### My Last Year in the Soviet Union

Following Lovestone's expulsion from the Party in June of 1929, Nasanov and I continued our work in the Negro Commission of the Comintern. We both loved the work which involved a continuous check on the press of the U.S. Party (then the *Daily Worker* and *The Communist*); the minutes and resolutions of the Party's leading committees; and other labor and progressive publications in which Party members were active.

This included *Labor Unity*, the organ of the TUUL, and *Labor Defender* which was put out by the International Labor Defense. This material was to be found in the Comintern Information Department whose American representative at the time, as I remember, was A. G. Bosse.

As I acquainted myself with the material, I became pleased and excited at the advances the Party had made in work among Blacks. The U.S., it seemed, had entered the third period with a bang – a rapid decline of the economy and growth of mass unemployment. Most impressive was the widespread resistance of workers to “rationalization” (wage cutting, stretch-out and speed-up), and the anti-union terror campaign of employers backed by the federal, state and local governments. The resistance was reflected in the needle trades, mining, automobile and textile industries.

All this was two months before the October 1929 stock market crash and the onset of the economic crisis which was to embrace the whole capitalist world. The Party, now freed from factionalism, had united on the basis of the Comintern Address and was timorously moving forth to organize and lead the mounting struggles of the workers.

Nasanov and I felt the best evaluation of the Party's work among Blacks was put forward by Cyril Briggs in a series of articles which appeared in the June, July and September 1929 issues of *The Communist*.<sup>1</sup>

Briggs characterized the Sixth Congress of the CI as a major turning point for the Party in carrying out a revolutionary program in Afro-American work. Using the struggle against white chauvinism as a barometer of the effectiveness of the Party's work in this area, he pointed out that “prior to the Sixth Congress, white chauvinism in the American Party (in both factions!), unmasked at that

Congress by Comrade Ford, and mercilessly condemned by that supreme revolutionary body, made progress in Negro work well-nigh impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

Before the Sixth Congress there were only a handful of Blacks in (he Party, but since then the Central Committee had set up a National Negro Department to help in the formulation of policies and in the direction of the work nationally. District and section Negro committees were formed in most areas of Party concentration.

At the Sixth Party Convention, Black comrades were elected to the highest body in the Party, the Central Committee, and to the National Executive Committee of the Young Communist League. They were also elected to the Party’s Politburo, the National Bureau of the League, and added to district committees and section committees. Another step forward was registered at the founding convention of the TUUL in September 1929; of the 800 plus delegates, 68 were Black.

Nevertheless, this was only a beginning. White chauvinism was still pervasive and represented a powerful influence in the Party. Briggs then turned a critical spotlight on the most dramatic struggle of the period – the strike of Southern textile workers at Gastonia, North Carolina, which took place in the spring of 1929. This strike – led by the Party and the National Textile Workers Union, an affiliate of the TUEL – was the Party’s first mass activity in the South. It was therefore a test for the new line on the unions and on the Afro-American question.

The Southern textile industry – and Gastonia’s mills were no exception – was traditionally a white industry with Blacks about five percent of the work force. The whites were new proletarians from the mountains and farms, employed by northern mill owners who had moved their mills south to exploit the cheap and unorganized labor of the region. In Gastonia, these workers responded to their exploitation by striking against “stretch-out” and starvation conditions.

The bosses used the old battle-cry of white supremacy to divide the Black and white workers and try to break the strike. It created an atmosphere of reeking race hatreds and suspicion, and this was the state of things when the National Textile Workers Union launched its organizing campaign in Gastonia.

The mill owners and their local myrmidons – the sheriff, police, militia, foremen, managers and extra-legal arms of the KKK sought

to maintain the status quo threatened by the strikers. The strike speedily took on a political character, reaching the point of armed conflict.

The heroic woman strike leader, Ella May Wiggins, was pursued and shot down in broad daylight. The Gastonia chief of police was killed and several deputies wounded when they attacked a tent colony which strikers had formed after being evicted from their company-owned homes. Sixteen strike leaders, including some communists, stood trial for the murder of the police chief.

The reign of terror that ensued made the situation extremely difficult for our organizers. Clearly there could be no retreat from the principle of organizing Blacks and whites into one union on the basis of complete equality, yet there were some union and Party leaders who wanted to back down in the face of the prevailing chauvinism among the white workers.

The Central Committee firmly laid down the line against such a retreat. Following the line of the ECCI resolution, it insisted that the new union embrace all nationalities and colors and that separate unions for Blacks were to be organized only in those trades from which they were barred by the reactionary policies of white union leaders. After their initial wavering, the local leadership rallied to the correct line. Blacks and whites were organized into the same union.

Testimony to this is a dramatic incident involving my brother Otto. I hadn't heard much of Otto since he'd returned to the States, only that he'd been placed on the Central Committee at the Sixth Convention and was working in the Negro Department of the TUUL. As TUUL organizer, he had been sent to Gastonia. He was at nearby Bessemer City at the time of the attack on the strikers' tent colony and the shooting of the police chief. Otto was unaware of what had happened and that the stage had been set for his lynching should he return.

As an article in the *Daily Worker* described the incident:

Otto Hall... was on his way... to Gastonia on the night of the raid... the white workers, realizing the grave danger to which Hall was exposed if he happened to get into Gastonia that night, formed a body guard and went to meet Hall and warned him to keep away. They met Hall two miles out of town and took him in a motorcar to Charlotte where they

collected enough money among themselves to pay his railroad fare to New York. No sooner had Hall embarked on the train a mob broke into the house where he hid before his departure.

It was only timely action on the part of these white workers that saved the life of their Negro comrade.<sup>3</sup>

The Gastonia struggle signaled a new period in the Party's trade union work – a period which characterized the thirties overall. Under the leadership of the Communist Party and our left trade unions, Black and white workers were organized into the same unions on the basis of equality and in the common fight against the capitalists. The Party was able to mobilize mass support for the strike and the sixteen leaders framed for murder, in cities throughout the South and the country as a whole. Otto personally spoke in some twenty-seven cities.

