
A Report on the American “Negro Problem” for the Communist International.

[November 1922]

by Claude McKay

A document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 93, l. 97, 99-105. Original document is untitled, words “Copy of Statement Given to Billings” handwritten at top. Attributed to McKay based on his letter of Nov. 28, 1922 to “Com. Wallunys” mentioning this report. (*ibid.*, l. 81-82).

Present Condition.

During the World War the economic status of the Negro Race in the New World underwent a swift transition for the better. Especially was this the case in the United States where, on account of the giant war industries and the shutting down of immigration, the services of Negro workers were greatly in demand in the northern industrial zone. During this period it is estimated that over 500,000 Negro workers left the South for jobs in the less hostile atmosphere of the North.

Racial State of Mind.

Along with the improvement in their economic status came a great wave of emotional radicalism, aroused in part by the wrongs suffered by the race and the sacrifices it was called upon to make for “World Democracy,” as well as by the fine democratic phrases with which the Entente statesmen were gassing the credulous liberals of their own countries and misleading the peoples of the colonies. This radicalism among the Negro workers at first took the form of a proletarian movement but has been to a great extent perverted by subsequent activities of opportunists and charlatans with their cowardly compromises and surrenders and their grafting of all sorts of stock schemes upon the mass movement.

At present much of the original buoyancy and enthusiasm is lacking as a result of the collapse of the stock schemes that were grafted upon the movement and the inevitable exposure of the unscrupulous lead-

ership responsible for the grafting, as well as by reason of the receding of the wave of prosperity and the considerable lowering of the economic status of the Negro workers, who have suffered much more than the white workers because of the present long-extended Unemployment Crisis.

As a consequence of the sharpness of the economic pressure and the disgust and distrust engendered in their minds by their experience with unscrupulous leaders, large masses are sinking back into the ancient apathy and inertia from which they were roused by the World War and the period of educational propaganda preceding it.

The prey of unscrupulous leaders who glibly promised everything but accomplished nothing save the periodical emptying of the pockets of their credulous followers, the Negro masses, are discouraged and suspicious, yet there are organizational possibilities on a wide scale for any organization that can, first, win their confidence and, second, push energetically the campaign of organizing and, third, **keep up interest in the organization.**

Radicals Among the Race.

The Negro masses are leavened by an increasingly large body of **race radicals** and **class radicals**. The former are Negroes who, while roused to thought and action by the wrongs of the race, have not yet recognized the essential class nature of the struggle, nor the exact cause and source of their oppression, which they blame indiscriminately upon the entire white race. They are, however, generally inclined to

side with and follow the leadership of the class radicals who, fully cognizant of the value of race radicalism for rousing the masses and as a natural and necessary step toward class radicalism, have not been slow in utilizing it and even in helping in its development.

Organized Workers.

Comparatively few Negro workers are in the unions for the reason that, until recently, they were almost universally barred from the ranks of Organized Labor. However, several thousand are now unionized. Some in the regular unions, but many in segregated unions which are generally affiliated with the national bodies.

Distribution of Radicals.

Most of the class radicals are to be found in the ranks of the "**African Blood Brotherhood**" and the "**Friends of Negro Freedom**" — the latter an organization backed by the Socialist Party of America; the former said to have Communist tendencies.

A large group of race radicals are also in the **African Blood Brotherhood** (which makes a race as well as a class appeal); and a larger group in the so-called "Garvey Movement" of "**Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League**." The true race radical should not be confused, however, with the motley crowd of fanatics, emotionals, title and tinsel worshippers who make up the huge mass of the Garvey organization. Latterly, following the exposure of Marcus Garvey, the Garvey organization has been more and more confined to the fanatics and tinsel worshippers.

Petit-Bourgeoisie.

The petit-bourgeoisie, which whom the race is honeycombed, find expression chiefly in the "**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**," in which a group of bourgeois gentlemen (colored and white) and gentlemen who, while lacking the bourgeois gold, carry around the bourgeois psychology, dominate a large but not compactly organized or effectively functioning body of workers and professionals. The domination of the bourgeoisie is here more

open and complete than in the Garvey Movement which, while cursed with petit-bourgeoisie for leaders, has a rank and file wholly made up of workers, and the bourgeoisie in the latter movement have been accordingly forced to resort to camouflage tactics. The compact organization of the "Garvey Movement," together with the mighty enthusiasm and blind fanaticism of most of its membership have made it in the past more of an obstacle to the proper prosecution of the Negro Liberation Struggle than has been the "**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**."

