

THE COMMUNISTS AND THE NEGROES

A SYMPOSIUM

Several weeks ago the New York "Herald Tribune" charged editorially that Communists incite the Negro people to "unreason, lawlessness, and violence." In its February 15 issue NEW MASSES published an article by a distinguished Communist and leader of the Negro people, Councilman Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., refuting this charge and pointing out that in the Harlem outbreak of last August and in other situations the Communists have been a stabilizing factor, seeking to prevent violence and to direct the struggle for Negro rights into patriotic and constructive channels. NEW MASSES sent Mr. Davis' article to a number of Negro leaders, all of them non-Communists, and invited them to reply to the following five questions:

1. From your own experience and knowledge do you think there is any validity in the charge that Communists incite Negroes to "unreason, lawlessness, and violence?"

2. What in your opinion has been the character of Communist activity among the Negro people, particularly in relation to the war effort?

3. What criticisms, if any, would you make of this activity?

4. What are the causes of unrest among the Negro people which sometimes, as in the Harlem outbreak of last August 1, assume lawless forms?

5. Do you think there ought to be cooperation between Communists and non-Communists, both black and white, in order to strengthen the war effort and eliminate the discriminatory practices that deny the Negro people full citizenship rights?

We present the replies of six Negro leaders.—The Editors.

Roscoe Dunjee

Editor, "Black Dispatch," Oklahoma City, Okla.

MY ANSWER is "no." I have had considerable knowledge of the work of the Communist Party in the state of Oklahoma and I know of no program or effort on the part of Oklahoma leaders of that organization that in the remotest way indicates a spirit of violence and lawlessness. On the other hand, all of them in their public and private address have indicated support of the government. The Communist effort in Oklahoma has made but slight dent upon Negro life.

2. I attended a Lincoln and Douglass meeting held under the auspices of the Communist Party, February 12, and I noted particularly that all of those who spoke, representing the Communist Party, gave more attention to ways and means of

winning the war than to the lives of Lincoln and Douglass. It is my opinion that those Communists with whom I have had contact are one hundred percent behind the war effort.

3. I have no criticisms to make, as indicated in my answer to question number 2.

4. Current unrest among Negroes results from denial of work opportunity, discrimination in the armed forces and their general demoted citizenship status. I take no stock in the idea that outside influences are creating unrest among Negroes. It is stupid to assume that all of the people of the earth would be crying about liberty and freedom and that the Negro would not in the same moment crank his own motor while thinking about the same subject.

5. Democracy and tolerance demand cooperation and integration in our thought and life. Most assuredly Americans should stop and listen to what Communists have to say. The Russian experiment as expressed today in Soviet life is too effective for anyone to attempt to overlook this. As the president of the state conference of branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, I have every year for the past ten invited the Communists to address our meeting. Alan Shaw, secretary of the Communist Party in Oklahoma, addressed our state conference at Tulsa last November. Communism as a political philosophy should be discussed openly by everybody, and personally I endorse the idea of an international state and racial equality as espoused by the Communist Party.

William Henry Huff

Chicago attorney and journalist

TO BEGIN with, I am in no way connected with the Communist Party, never have been, and may never be. I am satisfied to remain in the party of my first choice regardless of its shortcomings, and I am jealous of my religious proclivities. On the other hand, I do not believe there is any validity to the charge that Communists incite Negroes to unreason, lawlessness, and violence. Such a charge, in my opinion, is not only unreasonable but vicious, and could not be made for any purpose save that of hiding the real truth from the eyes of a public in search of such truth.

While I hold in my hand no whitewash brush for the Communists, I must say they appear to be as loyal to our war effort as any other group of people in the country. That this was not so pronounced before the attack upon Russia is in my humble

opinion true. But that is not the question here. I cannot recall hearing a single Communist, white or Negro, speak against our war effort since Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. This frank statement may not be pleasing either to the Communists or to the Communist haters. But, I like to tell the truth as I see it and let it go at that.