But what was to be said about the needle trades union, long a bastion of the left? Briggs pointed out the “criminal” apathy of the comrades working in this area. The Needle Trades Industrial Workers' Union only organized Blacks in times of strike, and as a result, had very few Black members. While the union had special departments and scores of functionaries for Greek, Italian, Jewish and other immigrant workers, there was no Afro-American department and not a single Black functionary. This, at a time when in New York alone there were several thousand Black needle trades workers.

Comrades in the Miners Union made a similar underestimation of work among Afro-Americans. This union, operated in an industry which had a large number of Black miners – in some fields even out-numbering the white workers – but had not yet appointed a single Black organizer. In Illinois District Eight (my old district), there occurred a particularly blatant case of white chauvinism. William Kruse, the district organizer, refused to share the pool of funds available for wages with Comrade Isabel, the Black functionary. He persisted in this practice despite the demands of the National Secretariat that the funds be shared equitably.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the numerous examples of white chauvinism, there was no doubt that the Party was making advances in regards to Negro work. In fact, it was precisely because of these advances that chau-

vinistic practices which hitherto had gone under wraps were brought out into the open and attacked. Briggs' series of three articles was the sharpest attack on white chauvinism ever published by the Party.

Their publication reflected that despite the many shortcomings in our work, there was a growing awareness in the Party leadership of the seriousness of the question. The rapid deterioration of economic conditions affecting both Black and white workers allowed no complacency. If the Party was going to play a leading role in the coming struggles, it would have to carry on a continuous struggle against white chauvinist ideology and practices.

I was heartened by Briggs's articles. At the same time, however, I was somewhat disturbed. While Briggs evoked the Comintern resolution on the Negro question in his blast against white chauvinism, he was curiously silent on the theory and program underlying the resolution. It was certainly true, as Briggs said, that among revolutionary white workers, white chauvinism was often manifested in the "general underestimation of the role of the Negro masses in the revolutionary struggle." But to say no more than that was to avoid the essence of the question.

What were the ideas and theories fueling this underestimation? Clearly they were to be found in the remnants of Lovestone's line which still clung to the Party – the hangovers of the social democratic view which considered the fight against the special oppression of Blacks to be a diversion from the class struggle.

The new line was a drastic break with the social chauvinist doctrines of the past, and in it the Party had a mighty weapon in the fight against white chauvinism and petty bourgeois nationalism of the Garvey stripe. But the new line could not simply be declared, it had to be fought for.

As months passed, Nasanov and I searched in vain through the Party press and documents for further discussion of the 1928 resolution. The resolution of the October 1929 plenum of the Central Committee had noted the increasingly important role the Black proletariat played in building the new unions. Its Program of Action called for "merciless struggle against white chauvinism and any attempt towards segregating the Negro workers."<sup>5</sup> Following the plenum, the National Agitprop Department had promised to publish a special discussion bulletin on the Afro-American question. None ever materialized, however.

By the beginning of 1930, it was becoming clear to us that there

was not only confusion in the Party, but definite opposition to the new line.

As if to confirm our misgivings, the February 1930 issue of *The Communist* contained an article by veteran Black communist Otto Huiswood, titled “World Aspects of the Negro Question.” It was the first article in a year to broach the theoretical aspects of the question, but it was a direct challenge to the line of the Comintern Sixth Congress.

Huiswood sought to establish a difference in character between the oppression of Blacks in Africa and the West Indies, and those in the USA. The question in Africa and the West Indies, he contended, was a national question, but in the United States, it was a race question. According to Huiswood, the Black minority in the U.S. lacked the requisites of a nation. It had “no distinct language and culture from the dominant racial group... its only distinguishing feature is its racial origin.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Huiswood pulled the Afro-American question out of the category of national-colonial questions and dumped it back into the muddy waters of “race question.” He had fallen back upon Sik and his “social race” theory, which asserted the primacy of the race factor, race ideologies, in the oppression of U.S. Blacks.

By making race primary, Huiswood’s article denied the validity of self-determination as a slogan for Black liberation. It rejected the concept of Blacks in the South as an oppressed nation, and therefore rejected the perspective which called for the development of a national revolutionary movement based on the masses of Black soil-tillers and workers in that region.

Huiswood’s article demanded an answer. Nasanov and I felt that it could in the end serve a positive purpose in that our reply afforded an excellent opportunity to clarify a number of areas of misunderstanding and confusion. Our response could be the vehicle to finally settle accounts with Sik and demolish his “social race” theory. Nasanov had already written a polemic against Sik exposing the latter’s incredible ignorance of Lenin’s position on the national question. This was to be published in the April issue of *The Communist*.<sup>7</sup> I would take on Huiswood directly.

First I answered his assertion that Blacks in the U.S. had no special culture. “Negroes have a culture which reflects their whole historical development as a people in the U.S.,” I pointed out. “And as to separate language... this is not one of the prerequisites of the

nation.”<sup>8</sup> I referred to Stalin, who said: “A common language for every nation, but not necessarily different languages for different nations.”<sup>9</sup>

But was there in fact a difference in the character of oppression between Blacks in the U.S., on the one hand, and in Africa and the West Indies on the other? I concluded that there was no such difference. It was clear to me, of course, that Blacks in the U.S. were not a colony in the formal sense of the term. Unlike a colony, they were not separated geographically from the metropolitan country.

There was, however, no substantive difference in the character of Black oppression in the United States and the colonies and semi-colonies. In both instances, imperialist policy was directed towards forcibly arresting the free economic and cultural development of the people, towards keeping them backward as an essential condition for super-exploitation.

