

The Decline of the Garvey Movement

By CYRIL BRIGGS

GARVEYISM, or Negro Zionism, rose on the crest of the wave of discontent and revolutionary ferment which swept the capitalist world as a result of the post-war crisis.

Increased national oppression of the Negroes, arising out of the post-war crisis, together with the democratic slogans thrown out by the liberal-imperialist demagogues during the World War (right of self-determination for all nations, etc.) served to bring to the surface the latent national aspirations of the Negro masses. These aspirations were considerably strengthened with the return of the Negro workers and poor farmers who had been conscripted to "save the world for democracy." These returned with a wider horizon, new perspectives of human rights and a new confidence in themselves as a result of their experiences and disillusionment in the war. Their return strengthened the morale of the Negro masses and stiffened their resistance. So-called race riots took the place of lynching bees and massacres. The Negro masses were fighting back. In addition, many of the more politically advanced of the Negro workers were looking to the example of the victorious Russian proletariat as the way out of their oppression. The conviction was growing that the proletarian revolution in Russia was the beginning of a world-wide *united* movement of down-trodden classes and oppressed peoples. Even larger numbers of the Negro masses were becoming more favorable toward the revolutionary labor movement.

DISTORTION OF NATIONAL REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT BY THE REFORMISTS

This growing national revolutionary sentiment was seized upon by the Negro petty bourgeoisie, under the leadership of the demagogue, Marcus Garvey, and diverted into utopian, reactionary, "Back to Africa" channels. There were various other reformist attempts to formulate the demands of the Negro masses and to create a program of action which would appeal to all elements of the dissatisfied Negro people. None of these met with even the partial and temporary success which greeted the Garvey movement.

The leadership of the Garvey Movement consisted of the poorest stratum of the Negro intellectuals—declassed elements, struggling business men and preachers, lawyers without a brief, etc.—who stood more or less close to the Negro masses and felt sharply the effects of the crisis. The movement represented a split-away from the official Negro bourgeois leadership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People which even then was already linked up with the imperialists.

The main social base of the movement was the Negro agricultural workers and the farming masses groaning under the terrific oppression of peonage and share cropper slavery, and the backward sections of the Negro industrial workers, for the most part recent migrants from the plantations into the industrial centers of the North and South. These saw in the movement an escape from national oppression, a struggle for Negro rights throughout the world, including freedom from the oppression of the southern landlords and for ownership of the land. To the small advanced industrial Negro proletariat, who were experienced in the class struggle, the Garvey movement had little appeal.

While the movement never had the millions organizationally enrolled that its leaders claimed, it did have in 1921, at the time of its second congress, nearly 100,000 members on its books, as revealed in an analysis made by W. A. Domingo¹ of the deliberately confused financial statement given by the leadership to the delegates at the Second Congress. Moreover, the movement exercised a tremendous ideological influence over millions of Negroes outside its ranks.

REFLECTED MILITANCY OF THE MASSES IN ITS EARLY STAGES

The movement began as a radical petty bourgeois national movement, reflecting to a great extent in its early stages the militancy of the toiling masses, and in its demands expressing their readiness for struggle against oppression in the United States. From the very beginning there were two sides inherent to the movement: a democratic side and a reactionary side. In the early stage the democratic side dominated. To get the masses into the movement, the national reformist leaders were forced to resort to demagoguery. The pressure of the militant masses in the movement further forced them to adopt progressive slogans. The program of the first congress was full of militant demands expressing the readiness for struggle in the United States.

¹In an article in the *Crusader Magazine*, entitled "Figures Never Lie But Liars Do Figure."

A Negro mass movement with such perspectives was correctly construed by the imperialists as a direct threat to imperialism, and pressure began to be put on the leadership. A threat of the imperialists, inspired and backed by the leadership of the N. A. C. P., to exclude Garvey from the country on his return from a tour of the West Indies brought about the complete and abject capitulation of the national reformist leaders. Crawling on his knees before the imperialists, Garvey enunciated the infamous doctrine that "the Negro must be loyal to all flags under which he lives." This was a complete negation of the Negro liberation struggle. It was followed by an agreement with the Ku Klux Klan, in which the reformists catered for the support of the southern senators in an attempt to secure the "repatriation" of the Negro masses by deportation to Liberia.

The objective difficulties and subjective weakness of the movement, arising out of reformist leadership and its attempt to harmonize the demands of all the dissatisfied elements among the Negro people, inevitably led to the betrayal of the toiling masses.

SURRENDERED RIGHT OF SELF-DETERMINATION OF NEGRO MAJORITIES OF U. S. AND WEST INDIES

While never actually waging a real struggle for national liberation the movement did make some militant demands in the beginning. However, these demands were soon thrown overboard as the reactionary side of the movement gained dominance. There followed a complete and shameful abandonment and betrayal of the struggles of the Negro masses of the United States and the West Indies. The right of the Negro majorities in the West Indies and in the Black Belt of the United States to determine and control their own government was as completely negated by the Garvey national reformists as by the imperialists. The Garvey movement became a tool of the imperialists. Even its struggle slogans for the liberation of the African peoples, which had always been given main stress, were abandoned and the movement began to peddle the illusion of a *peaceful return to Africa*.

