

The South African Question

Source: Resolution on 'The South African Question' adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist International following the Sixth Comintern congress.

Transcribed: by [Dominic Tweedie](#).

South Africa is a British Dominion of the colonial type. The development of relations of capitalist production has led to British imperialism carrying out the economic exploitation of the country with the participation of the white bourgeoisie of South Africa (British and Boer). Of course, this does not alter the general colonial character of the economy of South Africa, since British capital continues to occupy the principal economic positions in the country (banks, mining and industry), and since the South African bourgeoisie is equally interested in the merciless exploitation of the negro population.

In the recent period in South Africa we have witnessed the growth of the' manufacturing iron and steel industries, the development of commercial crops (cotton, sugar, cane), and the growth of capitalist relations in agriculture, chiefly in cattle-raising. On the basis of this growth of capitalism there is a growing tendency to expropriate the land from the negroes and from a certain section of the white farming population. The South African bourgeoisie is endeavouring also by legislative means to create a cheap market of labour power and a reserve army

The overwhelming majority of the population is made up of negroes and coloured people (about 5,500,000 negroes and coloured people and about 1,500,000 white people according to the 1921 census). A characteristic feature of the colonial type of the country is the almost complete landlessness of the negro population: the negroes hold only one-eighth of the land whilst seven-eighths have been expropriated by the white population. There is no negro bourgeoisie as a class, apart from individual negroes engaged in trading and a thin strata of negro intellectuals who do not play any essential role in the economic and political life of the country. The negroes constitute also the majority of the working class: among the workers employed in industry and transport, 420,000 are black and coloured people and 145,000 white; among agricultural labourers 435,000 are black and 50,000 are white. The characteristic feature of the proletarianisation of the native population is the fact that the number of black workers grows faster than the number of white workers. Another characteristic fact is the great difference in the wages and the material conditions of the white and black proletariat in general. Notwithstanding a certain reduction in the living standard of the white workers which has lately taken place, the great disproportion between the wages of the white and black proletariat continues to exist as the characteristic feature of the colonial type of the country.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The political situation reflects the economic structure — the semi-colonial character of the country and the profound social contradictions between the black and white population. The native population (except in the Cape province) of the country have no electoral rights, the power of the State has been monopolised by the white bourgeoisie, which has at its disposal the armed white forces. The white bourgeoisie, chiefly the Boers defeated by the arms of British imperialism at the close of the last century, had for a long time carried on a dispute

with British capital. But as the process of capitalist development goes on in the country, the interests of the South African bourgeoisie are becoming more and more blended with the interests of British financial and industrial capital, and the white South African bourgeoisie is becoming more and more inclined to compromise with British imperialism, forming with the latter a united front for the exploitation of the native population.

The Nationalist Party, which represents the interests of the big farmers and landowners and a section of white (mainly Boer) bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie is winding up its struggle for separation from the Empire and is surrendering before British capitalism (the formula proposed by the leader of this Party, General Hertzog, and carried at the British Imperial Conference). Furthermore, this party is already coming out as the open advocate of the colonial expansion of British capital, carrying on an agitation for the extension of the territory of the Union of South Africa to the north (the annexation of Rhodesia), hoping in this manner to secure a vast fund of cheap native labour power.

Simultaneously with the importation of British capital and British goods, there are imported to South Africa the methods of corrupting the working class. The Labour Party of South Africa, representing the interests of the petty bourgeoisie and of the skilled labour aristocracy, openly carries on an imperialist policy, demoralising the white workers by imbuing them with a white racial ideology. Nevertheless, the influence of this party is being undermined by the steady worsening of the material conditions of the mass of the white workers. At the same time the South African bourgeoisie is endeavouring to attract to its side certain elements of the non-European population, for instance, the 'coloured' population, promising them electoral rights, and also the native leaders, turning them into agents for the exploitation of the negro population. This policy of corruption has already brought about the fact that the leaders of the negro trade union organisations — the Industrial and Commercial Union — having expelled the Communists from the union, are now endeavouring to guide the negro trade union movement into the channel of reformism. The inception of negro reformism, as a result of the corruptionist policy of the white bourgeoisie, a reformism which acts in close alliance with the Amsterdam International, constitutes a characteristic fact of the present political situation.

