

Slogan of Self-Determination

By TOM JOHNSON.

IN the small space at my disposal it is impossible to give this question the detailed treatment its importance merits. I will therefore limit myself to a discussion of three major problems which arise in the course of our practical application of the slogan of self-determination for the Negro nation in the South.

The first problem is that of creating a revolutionary national movement of the Negro masses. There is no such movement today. There never has been in America such a movement of any mass character at all. How are we to create such a movement? Certainly not by merely tacking this slogan onto the end of leaflets addressed to the Negro workers, and by an occasional mention of the slogan in the speeches of our agitators, as has been the case up to now.

To create such a movement requires first of all the linking up of the demand for the right of self-determination with economic and political demands which the Negro masses understand, recognize the immediate necessity for, and are ready to fight for now. The demand for the right of self-determination must, in all our agitational material, flow directly from the demand for full equality. We must put forward the demand for equality not only in the sense of full economic, political and social equality for every Negro in relation to the whites, but also the demand for full equality for the Negro race as a nation. In all of our struggles against lynch law, against all forms of social oppression and against the disfranchisement of the Negroes we must show clearly that this constitutes the oppression of the entire Negro nation and must be fought as such.

Secondly, if this is to become a broad mass movement it cannot find organizational expression within the frame work of the Party alone. The organization to give expression to this movement must be the American Negro Labor Congress. The A.N.L.C. must devote much more attention to the development of the national struggle than it has done in the past. The demand for the right of self-determination must find a prominent place in the program of the A.N.L.C. to be adopted by the St. Louis Convention. The Liberator must, in its columns, carry on a constant campaign of agitation for this demand, linking it up at all times with the daily struggles of the Negro masses against all forms of oppression. Up to the present it must be said that the A.N.L.C. and its organ, the Liberator, have failed completely to give any life, any vitality, to this slogan.

The Negro Farmers.

The second problem is that of extending our influence over the Negro farmers and agricultural laborers of the southern Black Belt, of organizing and leading these masses into struggle. This is precisely the one section where this slogan can, at some future date, be transformed into a slogan of action. And under the leadership of the Negro industrial proletariat, it is precisely these Negro masses of the country side who will form the backbone of the revolutionary national movement. It is here that all forms of oppression and exploitation of a semi-slave character are sharpest. As the Comintern Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States states, "The agrarian problem lies at the root of the Negro national

movement." One cannot speak seriously of a Negro national movement until such time as we have seriously tackled the job of organizing the Negro rural proletariat and poor farmers.

Furthermore this should be particularly easy in the South. In no other section of the country or the connections between the farmers and the industrial proletariat so strong. At the same time in some industries, such as tobacco, the farmers and the workers in the shops feel the oppression of the same boss. The same tobacco trust that sets the price of the tobacco raised on the farms, employs the workers in the big tobacco plants. These industries must be our central points of attack in work among the Negro farmers of the South. The whole system of peonage and semi-slavery on the farms, of ruinous prices for the farmers products, must be linked up with the demand for the right of self-determination for the Negro nation in the Black Belt. The T.U.U.L. and the A.N.L.C. should consider as one of their most pressing tasks in their work in the South the sending of competent organizers into the rural districts.

Winning Southern White Workers.

The third problem is that of winning the white workers of the South to the support of the slogan of self-determination. In one of his articles on the national question, Lenin spoke of the three-fold duty of Communists in this connection: namely the propaganda of the right of self-determination for an oppressed national minority among the workers of the oppressor nation and the propaganda of the duty of internationalism, among the workers of the oppressed nation. The first part of this quotation from Lenin (the "quotation" is far from exact as I do not have the article referred to at hand and quote from memory) applies exactly to our third problem. I am of the opinion that in our work in the South we have somewhat underestimated and in consequence neglected this aspect of our work.

There can be no question that the slogan of self-determination will meet with the active resistance of large sections of the white workers in the South. Despite all assertions to the contrary it is a fact that the slogan of full social, economic and political equality for the Negroes is resented by considerable sections of the white working class in the South. A tendency to retreat before the chauvinism of the southern workers, not in the sense of modification of our program, but in the sense of capitulation before the greater difficulties often encountered in the organization of white workers, was noted by the resolution of the Central Committee Plenum on the Economic and Political Situation in the South. The resolution correctly characterized this tendency as an expression of the right danger. We must, therefore, put at once more emphasis on the systematic carrying on of propaganda for the right of the Negroes to self-determination, among the white workers.

At the same time we must carry out in practice the second half of the quotation from Lenin—we must guard against any tendency to convert the slogan of self-determination into its opposite: a counter-revolutionary slogan for the further segregation of the Negroes in some kind of a Jim Crow state.

These constitute our principal problems in the practical application of the slogan of self-determination for the Negro nation in the South.