In attempting to prove a difference in the character of oppression, Huiswood wound up downgrading the anti-imperialist content of the Black liberation struggle in the United States.

Since the Sixth Congress I had given considerable thought to the race factor and its role in the question of U.S. Blacks.

Certainly it was clear that race played an important role in the Afro-American question, but it was only one element and not the central question itself.

Of course, I pointed out: “It would be a serious mistake to underestimate the profound social role played by these theories. Arising first as a moral sanction for a national colonial policy, these dogmas become fixed in laws, in turn influence politics and in this manner react again upon the social and economic basis, sharpening and deepening the exploitation of subject peoples and perpetuating the existing social relations.”<sup>10</sup>

In reality, I wrote, the racial persecution of Blacks was a particular form and device of national oppression. The racial element was a peculiarity of the question of U.S. Blacks. Nowhere, with the exception of apartheid in Southern Africa, had race been made to play such a decisive role. Nowhere had it served for such a long period as an instrument of ruling class oppression. The prominence of racial ideologies in Black oppression in the U.S. arose from the necessity of the white rulers to maintain the degradation of Blacks in the midst of the most modern and advanced capitalist society in the world.

Under these conditions the bourgeois rulers had to pursue “the most energetic policy in order to keep up the bar of separation between white and Negroes, i.e., retard the process of assimilation and thus preserve the conditions for the super-exploitation of the latter.”<sup>11</sup>

In the absence of pronounced cultural distinctions such as language or religion, I argued, the “racial visibility” of U.S. Blacks was used by bourgeois social theorists as the most convenient factor upon which to erect spurious theories of white supremacy in order to set them apart from the masses of the white population as permanent objects of scorn.

Sik (and thus Huiswood) on the other hand, counterposed the race question to the national question. They asserted that Blacks were separated from the dominant white race solely by “artificial racial divisions and race oppression arising on this basis.”

Sik compounded these errors when he reduced the whole national question to a struggle between competing bourgeoisie for markets:

Among American Negroes there is no developing industrial bourgeoisie, hindered in its economic development the struggle of which (for its free economic development) for the winning of internal markets and for the removal of obstacles standing in the path of economic progress, could give these national movements a progressive character.<sup>12</sup>

But the national question, as Stalin pointed out, had undergone changes from that earlier period when it first appeared as part of the bourgeois revolution. Now, in the period of socialist revolution, it was part of the struggle of the proletariat:

It is quite evident that the main point here is not that the bourgeoisie of one nationality is beating, or may beat, the bourgeoisie of another nationality in the competitive struggle, but that the imperialist group of the ruling nationality is exploiting and oppressing the bulk of the masses, above all the peasant masses, of the colonies and dependent nationalities and that, by oppressing and exploiting them, it is drawing them into the struggle against imperialism, converting them into allies of the proletarian revolution.<sup>13</sup>

This was in sharp contrast to the formulation put forward by Sik



and espoused by Huiswood. Sik, I contended, made the ideological factor of “racism” more important than the social question itself. Thus, in asserting the primacy of racial factors in the question, Sik and Huiswood reduced the Black liberation struggle to a struggle against racial ideology. They saw only the bourgeois assimilationist trend, “a striving towards intermingling and amalgamation, towards full social equality” in the struggle and not the potential national revolutionary trend of the masses.<sup>14</sup>

The Black liberation struggle was reduced to a feeble bourgeois liberal protest against racism and racist ideology, divorced from its economic roots, and to be resolved through education and humanitarian uplift.

Feeling that it would add some clarity to the situation, I ended my piece with the serious economic and historical analysis of the question that Sik and Huiswood had so assiduously avoided. As I saw it, the evolution of American Blacks as an oppressed nation was the result of the unfinished bourgeois democratic revolution of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The advent of imperialism froze the Blacks in their post-Reconstruction position – landless, semi-slaves in the South. It permanently blocked the road to fusion of Blacks and whites into one nation on the basis of equality under capitalism. The struggle for genuine equality was thenceforth ultimately bound in the South to take a national revolutionary and socialist revolutionary direction. This position defined the status of Blacks in the north as an unas-similable national minority, as the shadow of the plantation fell upon them throughout the country.

I think Huiswood was won over by my argument; at least I saw nothing more in the Party press trumpeting Sik’s “race” theories. In looking back on the thing now, I think it was a sort of skirmish in the war to carry out a revolutionary program on the Black national question. As long as the Party leadership vacillated in carrying out the line of the Sixth Congress, such old and reactionary theories were bound to persist.

I must say, however, that things were not standing still at home. While progress in the struggle was slow, it was progress nevertheless. Amid a great upsurge in the workers’ movement, the Party was beginning to implement the line of the Sixth Congress, though there was still some vacillation.

Our biggest thrill that spring had been the nationwide demon-

strations of the unemployed led by the Party and the TUUL on March 6, 1930. Over one and a quarter million workers responded to the Party's call in over a dozen cities coast to coast. Hundreds of workers and Party leaders were arrested. William Z. Foster, Robert Minor, Israel Amter and Harry Raymond were sentenced to three years in jail for leading a demonstration of 110,000 in New York's Union Square.<sup>15</sup> They served at least a year of these sentences.

The Party also led large and militant May Day demonstrations in several cities. All this clearly indicated that the Party was becoming a leader of the masses, as more and more people were thrown into struggle by the deepening economic crisis and the capitalist offensive.

The Party chalked up an astounding success in its recruitment drive. In a period of two or three months the Party recruited into its ranks over 6,000 new members, 90% from basic industry and 1,000 of whom were Blacks.<sup>16</sup> A considerable number of the latter had come from the disintegrating Garvey movement.

In the midst of this upsurge the Seventh Convention of the U.S. Party convened in New York on June 22, 1930, and Nasanov and I followed the proceedings closely. The Party's estimate of the economic crisis and perspectives for the future were discussed in detail, emphasizing the need to defeat the right deviation in the Party.