The "**Universal Negro Improvement Association**," the "**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**," and the "**African Blood Brotherhood**" are the three leading organizations of their type in the United States. Other organizations duplicate these three with more or less frequency.

Fraternal Organizations and the Churches.

To date the great fraternal organizations and the churches have failed to play an important part in the Negro Movement. With vast potentialities, the fraternal organizations are, to all intents and purposes, unaware of the existence of a Negro Liberation Movement, save in the few, and frankly insignificant, instances where members of the **African Blood Brotherhood**, working within the Lodges have raised the question. The Negro churches while not frankly bourgeoisistic have more than a drift that way. At present, however, they serve more the part of social centers than of bourgeois machinery.

Press.

The Negro Press is continually growing in strength and popularity with the masses. Comparatively few of the four hundred and more Negro publications in the United States are class radical, however, although most of them, by reason of their race radicalism, approach very closely the line of class radicalism. Some of them are absolutely fearless in their race radicalism. Most are published weekly. A few attempts have been made at publishing a daily, but lack of funds and enterprise have made these abortive in the past. The latest attempt is being made by Marcus Garvey,

who has just begun publication of the *Daily Negro Times*, with prospects that are far from bright. The truly class-radical publications are confined to the monthly class, a fact that has proved a great handicap to the movement.

Economic Status.

As is well-known, the Negro workers are the most viciously oppressed and poorly paid of any group of workers in the United States. No matter what a Negro's ability and fitness there are positions which he may not fill and trades whose doors are closed to him. As a rule, only the most menial jobs are open to him during normal times. Made to believe that the antagonistic attitude of Organized Labor is wholly responsible for his exclusion from the better-paid industries, he becomes a willing — and often a joyous — tool of the Interests, and a scab in times of crisis for Organized Labor. He knows that in numerous instances White Labor opposes his employment. He knows, too, of frequent and widely heralded "philanthropies" to his race — by way of subsidies to Negro colleges, etc. — on the part of the White Bourgeoisie and being at least as backward as White Labor, which by its silly prejudices splits the ranks of Labor, he is not able to see the facts as they really are, but is usually convinced of White Labor's enmity even though not so confident as to the genuineness of the professed friendship of the white bourgeoisie when he remembers that these latter employ him only when white labor is out on strike and immediately discharges him when white labor returns. His doubts are further increased when he is shown that the white bourgeoisie controls the press, the schools, the churches, the theatres, etc., in which race prejudice is engendered and promoted.

Educational.

The Negro Race in the United States has thousands of professional men and women and a number of skilled artisans among its members. Generally speaking, however, Negro education has been sadly neglected, as may be expected as a result of the effort of the Southern white bourgeoisie to prevent the Negro workers from acquiring all knowledge save the most rudimentary. The policy of the Southern bourgeoisie

has been to confine the training of the Negro to such lines as would make merely a good servant out of him. This policy has been endorsed by many of his traitor leaders. Negro youth are segregated into separate schools in rickety and unsanitary buildings. Their teachers in these segregated schools are generally Negroes who lack the essential training and are poorly paid. These schools are open only during three or four months of the year, in order not to interfere with the cotton-picking and other Southern industries in which Negro Child Labor plays an important part, as well as by the opposition in the South to educating the Negro.

In the northern states, educational opportunities are much greater. But here other difficulties arise. While in the South the Negro is generally denied any but the most rudimentary education, and often denied that, in the North an "Alien Education," which almost wholly unfits him for the struggle of life, is forced down his throat. Robbed of his race's historical background and forced to get his knowledge of history from books in which his race is maligned and debased, the Negro child has anything but an encouraging time in school — even in the North. Stimulated by the prejudice-inspiring teachings of the schools, the white children taunt him at every opportunity with the fact of his identity with a race which they are taught to despise. Upon leaving school and going out to seek work, he finds the door to superior opportunity universally closed against him and he most likely develops an "Oh, what's the use" attitude. Only by the inculcation of a knowledge of Negro history can this apathetic attitude be conquered and the Negro made to be of service to himself and his comrades in the Class Struggle.

