The Sixth Congress and the ‘Negro Question’

The Sixth Congress (17 July to 1 September 1928) was a turning point in the Communist approach to the ‘Negro Question’. A resolution passed shortly after the Congress established that the American black population was an oppressed *nation* with the right to self-determination, up to independence from the US. The Congress and its aftermath was also a turning point in the factionalism racking the party; this factionalism was not *about* black oppression, but in the atmosphere of 1928–9, the Negro question became intertwined with the struggle for control of the party.

Most black Communists supported the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction. The Foster-Cannon group’s emphasis on the trade unions, and Foster’s dedication to working within the AFL, were not attractive to black militants given the racism of the trade-union bureaucracy (as Claude McKay had made clear in *Negroes in America*). After the 1925 convention, the Ruthenberg faction’s claim to be more loyal to the Comintern must have played a role, since as William J. Maxwell has argued, ‘indigenous black interests were sometimes better represented in Comintern directives than in U.S. Communism at its most national’. Pepper’s role as the chairman of the first Comintern Negro Commission in 1925, and Minor’s importance in ‘Negro work’ in America, buttressed their faction’s credentials as well.1

Despite black Communists’ support for the Lovestone leadership, the Negro question was not prominent in the party’s work in 1927. In this period the struggle to save Sacco and Vanzetti consumed much of the party’s external efforts. Black Communists, such as Moore, were active, although not more than other comrades. (Through this work, the Communists recruited a young black attorney, William L. Patterson). This is not to say that the party ignored the Negro question altogether: at the same time as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was preparing to execute the two Italian anarchists, its legislature was debating a bill ‘prohibiting the Intermarriage of whites and persons of African descent’.

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The NAACP was active in mobilising against it; Communists also opposed the bill, even appearing before a legislative committee to denounce it.\(^2\)

In February 1927, American Communists participated in the Brussels conference of the League Against Imperialism. Raised by the CPGB in 1925, and organised by German Communist Willi Münzenberg, the League was meant to attract Communist and non-Communist opponents of imperialism. (The culmination of seeking alliances with bourgeois nationalists was the alliance with the Goumindang; soon after the Brussels conference, this resulted in one of the bloodiest defeats for Communists as the Chinese nationalists turned on their erstwhile allies).\(^3\) Several delegates—including Moore (representing both the ANLC and the UNIA) and representatives from South Africa and Francophone West Africa—drew up a resolution on the Negro question.

In presenting the motion, Moore called ‘to unite the European workers with the workers in the colonies for a common fight against this monster’ of world imperialism. Moore warned that ‘the imperialists are concocting a new world war, a terrible war in which race will fight against race’. He added: ‘It is conceivable that the despised Negro peoples will be instrumental in tipping the scale of freedom in favor of the oppressed classes against the imperialistic oppressors in the event of a war between the oppressed and the exploiters’. The resolution demanded withdrawal of imperialist troops from and independence for much of the Caribbean, and called for a ‘Confederation of the British West Indies’. It demanded racial and national equality, free speech and press, and the right to form trade unions and the right to an education. In the US, the All-American Anti-Imperialist League, led by Manuel Gomez, focused on

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\(^2\) For an example of Moore’s activism, see New York Times, 17 April, 28 July, and 22 August 1927; on Patterson, see Patterson 1971; also see his obituary in New York Times, 7 March 1980. On the anti-miscegenation bill, see Miletsky 2008, pp. 127–8; for Communist opposition, see B.B. Rubenstein, ‘Workers Party Opposes Intermarriage Bill in Mass’. [1927], in Comintern archives, 5153:1224. The bill was ultimately defeated. On the rise of laws against intermarriage in the 1920s, see Mumford 1997, Chapter 9.

\(^3\) Sean McMeekin argues that Münzenberg’s building of the conference was based on a double lie: to the Comintern, in that the various nationalists and ‘anti-imperialists’ were sympathetic to Soviet Russia, and to the attendees, in that the conference was not organised and financed by Moscow; McMeekin 2003, p. 196. However, the fundamental ‘lie’ of the League was that bourgeois nationalists (like Chiang Kai-shek) and Communists could form an anti-imperialist united front. On the League Against Imperialism, see Jones 1996; Melgar Bao 2008; Petersson 2007. See also the coverage of the conference in the special edition of the Bulletin de la Ligue Contre l’Oppression Coloniale et l’Impérialisme [1927], in Prometheus Research Library collection.