As summarized by Browder, then General Secretary, the convention observed "that the economic crisis shows the stabilization of capitalism approaching its end, that it brings close the realization of war, and that it will in many countries be transformed into a political crisis, and that the working class will be more and more unable to find any path except that of revolutionary struggle." At the same time, the convention recognized the need to struggle against the "leftist" concept of the crisis as the "automatic bearer of revolution."<sup>17</sup>

Internally the Party was in a qualitatively different position than it had been at the time of the Sixth Convention in 1929. It had broken away from the crippling factionalism that had all but paralyzed its work. It was now consolidating its forces on the basis of the decisions of the CI and had seized the initiative in the growing revolutionary trend in the country.

There were a score of Black delegates (17%) present and for the first time the Afro-American question was characterized as "*the* problem for our Party."<sup>18</sup> While it was evident that important ad-

vances had been made in the work, the convention brought out that “this could not be credited to the clarity of understanding of the Party as a whole,”<sup>19</sup> and that a “proper orientation is lacking.”<sup>20</sup>

Much discussion and debate did not clear up this confusion. Browder, for instance, denigrated the slogan of self-determination by making the Black rebellion contingent upon a revolutionary situation in the whole country. “The transformation of this slogan into one of action is conditioned upon the maturing of a revolutionary situation for American capitalist society.”<sup>21</sup> Overall, however, we felt the convention represented progress in terms of work among U.S. Blacks.

My three-year term at the Lenin School was drawing toward a close in June 1930. I began thinking about home and what awaited me on my return. I had little organizational experience in the Party before coming to the Soviet Union, and now began to wonder what type of work I would be doing.

But I was to find that Nasanov had other immediate plans for me. He felt that I should stay for a few months longer and work with the CI. It was felt (I presumed by Kuusinen and others) that the Comintern should intervene once more on the Black question. Clearly the brief resolution adopted at the Sixth Congress two years previous was not sufficient. Now a more detailed statement of the question was needed. They had in mind another CI Commission on the question that would meet after the Seventh Convention of the U.S. Party – one set up to discuss and work out such a statement when all the proceedings from that convention were available. The convention would undoubtedly point up remaining areas of confusion.

“Wouldn’t it be best for you to stay, Harry?” asked Nasanov. “Eventually everything will work out,” he said, “but it would be better for you to return with a new CI resolution. That way you’ll be off to a good start. If you left now, you might get battered about in the fights there.”

## **THE RILU’S FIFTH CONGRESS**

The Fifth Congress of the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU) was to convene in Moscow August 15, 1930. Delegates started arriving several weeks early. The U.S. delegation, thirty strong, included seven Blacks – the largest number ever to attend an RILU Congress. They had come to Moscow via Hamburg where

they had participated together with Africans and West Indian blacks in the founding conference of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, initiated by the RILU.

The Hamburg delegation was led by James Ford, head of the Negro Department of the Trade Union Unity League, a member of the executive committee of the RILU, and provisional chairman and chief organizer of the Hamburg Conference. His co-worker and assistant was George Padmore, also a TUUL national organizer.<sup>22</sup>

The U.S. delegation included: Harold Williams, KUTVA graduate and a member of the railroad workers union in Chicago; Helen McClain, a Philadelphia needle trades worker; Ike Hawkins, a Pennsylvania coal miner; and Arthur Murphy, a Pennsylvania steelworker. Of the delegation I only knew Ford and Padmore, and I hastened to make the acquaintance of the other delegates.

They were a young, enthusiastic group, fresh from struggles in their respective industries in which they had played leading roles. I was especially impressed by the young Black woman from Philadelphia, Helen McClain. She was a natural leader, lively, attractive, humorous and the center of attention.

The delegates filled me in on news from home and related what had happened at the Hamburg Conference. The conference had been in preparation for nearly a year. A provisional committee had been set up under the chairmanship of Jimmy Ford. It was originally scheduled to be held in London, metropolis of the world's greatest colonial power. But it appeared that the conference organizers had reckoned without their hosts.

The preparations came under the scrutiny of His Majesty's Labor Government, headed by Ramsay MacDonald, whose Colonial Secretary was the well known Fabian Socialist, Sydney Webb. They would not allow the conference to meet in London and at the last minute, delegates and organizers moved it to Hamburg, Germany. After some delay it opened on July 7, 1929.

There were seventeen regular delegates and three fraternal (non-voting) delegates representing 20,000 workers in seven countries. Besides the U.S. delegates, there were delegates from Jamaica, Nigeria, Gambia, the Gold Coast (now Ghana), the former German colonies of the Cameroons (now Cameroon) and South Africa. The South African delegate was a white trade unionist, an active fighter for black-white unity in the trade union movement, who was acting as a proxy for a black trade unionist whom the apartheid govern-

ment had denied a passport.

The conference lasted three days. There was an interchange of experiences; reports by Ford, Padmore and Patterson (the last a fraternal delegate from the Anti-Imperialist League). A number of resolutions were adopted and a permanent organization formed – the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers. An executive board was elected, including Ford, Hawkins, McClain and Padmore from the U.S.; Kouyate from French West Africa; Frank MacCaulay from Nigeria; Albert Nzula from South Africa; G. Small of Gambia; and G. Reid of Jamaica. Representatives from Haiti, Liberia and East Africa were to be added.

A monthly publication, *The Negro Worker*, was established with Padmore as the editor. Headquarters of the organization were set up in Hamburg. Many black sailors came into that international port – the second largest in Europe – and the organization’s literature later was circulated there by these sailors throughout Africa.

The International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers was the first attempt to bring together black workers on a world scale. Though the founding conference was small, it was historically important, because it was the first time Black workers from Africa and the Americas had gotten together. It was a wedge into black Africa which hitherto, with the exception of South Africa, had been isolated from the world revolutionary movement.