Racial Aspirations.

And this leads naturally to a consideration of the present aspirations of the Negro Race. The vast masses of the race in America have only the very simplest aspirations, viz: to be permitted to live and eke out a mean and miserable existence in peace. Of the various groups that rise above this low level, the aspirations of some are confined to safety of life and property and the protection of their women from insult and rape at the hands of white men. Other groups

would have political equality in addition; while the most progressive groups demand nothing less than full equality: political, economic, racial; and the abolition of human exploitation. Illiteracy has little to do with these groupings. Many "college-bred" Negroes have less racial self-respect than some of the most illiterate. In fact, illiterates and near-illiterates are very often found in the groups having the highest aspirations, while college men as a rule either stand aloof from the problems of the race or are extremely conservative in their demands. The explanation seems to be that the illiterates, not having been dosed with "Alien Education," has less to unlearn. The trouble with the college men is that they have been trained to have no faith in their race, while with the illiterates it is merely that they do not know their rights.

**Africa, the West Indies,
Central and South America.**

The foregoing outline is mainly of conditions in the United States, but many of these conditions are duplicated in the West Indies, with further complications by way of color castes which weaken and divide the race into "blacks" and "mulattoes," with the former occupying a very low and degraded position in the social order and the former playing the part of a buffer group between the ruling whites and the blacks. This is particularly true in the British-owned islands where the Roman-borrowed British policy of "Divide and Rule," backed by the imported East Indian caste idea, has been a complete success, receiving its first effective challenge only within the last four years. That challenge was the message of race unity and solidarity broadcasted from the American section of the race. Labor conditions are extremely bad in all the islands and the youth of the population are migrating just as rapidly as they can to the United States, Canada, South and Central America.

Until very recently the islands had been existing in the feudal stage, with the planters occupying the dominant position. Latterly, however, the planters' power has been challenged and in many cases overthrown by the merchants of the towns. A few factories have been put up and an attempt is being made, in opposition to imperialist policies of the Home Governments, to put the islands on an industrial basis.

With the entrance of industrialism have come labor unions and frequent strikes by the workers for a living wage, which they do not get at present.

In Central and South America, while the color cast complication is absent, the impulse toward race consciousness and solidarity is also lacking in most of the countries of this part of the New World. There is little race prejudice on the part of the dominant Portuguese and Spanish. Only with the entrance of the North American — as in Panama, Guatemala, Costa Rica, etc. — does prejudice find a foothold and a common persecution forces the Negro population together. With the penetration of the American tourist and traveling salesman, color-phobia is being imported into many of these lands. The island of Cuba has been completely transformed in this respect by the presence of a large colony of American bourgeoisie seeking escape from the effects of the Volstead Law of their own land.

In those parts of Africa where the white colonists have not penetrated — i.e.: West Africa — the economic condition of the native is much better than in sections having large numbers of white colonists with their resultant desire for cheap labor and manifold tricks to create a landless proletariat for their convenience.

A serious drawback to the carrying on of work in Africa is the presence of so many native dialects and the resulting Babel of tongues. However, there are three main languages which are generally understood throughout Africa: Arabic, Hausa, and Swahili. Then, of course, English and other European languages are spoken in the coastal districts and sometimes for a considerable distance inland. With a knowledge of Arabic, Swahili, and Hausa one can reach practically all the tribes of Africa through the spoken word.

Any work carried on in Africa must take under cognizance the two great native movements at present stirring that continent: Ethiopianism in the South, and Mohammedanism in the North. Ethiopianism is a political movement operating under the guise of religion, and was the first to give voice to the now universal demand of the Negro of "Africa for the Africans."

The two most fertile fields for immediate activities would be the Union of South Africa and British West Africa. There are a surprisingly large number of native publications in both of these sections, and the sentiment for racial solidarity is growing apace under

the influence of the native organs and many American publications which are here in great demand.

Work to Be Done.