The united front of the British and South African white bourgeoisie against the toiling negro population, backed by the white and negro reformists, creates for the Communist Party in South Africa an exceptionally complicated but favourable position of being the only political Party in the country which unites the white and black proletariat and the landless black peasantry for the struggle against British imperialism, against the white bourgeoisie and the white and black reformist leaders.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND ITS TASKS

The Executive Committee of the Communist International recognises the successes which the Communist Party of South Africa has recently achieved. This is seen in the growth of the Communist Party, which is now predominantly native in composition. The Communist Party has a membership of about 1,750 of whom 1,600 are natives or coloured. The Communist Party has also spread into the country districts of the Transvaal. The Party has waged a fight against the reactionary Native Administration Act. The ECCI also notes the growth of native trade unions under the leadership of the CP, the successful carrying through of a number of strikes and efforts to carry through the amalgamation of the black and white unions.

The present intensified campaigns of the Government against the natives offer the CP an immense field to develop its influence among the workers and peasants, and it is among this section of the South African population that the chief field of activity of the Communist Party must continue to lie in the near future.

(a) The first task of the Party is to reorganise itself on the shop and street nuclei basis and to put forward a programme of action as a necessary condition for the building up of a mass Communist Party in South Africa.

b) The Party must orientate itself chiefly upon the native toiling masses while continuing to work actively among the white workers. The Party leadership must be developed in the same sense. This can only be achieved by bringing the native membership without delay into much more active leadership of the Party both locally and centrally.

(c) While developing and strengthening the fight against all the customs, laws and regulations which discriminate against the native and coloured population in favour of the white population, the Communist Party of South Africa must combine the fight against all anti-native laws with the general political slogan in the fight against British domination, the slogan of an independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic, with full equal rights for all races, black, coloured and white.

(d) South Africa is a black country, the majority of its population is black and so is the majority of the workers and peasants. The bulk of the South African population is the black peasantry, whose land has been expropriated by the white minority. Seven eighths of the land is owned by the whites. Hence the national question in South Africa, which is based upon the agrarian question lies at the foundation of the revolution in South Africa. The black peasantry constitutes the basic moving force of the revolution in alliance with and under the leadership of the working class.

(e) South Africa is dominated politically by the white exploiting class. Despite the conflict of interests between the Dutch bourgeoisie and the English imperialists, the basic characteristic of the political situation in South Africa is the developing united front between the Dutch bourgeoisie and the British imperialists against the native population. No political party in South Africa with the exception of the Communist Party advocates measures that would be of real benefit to the oppressed native population, the ruling political parties never go beyond empty and meaningless liberal phrases. The Communist Party of South Africa is the only Party of native and white workers that fights for the complete abolition of race and national exploitation, that can head the revolutionary movement of the black masses for liberation. Consequently, if the Communist Party correctly understands its political tasks it will and must become the leader of the national agrarian revolutionary movement of the native masses.

Unfortunately the Communist Party of South Africa did not give evidence of sufficient understanding of the revolutionary importance of the mass movements of the native workers and peasants. The Communist Party of South Africa carried on a correct struggle for unity of the native and white workers in the trade union movement. But at the same time the Communist Party of South Africa found itself in stubborn opposition to the correct slogan proposed by the Comintern calling for an independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic with full, equal rights for all races.

This opposition shows a lack of understanding of the task of our Party in South Africa relative to the revolutionary struggles of the native masses, which explains partly the still insufficient growth of the political influence of our Party upon the negro masses despite the extremely favourable conditions.

South Africa is a British dominion of a colonial type. The country was seized by violence by foreign exploiters, the land expropriated from the natives, who were met by a policy of extermination in the first stages of colonisation, and conditions of semi-slavery established for the overwhelming majority of the native masses. It is necessary to tell the native masses that in the face of existing political and economic discrimination against the natives and ruthless oppression of them by the white oppressors, the Comintern slogan of a native republic means restoration of the land to the landless and land-poor population.

This slogan does not mean that we ignore or forget about the non-exploiting elements of the white population. On the contrary, the slogan calls for 'full and equal rights for all races'. The white toiling masses must realise that in South Africa they constitute national minorities, and it is their task to support and fight jointly with the native masses against the white bourgeoisie and the British imperialists. The argument against the slogan for a native republic on the ground that it does not protect the whites is objectively nothing else than a cover for the unwillingness to accept the correct principle that South Africa belongs to the native population. Under these conditions it is the task of the Communist Party to influence the embryonic and crystallising national movements among the natives in order to develop these movements into national agrarian revolutionary movements against the white bourgeoisie and British imperialists.