The main effort of the organization was to promote trade union organization in Africa and the West Indies, linking them up with the world revolutionary trade union movement led by the RILU. Black workers in the U.S. were to play a vanguard role in this endeavor because of their greater political and organizational experience, the result of their position as an oppressed people in the heartland of the most advanced capitalist country.

The Fifth Congress of the RILU met in the *Dom Soyuzov* (House of the Unions) – meeting place for most of the international congresses held in Moscow. I attended a number of sessions of the congress, along with delegates from fifty-five countries. As this was also the Tenth Anniversary of the RILU, business sessions were accompanied by a number of festivities. Our Soviet hosts seemed determined to make it a memorable occasion.

One of the things I remember best about the congress was the presence of a dozen or so veterans of the 1871 Paris Commune – now old men in their seventies and eighties. As I remember, they

wore uniforms – red caps, red-lined blue capes and short white canvas leggings. At the opening celebration, one of the men on seeing us rushed up to embrace me, welcoming us as “my brothers,” fighting “for the world commune.”

When the congress opened, the Moscow press published an article by RILU leader A. Lozovsky. He listed the main tasks of the congress:

Closer to the masses by means of the united front from below, combat Right opportunism and ‘left’ sectarianism, the actual leadership of the economic mass struggle of the proletariat, aid for the weakest sections of the world proletariat, closer contact of the colonial slaves with the working class of the capitalist countries and the proletariat of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup>

The RILU had come to this approach through years of struggle which Lozovsky had summarized in an article published two weeks before the congress.<sup>24</sup> When the RILU was formed in 1920, the main errors came from “left” anarcho-syndicalist tendencies. But in later years, especially after the Ninth Plenum of the ECCI and the Fourth RILU Congress in 1928, the main danger came from the right. By 1930, open right opposition to the decisions of these meetings had been defeated and remaining right tendencies, though still very dangerous, were under attack.

Lozovsky warned, however, that in the course of the fight against right opportunist tendencies and for the line of “class against class” and independent leadership of economic struggles, left-sectarian tendencies had cropped up, involving the danger of alienation from the masses. This left tendency was one which lumped together the social-fascist (reformist) leaders and the workers who followed them. Not knowing how to work in reformist trade unions for the realization of the “united front from below,” they shouted “leftist” slogans such as “permanent general strike,” and “armed strikes,” all of which remained mere words.

Finally, Lozovsky pointed to the RILU’s weaknesses:

The most important of these faults are: lagging behind the mass, and the disproportion between political influence and organizational consolidation of this influence... In spite of all this, the RILU has accomplished a great work in uniting, rallying and ideologically welding together the forces of the

international revolutionary movement.<sup>25</sup>

The congress only lasted about ten days; I attended a number of sessions and had the chance to hear Lozovsky, Padmore and James Ford, who reported on the Hamburg Conference.

The conference broke down into working commissions; each national delegation met to discuss their respective problems. After the congress adjourned, the delegates were taken on tours of the Soviet Union, the Dnieperstroy Dam, the Stalingrad plants and other sights.

### **THE 1930 RESOLUTION**

The Negro Commission of the CI convened in late August, under the chairmanship of Otto Kuusinen. Members of the commission included: Earl Browder, James Ford, Bill Dunne, William Weinstone, William Patterson, Mingulian (head of the Anglo-American Secretariat), Mikhailov (CI rep to the U.S. Party), Nasanov, myself and several Black students from the Lenin School and KUTVA.<sup>26</sup>

Kuusinen was well versed in the problems of the U.S. Party and its work among Blacks. Prior to the commission, and in preparation for it, he had talked on numerous occasions with Nasanov and myself as well as with leading U.S. comrades present in Moscow. He had also received a report from Mikhailov who had recently returned from a visit to the U.S.

He immediately got down to the business at hand. As I remember, he commended the U.S. Party on its recent progress in Afro-American work and its struggle against white chauvinism. This was reflected in the fact that the Party in the last year had recruited over 1,000 Blacks into its ranks.

However, he observed, despite this advance, the pre-convention discussion preceding the Seventh Convention of the Party and the convention itself revealed that there was still much confusion on the question. This fact had been admitted by the leading American comrades themselves. Looking over the materials from the discussion on the question, it was quite clear, he noted, that the Party had not yet overcome all underestimation of the slogan of the right of self-determination. There were still large areas of unclarity on the question generally.

Kuusinen then proceeded to pinpoint these areas as: a false

counterposing of the slogan of “social equality” and “the right of self-determination” and the lack of understanding of their interrelationship. The U.S. convention had raised, but not answered, the following questions: Should the right of self-determination be considered only a slogan of propaganda or one of action? Should separatist tendencies among Blacks be supported or opposed? Should the area of Black concentration in the South be regarded as a colony or as an integral part of the national economy of the United States? Could a revolutionary uprising occur in the South independent of the revolutionary movement in the country as a whole?

Kuusinen suggested the discussion center on these areas of uncertainty without excluding any other questions comrades might want to raise. After the discussion, a new resolution should be drafted addressing itself to these questions. I noticed the bitterness and acrimony that had characterized earlier meetings were absent from the discussions that followed. Freed from factional considerations, it was evident that everyone was honestly seeking clarity on the question.

After a few days of discussion, Kuusinen himself undertook to draft a resolution. Further discussion followed, but on the whole there was agreement. After a few minor changes it was adopted by the commission and eventually became the resolution of the American Party on the Black national question.

The resolution proceeded straight to the heart of the controversial issues. It reasserted the position of the Sixth Congress which defined U.S. Blacks as an oppressed nation. Implicitly, it rejected the position of Sik and others with their one-sided emphasis on race as the primary factor in Black oppression. Stressing instead the basic social and economic factors, it defined it as “a question of an oppressed nation which is in a peculiar and extraordinarily distressing situation of national oppression, not only in view of the problem of racial distinctions (marked differences in the color of skin, etc.), but above all, because of considerable *social antagonisms* (remnants of slavery).”