At first giving expression to the disgust which the Negro masses felt for the religious illusions of liberation through "divine" intervention, etc., the Garvey movement became one of the main social carriers of these illusions among the masses, with Marcus Garvey taking on the role of High Priest after the resignation and defection of the Chaplain-General, Bishop McGuire. Feudal orders, high sounding titles and various commercial adventures were substituted for the struggle demands of the earlier stages.

How completely the reactionary side came to dominate the movement is shown in (1) its acceptance of the Ku Klux Klan viewpoint that the United States is a white man's country and that the Negro masses living here are rightfully denied all democratic rights; (2) the rejection by the leaders at the 1929 convention in Jamaica, B. W. I., of a resolution condemning imperialism.

In both cases the betrayals just noted were carried to their logical conclusion, in Garvey's bid for an alliance with the Ku Klux Klan, and in an article he wrote in the *Black Man* (Jamaica organ of the movement) shortly after the 1929 convention in which he attacked the Jamaica workers for organizing into unions of the T.U.U.L. to better their conditions. In this article he attacked Communism as a menace to the imperialists and warned the Negro masses of Jamaica that they "would not dare accept and foster something tabooed by the mother country." So complete was the counter-revolutionary degeneration of the national reformists that the oppressing imperialism was openly accepted by them as their "mother country!" The imperialist oppressors were presented to the masses as "friends who have treated him (the Negro) if not fairly, with some kind of consideration!"

The decline of the movement synchronized with the subsiding of the post war crisis. As a result both of the lessening of the economic pressure on the masses and the awakening of the most militant sections of the membership to the betrayals being carried out by the national reformist behind the gesture of struggle phrases and demagogy, the masses began to drop away from the movement. Relieved of the pressure of the militant masses the movement began to assert more and more its reactionary and anti-democratic side.

Already at the Second Congress it was evident that the national reformists were losing their grip on the masses. As a result of the widespread exposures carried on by the Negro radicals against the dishonest business schemes and consistent betrayals of the national Negro liberation movement by the Garvey reformists, the sympathetic masses outside of the organization were becoming more and more critical of the national reformists. Within the organization itself there was such wide-spread dissatisfaction that the top leadership was forced to make sacrificial goats of several rubber stamp lieutenants. Within a few months of the closing of the Second Congress, the first big mass defections occurred (California,

*The Negro radicals referred to are Richard B. Moore, Otto Huiswoud, W. A. Domingo, Cyril Briggs, and Hubert Harrison before his degeneration. Domingo was never a member of the Party. Huiswoud, Briggs and Moore were members of the Communist fraction in the African Blood Brotherhood.

Philadelphia). These revolts, however, were led by reformists and were significant only from the point of view of the growing disintegration of the movement. From 1921, the movement has undergone a continuous process of deterioration and break-up, as the masses increasingly came to realize the treacherous character of the national reformist leaders.

The recent decision of Garvey to sell the Jamaica properties of the organization (pocketing the proceeds) and take up his residence in Europe, (far from the masses he has plundered and betrayed), denotes a high stage in the collapse of this reactionary movement, whose dangerous ideology, as pointed out by the C. I., bears not a single democratic trait.

Historically however the movement has certain progressive achievements. It undoubtedly helped to crystalize the national aspirations of the Negro masses. Moreover, the Negro masses achieved a certain political ripening as a result of their experience and disillusionment with this movement.

NEW NEGRO LIBERATION MOVEMENT GOES FORWARD UNDER THE HEGEMONY OF THE NEGRO PROLETARIAT

The betrayal of these aspirations and the national liberation struggle by the Garvey national reformists was facilitated by (1) the immaturity of the Negro working-class; (2) the weakness both in theoretical and in organizational strength of the revolutionary labor movement in the United States at that time.

To-day as the result of large-scale migrations into the industrial centers of large numbers of Negroes from the plantations, a strong Negro proletariat has come into being, developing in the class struggle and freeing themselves of petty bourgeois influences and reformist illusions. Further, as the result of the present crisis and the correct application by the Communist Party of the U. S. A. of the C. I. line on the Negro question, the Negro liberation movement again goes forward, this time under the sign of proletarian hegemony, and wages a relentless fight against imperialism and for unconditional Negro equality, including the right of self-determination of the Negro majorities in the Black Belt of the South, in the West Indies and the Negro peoples of Africa.

Before concluding, it is necessary to emphasize here that the Garvey movement, while in decline and on the verge of collapse, still represents a most dangerous reactionary force, exercising considerable ideological influence over large masses of Negroes. It will not do to ignore this movement which is most dangerous in its disintegration because of the desperate attempts being made by the

national reformists leaders to maintain their influence over the Negro masses, either by saving the movement as it is or by luring the dissatisfied masses into other organizations under the control of the national reformists.

The situation affords considerable opportunity for the winning of the Negro masses away from the influence of the reformists and in another article I will deal with the tasks of the Party in relation to the disintegration and decline of the Garvey Movement.

A CORRECTION

In the article "Blood Stained Nitrates of Chile" which appeared in the May issue of *THE COMMUNIST* a typographical error occurred. On page 464 in the fourth paragraph where it reads "loan of \$500,000,000," it should read "loan of \$500,000."