I cannot and will not criticize any loyal activity given our war effort by the Communists or by any one else. I am an American whose forebears fought, bled, and died in America's War for Independence (at Red Bank under Col. Christopher Greene) and I want to see America and her Allies win. Only a few weeks ago, Arthur Huff, Jr., my nephew, went down with his ship. (He was in the Navy.) Under such circumstances, what difference does it make whether the enemy is stopped by bullets from a gun held in the hand of a Communist, or a gun held in the hand of a capitalist? I can see no difference. Can you?

Negroes, like any other people, are incited to wholesale lawlessness by continued ill treatment. Everybody knows that. Sometimes, having taken insult after insult from anybody white who comes along, a few of them "just get sick and tired"—their "cup runneth over"—and they decide that they will be about as well off dead as alive. Usually at such times some corresponding fool act on the part of the "other fellow" occurs—a policeman or overlord or some other brute will do some "smart aleck" thing which lights the torch—sets off the fuse, whereupon a saturnalia of hell begins to rain upon the heads of all Negroes who happen along, even those who don't know what it is all about. Brutalities are inflicted upon Negroes every day that could bring about such an affray as happened in Harlem last August if enough Negroes were about who were in the "I-don't-care-what-happens" or "I-don't-care-if-I-die" mood. If you don't want dynamite to explode, don't kick it around.

I truly think there should be cooperation between Communists and non-Communists, both white and Negro, in order to strengthen the war effort and eliminate the discriminating practices that deny the Negro people their full citizenship rights. But these lines are not to be construed as an endorsement of the Communist Party. They are not written for any such purpose. They are my honest opinions without any political implications of any kind or nature.

The International Labor Defense, said by Martin Dies and others to be a Communist organization, rendered invaluable service in the fight to free the Negroes

of Oglethorpe County, Ga., from the diabolical clutches of peonage, and it did no wholesale proselytizing—among the victims it helped to set free. So far as I know, not a single person rescued from that peonage farm has turned Communist—not even Will Fleming, the most outspoken of them all. As the leader in that fight, I refrained from talking politics with any of the refugees.

In conclusion, I hold neither brief nor tomahawk for Communism, for while I do know some Communists, I know nothing of Communism.

Ferdinand C. Smith

National secretary, National Maritime Union

THESE are the days when we are seeking to eradicate the causes of evil—and evil itself. The use of scapegoats in this direction retards progress. That protests by oppressed, minority people do take violent forms at times we recognize. But we must never lose sight of the fact that the reasons for such protest have malignant roots in bad conditions. Blaming Communists will stand in the way of our reaching a solution to this problem. Poverty, humiliation, and discrimination are the factors which impel people to “unreason, lawlessness, and violence.”

2. From my observations the purpose of Communist activity among the Negro people has been to give a realistic analysis of the world situation and to make clear that only by rallying around President Roosevelt's win-the-war and peace program and defeating fascism at home and abroad can the national aspirations of the Negro people be realized.

3. My criticism, that such activity is still too limited, would apply not only to the Communists but to all the progressive people of our country.

4. Covered under Point 1.

5. Emphatically yes.

Mabel K. Staupers, R.N.

Executive secretary, National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, Inc.

IN RESPONSE to your letter concerning the New York *Herald Tribune* article, may I state that in our work here, we have never been too concerned about political ideologies. We have worked with people of all parties, since our organization is national.

I do not think that the riot in Harlem was due to the influence of any party. It is my belief that the riots in Harlem and other cities were due to the frustrations which Negroes suffer because of second class citizenship.

All American liberals should work together for all minorities, including the Negro.

Charles Collins

Executive secretary, Negro Labor Victory Committee

THIS statement was intended to serve two purposes. One, to convey the impression that Negroes are potentially lawless and unreasonable and need only to be incited by some group in order to commit acts of violence. Two, to split up the forces of labor and progressives, including the Communists, who are pledged to the unconditional and speedy defeat of Hitler and company, including of course his friends, admirers and appeasers in our midst.