The resolution struck out at the tendency to counterpose the slogans of “social equality” and the “right of self-determination” and dealt in detail with their interrelationship. In this respect, it pointed out the necessity of making a clear distinction between the north and the South in the application of these slogans – between the oppressed Black nation in the South and the national minority in



the north.

Equality, the resolution contended, could only be obtained by the continuous fight for abolition “of all forms of economic and political oppression of the Negroes, as well as their social exclusion, the insults perpetrated against them and their segregation. This is to be obtained by constant struggle by the white and Black workers for effective legal protection for Blacks in all fields, as well as actual enforcement of their equality and combating of every expression of Negrophobia. One of the First Communist slogans is: Death for Negro lynching!”<sup>27</sup>

The demand for equality, the resolution said, “applies to all Negroes, in the North as well as in the South.” In the north it embraced all, or almost all, the special needs of the masses of Blacks. This, however, was not so in respect to the South, where the situation of Blacks was that of an oppressed nation. Here, the resolution held, “the main Communist slogan must be: *The right of self-determination of the Negroes in the Black Belt.*”<sup>28</sup>

In the South, the attainment of full equality involved the question of political power needed for its enforcement and this could be construed in no other manner than political power in the hands of the Black masses of peasants and workers of that region. This in turn could only be achieved through the fulfillment of the main slogan of the right of self-determination.

This did not mean that the slogan of equality was not applicable to the South where Blacks suffered “the glaring lack of all equality.” But here it applied to the most urgent partial or immediate demands of the Black masses. The two slogans were thus closely connected; the winning of self-determination in the South was the prerequisite for full equality in the north.

Anticipating the possibility of autonomous demands in the north, the resolution added:

The struggle for the equal rights of the Negroes does not in any way exclude recognition and support for the Negroes’ rights to their own special schools, government organs, etc., wherever the Negro masses put forward such national demands of their own accord.<sup>29</sup>

The resolution emphasized that the question was a “national question in the U.S., not only in the South but also in the North.” It went on to say that “The struggle for equal rights for the Negroes is

in fact one of the most important parts of the proletarian class struggle in the United States.” White workers must:

march *at the head* on this struggle. They must everywhere make a breach in the walls of segregation and “Jim-Crowism” which have been set up by bourgeois slave-market morality... white workers must boldly jump at the throat of the 100 per cent bandits who strike a Negro in the face. This struggle will be the test of the real international solidarity of the American white workers.<sup>30</sup>

The resolution rejected the characterization of the Black Belt (the area of Black concentration in the South) as a colony. Such characterization, it contended, could only be based on “artificially construed analogies, and would create superfluous difficulties for the clarification of ideas.” However, it warned, “It would be nonetheless false to try to make a fundamental distinction between the character of national oppression to which the colonial peoples are subjected and the yoke of other oppressed nations.”

The resolution asserted that the Black Belt “is not in itself, either economically or politically, such a united whole as to warrant its being called a special colony of the United States.” Nor on the other hand, was it “such an integral part of the whole United States as any other part of the country.”

For one thing, industrialization of the Black Belt, in contrast to most colonies, was not in conflict with the interests of the ruling U.S. imperialists. Therefore, expansion of industry in the Black Belt would “in no way bring a solution to the question of living conditions of the oppressed Negro majority, or to the agrarian question, which lies at the basis of the national question.” Industrialization in the area would only sharpen the contradictions in that it would bring forth “the most important driving force of the national revolution, the black working-class.”<sup>31</sup> The resolution lists three fundamental slogans of the liberation movement in the South: 1) The right of self-determination – this slogan, however, can be carried out only in connection with two other basic slogans. 2) Revolutionary land reform. (The resolution pointed out that “landed property in the hands of white American exploiters is the most important basis of the entire system of national oppression.”) The agrarian revolution must be completed by the confiscation of the landed property of white landlords and capitalists in favor of the masses of Black farmers. 3)

The establishment of the state unity of the Black Belt. The resolution called for the political and geographic unity of the Black Belt, that is, the bringing together of Black majority areas in one governmental administrative unit. This would include a significant white minority. The resolution assails the idea of a nation-state exclusively inhabited by Blacks or the transportation of Blacks to Africa. Any such attempt "to isolate and transport the Negroes," the resolution warned, "would have the most damaging effect upon their interests. Above all, it would violate the right of the Negro farmers in the Black Belt not only to their present residences and their land, but also to the land owned by the white landlords and cultivated by Negro labor."

The right of self-determination means, according to the resolution, the unlimited right of Blacks in the region to exercise, if they so choose, governmental, legislative and judicial authority over the entire territory and to decide upon the relations between their territory and other nations, including the United States. This would mean the overthrow of the class rule of the U.S. imperialists upon whose power the local landlords and capitalists depended. The right of self-determination, therefore, included the full freedom of separation for the Black nation. The resolution contended that "if it desires to separate it must be free to do so but if it prefers to remain federated with the United States, it must also be free to do that."<sup>32</sup> This, the resolution stated, was the correct meaning of self-determination. This right must be fought for as a "free democratic right" whether the U.S. was still a capitalist state or whether the proletarian state had been established.

But the right of self-determination must not be construed as identical with secession. The resolution quoted Lenin:

We demand freedom of separation, real right to self-determination certainly not in order to recommend "separation," but on the contrary, in order to facilitate and accelerate the democratic rapprochement and unification of nations.<sup>33</sup>

The resolution noted that separatist trends in the Black movement should not be supported "indiscriminately and without criticism." There were reactionary separatist trends as well as national revolutionary trends. An example of the former, it was pointed out, was Garvey's African utopia of an isolated nation-state consisting

of Blacks alone. Politically, this was a diversion from the struggle against U.S. imperialism.