The chief needs of the Negro Race are: **Education, Organization, and Honest and Efficient Leadership.**

In education the particular aim should be to inculcate a spirit of radical self-respect. Such education can be carried on by a combination of the printed word, cartoons, posters, and lectures. Wherever possible efforts should be made to fill the need of state schools in backward districts by establishing night school-clubs for instructing illiterates in the rudiments of the English language. Readings would be from the simpler books on Economics and Negro History. It would also be of immense value to be able to exchange students between the various Negro countries, especially to bring Africans, West Indians, etc., within the radius of the center of Negro propaganda in the United States; but this would come later. This article will be confined to a statement of immediate needs. These taken care of and a strong organization can be built up which would be in a position to meet of itself the more elaborate needs.

For education, then, the combination above referred to, through the following media:

a. Newspaper: the two jointly handling cartoons and news items and the press releases sent out.

b. Press Service: the type set for the columns of the newspaper.

c. Lecture Board: which would secure dates at forums, churches, lodges, etc., route speakers and organizers, arrange independent meetings, and put out posters. This Board would do all in its power to increase circulation of paper as well as membership of organization and would have the power to call upon all paid members of the organization — on the paper, etc. — to undertake tours or fill arrangements. It would also have cooperation of all local units of the organization whenever meetings are staged in their territory. The members of this Board, with exception of the Secretary, would receive no wages for work on it, but would be comrades who receive wages in other departments of the work, with some volunteers. This Board would put out whatever propaganda posters the

organization may see fit to print. The three — the Newspaper, the Press Service, the Lecture Board — must be closely interrelated as the newspaper and publishing will have eventually to carry the press service and for best results must have the full cooperation of the Lecture Board in its efforts to build circulation.

The cost of the three being, for six to nine months, estimating that period as necessary to establish the newspaper and the organization on a paying basis, and not counting in the meantime the probable receipts from the newspaper and meetings to be staged:

\$30,191 for Newspaper: The newspaper to be published semi-weekly on an up-to-date news basis, in order to insure immediate popularity and eventual big circulation. The twice a week issue would give us a tremendous advantage over the rest of the Negro papers, which are issued weekly, with the exception of *Garvey Negro Times*, which is not progressive and enterprising enough to derive the advantages of its daily issuance. Having our own plant will enable us to make an eventual savings of fifty percent. And make possible the issuance of an up-to-date paper as well as open to us the immensely profitable field of job-printing.

\$7,904 for Press Service: \$104 a week for wages for one director (\$30) and from ten to fifteen correspondents on part time. \$38 a week for releases to 350 papers (foreign mail 5¢, domestic 2¢). \$25 a week for mats and cuts. \$10 a week for Federated Press Service in order to get full information on Labor world.

\$2,000 for Posters: for work of artists and for the printing. Distribution by Lecture Board.

\$5,000 for Lecture Board: \$30 a week for Secretary and the balance of the sum for railroad fares, halls, and advertising for meetings. Lecture Board would eventually extend activity to all Negro communities throughout the world.

\$10,000 for special purpose.

Total \$55,095.

With such machinery, the work done by the organization would have its effect on the Negro Race far and near and would consequently be of immense benefit to the entire movement.

Organization.

Experience on every hand has proven that the *easiest and the best way* of organizing Negroes is on an *international basis*. The most effective Negro organizations anywhere in the world today are so organized. The branches in foreign countries of organizations rooted in America are usually larger than the local organizations and certainly far more effective in the fight for Negro rights in those countries. Organization on an international scale appeals to the imagination of even those Negroes who do not recognize that the so-called race problem is not national and must therefore be fought with international organization. Then, too, it is far more difficult to suppress a movement when only the branch and not the roots or central body can be attacked. And in the matter of publications, also, when these are published in the United States and circulated from that country it is impossible to deal with them as drastically as with local publications. The latter can be shut down and absolutely suppressed at the whim of any upstart overlord. Not so with the publications circulating from America. The *Crusader* and the *Negro World* — one the organ of the **African Blood Brotherhood** and the other the mouthpiece of Marcus Garvey — have both been officially barred and banned in the island of Trinidad, B.W.I. [British West Indies], but the people manage to get them in somehow and both are now more in demand as a consequence of the British ban. And these publications are also safe at their base, since they cannot be suppressed in America without affecting the freedom of the entire American press. Any law designed to deal with them must affect other publications as well and will accordingly find strong opposition. That is one of the strategic benefits of the residence of a large Negro population at the very heart of an imperialist power.