The failure to fulfil this task means separation of the Communist Party of South Africa from the native population. The Communist Party cannot confine itself to the general slogan of 'Let there be no whites and no blacks'. The Communist Party must understand the revolutionary importance of the national and agrarian questions. Only by a correct understanding of the importance of the national question in South Africa will the Communist Party be able to combat effectively the efforts of the bourgeoisie to divide the white and black workers by playing on race chauvinism, and to transform the embryonic nationalist movement into a revolutionary struggle against the white bourgeoisie and foreign imperialists. In its propaganda among the native masses the Communist Party of South Africa must emphasise the class differences between the white capitalists and the white workers, the latter also being exploited by the bourgeoisie as wage slaves, although better paid as compared with the natives. The Communist Party must continue to struggle for unity between black and white workers and not confine itself merely to the advocacy of 'co-operation' between the blacks and whites in general. The Communist Party must introduce a correct class content into the idea of co-operation between the blacks and whites. It must explain to the native masses that the black and white workers are not only allies, but are the leaders of the revolutionary struggle of the native masses against the white bourgeoisie and British imperialism. A correct formulation of this task and intensive propagation of the chief slogan of a native republic will result not in the alienation of the white workers from the Communist Party) not in segregation of the natives, but, on the contrary, in the building up of a solid united front of all toilers against capitalism and imperialism.

In the struggle against the domination of British imperialism in South Africa and against the white bourgeoisie under the slogans of the agrarian revolution and native republic the Communist Party of South Africa will undoubtedly meet with the most brutal attack of the

bourgeoisie and the imperialists. This can be no argument for not adopting the slogan of a native republic. On the contrary, the Party must wage a struggle for this slogan preparing all possible means, first and foremost by mobilising the black and white workers, to meet the attacks of the ruling class.

The ECCI, while fully approving the Party's agitation against the native Bills put forward by the Pact Government, considers that this agitation should be further strengthened and intensified and should be coupled with agitation against all anti-native legislation.

The Party should pay particular attention to the embryonic national organisations among the natives, such as the African National Congress. The Party, while retaining its full independence, should participate in these organisations, should seek to broaden and extend their activity. Our aim should be to transform the African National Congress into a fighting nationalist revolutionary organisation against the white bourgeoisie and the British imperialists, based upon the trade unions, peasant organisations, etc., developing systematically the leadership of the workers and the Communist Party in this organisation. The Party should seek to weaken the influence of the native chiefs corrupted by the white bourgeoisie over the existing native tribal organisations by developing peasants' organisations and spreading among them the influence of the Communist Party. The development of a national-revolutionary movement of the toilers of South Africa against the white bourgeoisie and British imperialism, constitutes one of the major tasks of the Communist Party of South Africa.

The Party should immediately work out an agrarian programme applicable to the native agrarian situation. The ECCI considers that the Party was correct in launching at its last Congress the slogan of 'Expropriate the big estates and give them to the landless whites and natives'. But this can only be treated as a general slogan. It is necessary to work out concrete partial demands which indicate that the basic question in the agrarian situation in South Africa is the land hunger of the blacks and that their interest is of prior importance in the solution of the agrarian question. Efforts should be made immediately to develop plans to organise the native peasants into peasant unions and the native agricultural workers into trade unions, while attention to the poor agrarian whites must in no way be minimised.

In the field of trade union work the Party must consider that its main task consists in the organisation of the native workers into trade unions as well as propaganda and work for the setting up of a South African trade union centre embracing black and white workers. The principle that the Party's main orientation must be on the native population applies equally well to the sphere of trade union work. The Party should energetically combat the splitting policy of the Industrial and Commercial Union leaders under the slogan of unity of the whole trade union movement of South Africa. Further, the Party should work out a detailed programme of immediate demands for the native workers. The Communists must participate actively in the trade union organisation of the native workers, pursuing the policy of building up a strong left-wing within these organisations under Communist leadership.

The Party should continue its exposure of the South African Labour Party as primarily an agent of imperialism in the Labour movement.

While concentrating its chief attention on organising the native workers in the trade unions the Communist Party should not neglect the workers in the white trade unions. Its tasks are the organisation of the unorganised workers in the existing trade unions, to intensify the

propaganda for reorganisation of the trade union movement on an industrial basis, increased agitation for affiliation of all trade unions to the Trade Union Congress. In all trade union organisations the Party must strive to build up a strong left-wing under Communist leadership.

The Party must energetically combat the influence of the Amsterdam International in the black and white trade union movement, intensifying the propaganda for world trade union unity along the lines of the Profintern (RILU) policy.

In connection with the danger of world war, the present imperialist intervention in China and the threatening war against the USSR the Party must fight by all means against the help given to the military policy of Great Britain which found its expression in the tacit support of the break of the British imperialists with the USSR. The Party should not neglect anti-militarist work.

The ECCI repeats its previous proposal to launch a special paper in the chief native languages as soon as technical difficulties have been overcome. Such a step is of great political importance.

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