Even if the situation does not yet warrant the raising of the question of uprising, one should not limit oneself at present to propaganda for the demand: 'Right to self-determination,' but should organize mass actions such as demonstrations, strikes, tax-boycott-movements, etc.<sup>34</sup>

The resolution enjoined communists to stand in the forefront of the fight for national liberation and to fight for the hegemony of the Black proletariat in the national struggle. It outlined the Party's tasks in building revolutionary organizations in the South, organizing proletarian and peasant self-defense against the KKK and other like reactionaries.

Final success in this struggle was possible only if supported by mass actions of Black and white proletarians throughout the country. "Only a victorious proletarian revolution will *finally* decide the agrarian question and the national question in the South of the United States, in the interests of the predominating mass of the Negro population in the country."<sup>35</sup>

It spoke directly against those who held that the Black rebellion was contingent upon the maturing of the revolutionary situation in the country as a whole or that it could only develop at the same pace as the overall class struggle. This assumption, widespread in the Party at the time, reflected an underestimation of the inherently explosive character of the liberation struggle in the South.

Lenin defined national rebellion as mass resistance to oppression. "Every act of national oppression calls forth resistance," he wrote. And further that "the tendency of every act of resistance on the part of the oppressed peoples is the national uprising."<sup>36</sup>

The entire thrust of the resolution was to prepare the Party for any contingency:

Whether the rebellion of the Negroes is to be the outcome of a general revolutionary situation in the United States, whether it is to originate in the whirlpool of decisive fights for power by the working-class, for proletarian dictatorship, or whether on the contrary, the Negro rebellion will be the prelude of gigantic struggles for power by the American proletariat cannot be foretold now. But in either contingent-

cy, it is essential for the Communist Party *to make an energetic beginning already now* with the organization of *joint mass struggles* of white and black workers against Negro oppression. This alone will enable us to get rid of the bourgeois white chauvinism which is polluting the ranks of the white workers of America, to overcome the distrust of the Negro masses... and to win over to our side these millions of Negroes as active fellow fighters in the struggle for the overthrow of bourgeois power throughout America.<sup>37</sup>

## INA

The time for my departure was approaching. I thought of Ina and the future of our marriage. She had been much in my mind these last days in Moscow as I reflected back on our three happy years together.

Despite my busy schedule at the school, we managed to spend most weekends together at her mother's apartment on Malaya Bronaya, a short distance from the school. It was Ina who had introduced me to the cultural life of the Soviet capital. Together we attended theaters, movies, concerts at the Conservatory of Music, and Moscow ballets and operas at the Bolshoi Theater. We often visited the Park of Culture and Rest, a wooded area across from the Kremlin along the Moscow River. It combined restaurants, theaters and amusements. Exhibitions of all sorts were held there as well. Other times we went boating on the Moscow River.

Ina had given up her ballet school studies a year or so before. She was now attending the Institute of Foreign Languages where she was studying English. She displayed a great aptitude for languages and her English was quite good. After only a year of study she had begun to read American literature.

Though not a member of the Communist Party, she was what they called a "non-Party social activist"; that is, sympathetic to the Party and actively supporting its aims of building socialism.

As the time for my departure drew near, we earnestly discussed the future of our marriage. We had agreed that it should not be terminated with my departure. Our idea was that we would eventually get Ina to the States. Of course, I anticipated some difficulties, but to my mind they were not insurmountable. For one thing, we were – by mutual choice – unencumbered by children.

Ina was a friendly, outgoing person and I felt she would have

little trouble adjusting to a new environment and would be accepted by the Black community in any of the big urban centers of the north. I would undoubtedly be assigned to national Afro-American work at the center in New York City on my return.

After all, even professional revolutionaries were not homeless itinerants of the old Wobbly tradition. Many were married and had families, even in situations where both were full-time professional revolutionaries.

So as we saw it, our separation was to be temporary. We agreed that once settled in my future work, perhaps in a year or so, I would either send for Ina or return myself to bring her back to the States.

Just before my departure, an incident occurred which forcibly brought home to me the contrast between the socialist world which I was leaving and the racist world which I was about to re-enter.

The incident occurred in Stalingrad, one of the new huge manufacturing cities of the Soviet Union. The location was Tractorstroi, a basic unit of the Five Year Plan with a capacity of 50,000 tractors a year. The plant stretched fifteen miles along the Volga River. They had brought over about three hundred and fifty highly skilled white mechanics from the United States, who – together with their families – formed a small American colony. They had their own restaurants supplied with the best food, tobacco and wines that the Soviets could furnish.

Into this situation stepped a lone Black toolmaker, Robert Robinson. A native of Jamaica and a naturalized U.S. citizen, Robinson was a graduate of Cass Technical High School in Detroit. He had come to Moscow under a one-year contract to instruct young Soviet workers in the Stalingrad plant in the art of tool-grinding. He had formerly been employed by the Ford Motor Company.

On the morning of his arrival in Stalingrad he was shown into the American dining room. He sat down at a table for breakfast before starting work where he was immediately insulted, beaten up and thrown out of the restaurant by two of his white American fellow workers. This attempt to transplant American racism to Soviet soil was met with outrage. It was made a political issue of high order by the Soviet trade unions and Party organizations.

Factory meetings were called throughout the Soviet Union which denounced this crime and expressed the outrage of Soviet workers. They adopted resolutions which were sent to Tractorstroi. The slogan of the day became, “American technique yes! American

race prejudice no!” It was given the widest publicity; the culprits were arrested immediately, not for assault and battery but for white chauvinism, a social crime and therefore far more serious.

A mass public trial, with delegations sent from factories all over the country, was held. The white technicians were sentenced to two years imprisonment which was commuted to deportation to the United States.

