Hakim Adi's "Pan-Africanism and Communism": A pro-Stalinist attempt to erase the Trotskyist alternative — Part Three

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This is the third part of a 10-part series responding to British-based historian Hakim Adi's recently republished book, Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa, and the Diaspora, 1919–1939.

The Comintern, the 'Negro' Question and Pan-Africanism

The founding of the Communist International in 1919 marked a turning point in the struggle against colonial oppression and racial discrimination. For the first time, an international revolutionary organisation placed the liberation of Africa and peoples of African descent within a unified programme for the overthrow of capitalism and imperialism.

Adi describes the early Comintern as seeking "to clarify Marxism's approach to the Negro Question and to begin to establish a general political orientation for the liberation of Africa and the African Diaspora," but later characterises the program adopted at the Fourth Congress in 1922 as an "essentially Pan-Africanist approach," that was maintained for "the best part of the next fifteen years."[1]

This is a false political conclusion. The early Comintern consciously sought to link the struggles of Africans and people of African descent across national boundaries. It recognised that racial oppression, colonial rule and the legacy of slavery required specific political attention. The Comintern insisted that Communist parties combat racial prejudice within the working class, defend complete social and political equality, organise black and colonial workers, and support struggles against imperialist domination. In doing so, the Comintern decisively broke with the national chauvinism and indifference that had infected major sections of the Social Democratic parties of the Second International before the First World War. But the Comintern's seeking to organise Africans and the African diaspora internationally did not make its programme Pan-Africanist.

Pan-Africanism encompassed diverse political tendencies, but it shared a common starting point: the idea of shared interests among all Africans and people of African descent across national boundaries. The early Comintern proceeded from a different class standpoint. It recognised the immense significance of racial and colonial oppression, but it insisted that liberation depended upon the independent revolutionary mobilisation of the working class against capitalism and imperialism.

The distinction was fundamental. The Comintern did not assume that black workers possessed a fundamental common political interest with black capitalists, landlords, chiefs, colonial intermediaries or aspiring sections of the petty bourgeoisie, simply because they shared a racial or continental identity. It sought to draw the struggle against racial oppression and colonial domination into the programme of world socialist revolution. It did not deny the forms taken by the oppression of black and colonial peoples, but fought to connect their struggles with the revolutionary mobilisation of the international working class.

Adi's documentary evidence exposes the falsity of his own characterisation.

The thesis of the Fourth Congress of the Comintern declared that "the Negro problem has become a vital question of the world revolution," that participation of the oppressed black masses was essential to the proletarian revolution and the destruction of capitalist power, and that "the international struggle of the Negro race is a struggle against Capitalism and Imperialism." The theses concluded that it was "on this basis that the World Negro movement must be organised."[2]

The words "on this basis" made the policy's essential political content clear. The Comintern was not proposing an autonomous racial movement to which communists would have to attach themselves from outside. It located the struggle of black workers and oppressed peoples within the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. Resolving the "Negro Question" was an integral component of the world socialist revolution.

This explains the Comintern's attitude toward Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), one of the major Pan-Africanist tendencies after the Russian Revolution. Garveyism acquired an enormous international following through its denunciations of racism, promotion of black pride and demand for "Africa for the Africans". Its influence reflected the depth of anger produced by colonial domination and racial oppression. But Garvey's programme sought to unite black workers with black businessmen, property owners, and aspiring political elites on the basis of a common racial identity.[3]

Adi himself records the importance which the Communist International attached to combating Garvey's anti-communism:

After Garvey was framed, prosecuted, and finally imprisoned

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> and deported for fraud in the mid-1920s, the UNIA became increasingly divided and weakened. Garveyism remained a major influence in the United States, in Africa, and throughout the African Diaspora during the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, its significance and the need to combat its international influence remained a key concern of American Communists and the Comintern during this period.[4]

If the Comintern's programme had rested on the same political foundations as Pan-African nationalism, the sharp conflict with one of the period's largest and most influential Pan-African movements would be inexplicable.