Another important point in favor of international organization of the Negro is the fact that the Negroes of other countries are today looking toward the Negro group in the United States for inspiration and leadership. New York City is at present the political center of the Negro peoples of the world. This tendency is noticeable even as far inland in Africa as Coquithatville in the Belgian Congo, and Timbuctoo in the French Sudan. The Garvey organization has a number of large branches in Africa, and the **African**

Blood Brotherhood also has several posts there.

International organization also has another aspect. Suffering jointly from the exaggerated ego of the Anglo-Saxon imperialists and their followers, the colored races of the world — Negro, Arab, Turk, Chinese, Indian, etc. — are being slowly but surely forced to make common cause. Already a color solidarity is visible when Negroes in America go wild over news of Japanese victories over Tsarist Russia and, more recently, of Turkish victories over the Greek tools of Great Britain. The possibilities for work along these lines are enormous. Could coordination be effected, nothing would be impossible.

When the organization grows strong and can afford it, bureaus should be established at Mecca, at Johannesburg, and at [*illeg.*] for the purpose of reaching the great masses which continually flow through those towns.

A strong international organization can be built up in a remarkably short time, as the **Universal Negro Improvement Association** bears witness. The **African Blood Brotherhood** is also internationally rooted but, starting after the Garvey organization had swept the world and lacking the funds to carry on work on a scale large enough to reach and impress the masses, it has had a slower growth. But the pile of correspondence which reaches its offices from all quarters of the Negro world indicates the widespread interest it has aroused and the tremendous possibilities it possesses as a result.

An organization to be effective must have an organ that comes out once a week, at least, and must offer more than spiritual benefits and political aspirations. It should have a beneficial (sick and death) feature to attract those masses who are not yet race- or class-conscious and therefore do not respond to appeals on those lines. It should also have a protective (defense) side, which should be real and made growingly effective and not merely [based upon] words. The sokols of the Czechs (calisthenic clubs) can be used here with great effectiveness, both as a feature to attract the masses and as a means of injecting discipline and teamwork. They would certainly appeal to the imagination of the Negro, especially after the first public meet had been staged and the exercises done in impressive unity by hundreds of people. The sokols would tend to fill a sad need among the Negro people,

inculcating as they would the spirit of teamwork and discipline.

Another point that cannot be ignored is the present strong tendency among the Negro masses to think in terms of "building up Negro enterprises." This was early recognized by Marcus Garvey and constitutes one of the main factors in the rapid building of his organization, which at one time promises to reach the million mark and undoubtedly exercised some degree of leadership over millions of Negroes not enrolled in its ranks, but affected by its ideology. Of course, the capitalist enterprises which Garvey unwisely grafted upon the mass movement are also the main cause of his downfall. But the yearning for "the building up of Negro enterprises" still remains in the hearts of the masses. We believe that cooperative enterprises, preceded by an extensive educational campaign, would prove highly beneficial to the Negro Race and act as a powerful magnet to draw thousands to the ranks of the organization. Cooperative enterprises would meet many of the immediate needs of the Negro masses and so would make a double appeal: to their race interests and to their economic interests. They would be a certain means of keeping up interest in the organization.

Leadership.

In any organization destined to lead the Negro Race there must be a group of active and alert com-

rades, willing to make sacrifices in the cause and capable of winning the confidence of the masses and of exercising wise leadership. This group must fight all reactionary and cowardly tendencies that may crop up in the organization as well as attack such tendencies in other organizations. If a small group, it must create machinery of some sort to ensure its control. The aim should be to establish control on the basis of confidence of the rank-and-file, and not by mechanical processes, but caucuses will be necessary in order to have always at hand an effective weapon against disruptive and reactionary tactics. This may be accomplished through the utilization of "masonic degrees," into which would be inducted the more advanced members of the organization. Those degrees would also act as a lure to draw membership for the organization and as an inspiration to studies and activities on the part of the membership. They may be seven in all, with the seventh degree reserved for those who become truly class-conscious, and the lower degrees forming a series of steps towards the seventh on the basis of development toward the class-conscious ideal. All the degrees would be under some sort of discipline, starting with a light discipline in the First Degree and culminating in a strict discipline in the Seventh Degree.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2005. • Free reproduction permitted.