*Pravda*, *Izvestia* and all of the provincial papers carried editorials summing up the lessons of the trial. In the building up of our industries, they said, we expected many foreign workers to come to the country on contract to help fulfill the Five Year Plan. They would inevitably bring with them their prejudices from the capitalist world. Thus it was necessary for the Soviet workers to maintain vigilance against all forms of racism and nationalism which must be sternly rebuffed.

Robinson himself remained in the Soviet Union where he became a citizen and eventually an engineer. Later he was a deputy to the Moscow Soviets.

I remember the Robinson incident well. At the time it occurred, some of us from the school were in a restaurant. A group of Russians seated near us pointed to us and exchanged comments.

“You heard about that shameful thing that happened at Tractorstroi?”

Our very presence reminded them of the incident. People were very sympathetic to us.

The incident was a dramatic affirmation by Soviet workers of their country’s position on the question of race prejudice.

Just a few days later, Ina, her mother and fellow students from the school accompanied me down to the White Russian Station, where I entrained for Berlin. From there, after a short stopover, I journeyed to Paris and then embarked at LeHavre for home.

The long voyage gave me plenty of time for reflection on my stay in the Soviet Union. I thought of how I would put into practice some of the lessons learned during my four-and-a-half-year stay there.

The initial theoretical framework had been set up – now began the difficult task of testing it in practice. How would we build a national revolutionary movement of Blacks in close alliance with the revolutionary working class movement? What would be the problems in organizing Blacks? What resistance to the CI position

would I find within the Party's ranks? These were but a few of the questions that passed through my mind as I headed home.

### Notes:

1. (p. 317.) Cyril Briggs, "The Negro Question in the Southern Textile Strikes," *The Communist*, June 1929, pp. 324-28; "Further Notes on Negro Question in Southern Textile Strikes," *The Communist*, July 1929, pp. 391-94; "Our Negro Work," *The Communist*, September 1929, pp. 494-501.
2. (p. 317.) Briggs, "Our Negro Work," p. 494.
3. (p. 319.) *Daily Worker*, October 4, 1929.
4. (p. 320.) Briggs, "Our Negro Work," p. 498.
5. (p. 321.) *Daily Worker*, October 17, 1929.
6. (p. 322.) Otto E. Huiswood, "World Aspects of the Negro Question," *The Communist*, February 1930, p. 133.
7. (p. 322.) N. Nasanov, "Against Liberalism in the American Negro Question," *The Communist*, April 1930, pp. 296-308.
8. (p. 322.) Harry Haywood, "Against Bourgeois-Liberal Distortions of Leninism on the Negro Question in the United States," *The Communist*, August 1930, p. 706.
9. (p. 322.) Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question," *Works*, vol. 2, p. 304.
10. (p. 323.) Haywood, p. 696.
11. (p. 323.) *Ibid.*, p. 698.
12. (p. 324.) A. Sik, "To the Question of the Negro Problem in the U.S.," in *Revolutionary East*, No. 7, 1929, quoted in Haywood, *ibid.*, p. 708.
13. (p. 324.) Stalin, "The National Question Once Again," *Works*, vol. 7, p. 225.
14. (p. 325.) From Haywood, p. 707.
15. (p. 326.) William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party*, p. 282.
16. (p. 326.) S. Mingulin, "The Crisis in the United States and the Problems of the Communist Party," *The Communist*, June 1930, p. 500.
17. (p. 326.) Earl Browder, "The Bolshevization of the Communist Party," *The Communist*, August 1930, p. 688.
18. (p. 327.) *The Daily Worker*, June 23, 1930.



19. (p. 327.) Browder, p. 689.
20. (p. 327.) *The Daily Worker*, June 23, 1930.
21. (p. 327.) Browder, p. 690.
22. (p. 328.) I first met George Padmore in December 1929, when Foster had brought him to Moscow. I got to know him quite well and on a number of occasions visited him in his room at the Lux Hotel. I remember him as a slim, handsome, ebony-hued young man of medium height, neatly dressed. A native of Trinidad, he had studied journalism at Howard University. He joined the YCL and then the CP in Washington, D.C. Later he was assigned to work with the TUUL as a national organizer. He was a good speaker and a prolific writer.

At the time I sized him up as a pragmatist with only a superficial grasp of Marxist theory. Politically, he appeared to be a staunch supporter of the fight for independence in Africa and the West Indies, but was adamantly opposed to the right of self-determination for U.S. Blacks, whom he regarded not as a nation, but as an oppressed racial minority. I was to clash with him publicly several years later. See also p. 429, n. 14.

23. (p. 330.) A. Lozovsky, *Inprecorr*, August 21, 1930, p. 782.
24. (p. 330.) A. Lozovsky, "Ten Years of the Red International of Labor Unions," *Inprecorr*, July 31, 1930, pp. 675-76.
25. (p. 331.) A. Lozovsky, "The World Crisis, Economic Struggles and the Tasks of the Revolutionary Trade Unions," *Inprecorr*, September 4, 1930, pp. 867-74; September 11, 1930, 891-96; September 18, 1930, pp. 919-24.
26. (p. 332.) Documents from this commission are not available. Consequently, I have had to rely on my memory, as well as consultations with comrades active at the time.
27. (p. 333.) "Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States," *The Communist International*, February 1, 1931, p. 66.
28. (p. 334.) *Ibid.*, p. 65.
29. (p. 334.) *Ibid.*, p. 66.
30. (p. 334.) *Ibid.*, p. 67.
31. (p. 335.) *Ibid.*, p. 68.
32. (p. 336.) *Ibid.*, p. 70.
33. (p. 336.) *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.
34. (p. 337.) *Ibid.*, p. 73.

35. (p. 337.) *Ibid.*, p. 73.

36. (p. 337.) *Ibid.*, p. 72.

37. (p. 338.) *Ibid.*, p. 74.