Who does not know the forces that are trying with some success to incite race violence in the United States? They are: the KKK, the White Supremacy Leaguers, the press (with the exception of the *Daily Worker* and one or two others), Rankin, Bilbo, Dies, May, Talmadge, together with an assortment of Communist-baiters and labor disrupters like David Dubinsky and John L. Lewis. Some of these are now under indictment by the United States. All of them are enemies of the Negro people. Let me say for the Communists that they have helped us to weather the storm of attacks, insults, and humiliation at the hands of these people and to keep an even keel. The Communists have taught us to seek a solution to our problems, not through lawlessness, but in common struggle with all the oppressed and exploited everywhere. It was in recognition of this great contribution to our progress that all sections of the Negro citizens of New York united to send Ben Davis, a Communist, to the City Council.

The issues to be decided by this great war and the problems on the home front are becoming clearer to us. A great surprise is in store for those for whom the *Herald Tribune* speaks in this election year. Abraham Lincoln is not running this year, and even the most uninformed Negro knows that Franklin Delano Roosevelt has done more for him than any other President since Lincoln. The *Herald Tribune* should abandon this dangerously stupid line. It should begin first by employing Negroes in all categories of the paper as the *Daily Worker* has done. Secondly, it can do a service to democracy by joining with the Communists at least in this one great task of removing the fascist blot of race discrimination from the fair name of our country and of helping to secure unconditional manhood rights for America's 15,000,000 loyal Negro citizens.

Frank Marshall Davis

Executive editor, Associated Negro Press

I CANNOT agree with the New York *Herald Tribune* or anyone else who makes the wild charge that Communists

incite Negroes to “unreason, lawlessness, and violence.” All evidence points the other way, and it's obvious enough to be understood by anybody capable of earning a diploma from a kindergarten.

Many Negroes today are thoroughly dissatisfied with the war and constantly ask, “What have we got to fight for?” Cynicism and disillusion, coming from denial of democracy, are guests in thousands of black homes. But I do not know of a Communist anywhere, white or Negro, who shares this attitude. Not only that, but they try to convince others with whom they come in contact that the war effort should be supported with every atom of our being.

The Communists today place patriotism and winning the war above all else. They are fully behind every effort, every plan that will hasten the end of the conflict. Obviously, this is the exact opposite of “unreason, lawlessness, and violence,” for such a program would hinder, not speed victory.

If the Communists were as the *Herald Tribune* described them, they could get thousands of Negro recruits. They could capitalize upon Afro-American dissatisfaction, and by promoting lawlessness, unreason, and violence throw a big wrench into the war machinery. The irony is that they have been so eager to show the Negro his stake in the global conflict and bring about unity between previously conflicting elements that many observers have disgustedly accused the Communists of “deserting the Negro's cause.”

The Negro needs no Communist to tell him when he is being discriminated against, to point out to him that he is sacrificing and dying abroad for Four Freedoms and democracy he hasn't received in his native land. It is not any Red agitation, but the indifference of the majority, the refusal of white America in general to change its segregation pattern against black America that results periodically in the natural reaction of violence and lawlessness. It is quite likely that the Communists have actually prevented many such outbreaks by their determined program of harmony and unity.

It seems to me that neither the *Herald Tribune*, *PM*, Walter Winchell, nor any other force or individual that understands the nature of this war and wants complete victory over fascism can afford to stop and indulge in the costly and senseless sport of Red-baiting. It's silly for one ally to halt and sock a fellow fighter. All energy should be directed toward the common foe.

That means simply that men of every political or religious faith, of every culture, and color, should join hands with the Communists to hasten victory and secure the resulting peace. And if Teheran decisions are taken seriously, such a coalition would not only shorten the war, but eliminate racial discrimination on these shores.