The Comintern's opposition to Garveyism acquired enormous practical significance as the years after the Russian Revolution witnessed the first interventions of the African working class, largely ignored in Adi's account. African municipal workers struck in Johannesburg in 1918. Thousands participated in the South African anti-pass movement in 1919, while more than 2,000 black and Coloured dockworkers struck in Cape Town. In 1920, tens of thousands of African gold miners struck across the Witwatersrand. Railway and public-sector workers confronted the racially discriminatory colonial administration in Sierra Leone; the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 brought workers, students and peasants into mass struggle against British rule; the arrest of Harry Thuku in Kenya produced a mass mobilisation in Nairobi in 1922; and the Bondelswarts rebellion in South West Africa was crushed by South African forces using machine guns and aircraft.

The material roots of this mass upsurge lay in the immense social contradictions generated by imperialist war, colonial exploitation, urbanisation, capitalist development and the rapid growth of wage labour. But the October Revolution exerted enormous political influence on these already developing movements, providing a new historical perspective. The Russian working class had demonstrated that the oppressed did not have to limit themselves to protest against exploitation or colonial rule, but could fight to take power themselves. The Comintern sought to win the oppressed masses away from bourgeois nationalism and towards revolutionary socialism.

The colonial question was therefore changing in its social content. It was no longer posed solely as tribal revolts against foreign rule, which had characterised many of the struggles in the aftermath of the Scramble for Africa in the 19th century. The working class was emerging within the colonial world, directly posing the question of which social force would lead the struggle.

A parallel transformation was occurring in the US, the heart of emerging world imperialist power. Adi records October's tremendous impact on African American radicals. Claude McKay called it "the greatest event in the history of humanity" and described Bolshevism as "the greatest and most scientific idea in the world today." A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen declared in *The Messenger* in 1919: "The Soviet Government proceeds apace. It bids fair to sweep the whole world. The sooner the better."[5]

Adi traces the development of other African American radicals like Cyril Briggs, Otto Huiswoud, McKay, Richard B. Moore and the African Blood Brotherhood. He notes Briggs's recollection that his "interest in Communism was sparked by the national policy of the Russian Bolsheviks and the anti-imperialist orientation of the Soviet state birthed by the October Revolution," and records the African Blood Brotherhood's growing orientation toward Bolshevism.[6]

The radicalisation of these figures coincided with an immense transformation in the social position of African Americans. Beginning during the First World War, the Great Migration was moving hundreds of thousands from the rural South into the industrial centres of the North. Black workers entered factories, mines, docks, and railways in growing numbers and became directly involved in the period's major class conflicts. Hundreds of African American longshoremen joined the Seattle General Strike in February 1919. In the steel industry, the Great Steel Strike of 1919 to 1920 exposed both the growing weight of black industrial labour and the racial divisions fostered by the employers and reinforced by the racist exclusions of the AFL. In the West Virginia coalfields, black miners fought alongside white and immigrant miners during the Mine Wars of 1912–1921, culminating in the armed miners' march and the Battle of Blair Mountain in August–September 1921.

The American ruling class responded by inciting racial reaction. During the "Red Summer" of 1919, racist violence swept more than twenty cities; in Chicago alone 38 people were killed and over 500 injured. Two years later, the Tulsa massacre left as many as 300 dead and thousands homeless. These atrocities underscored both the brutality of racial oppression and the strategic question confronting black workers: would the fight against racism become part of the revolutionary unification of the working class, or remain confined within a programme of racial solidarity subordinating class interests to other social layers?

The early Communist International fought for the independent organisation of black workers and the oppressed masses as part of the international struggle against capitalism. Adi's characterisation of this programme as Pan-Africanism conceals the class distinction upon which it was based.

To be continued.

Op cit., p. 18

Op cit., p. 18.

For more information on Garvey and Garveyism, see Larry Porter, "Marcus Garvey and the reactionary logic of racialist politics," World Socialist Web Site, March 2, 2023.

Op. cit., p. 13-14.

Op Cit., p.8

Op Cit., p.11.

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[1] Op cit., p. 18

[2] Op cit., p. 18.

[3] For more information on Garvey and Garveyism, see Larry Porter, "Marcus Garvey and the reactionary logic of racialist politics," World Socialist Web Site, March 2, 2023.

[4] Op. cit., p. 13-14.

[5] Op Cit., p.8

[6] Op Cit., p.11.



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