

CLR James, "The Rapid Growth of the NAACP" (1947)

The NAACP, I am informed, now has close to one million members. I doubt if many people know this. And I am pretty certain that if they do, few except the Marxists can understand what it means. It is one of the surest signs of the insoluble social crisis in the United States.

This growth has taken place during the last 12 years. In 1935, the membership was quite insignificant. In 1939, it was about 300,000. By 1943, it was half a million. And now, in 1947, it is almost one million. The Negro population is only 15 million. There is a small number of whites in the NAACP. The large majority of the membership is Negro. And when one out of every fifteen of the Negroes in the United States joins an organization aiming at the destruction of Negro oppression and discrimination, that becomes an indication of a tremendous social ferment in the nation as a whole.

What is it that has moved these Negroes to this tremendous mobilization? The answer is simple. There is obviously a dislocation of the whole social order which drives them towards unifying their forces for struggle. They are impelled toward the search for solidarity because they realize that all the great problems of the nation and of the Negro minority are now being posed. They gird themselves for a solution of their own.

Look at those two dates again, 1935 to 1947. To any Marxist student of American life, those dates must immediately call to mind the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Precisely during this time when the Negroes were just beginning to organize themselves, the labor movement of the United States accomplished one of the most astonishing mobilizations in the history of the working class.

The proletariat, in some of its deepest layers, felt that the foundations of American society were cracking under its feet, instinctively the long-overdue organization of industrial unions appeared out of the depths of dislocated capitalist society. If the CIO is a response of labor to the crisis of American society, then the organization of the Negroes in the NAACP is a response which has the same roots. Both were the reaction of Americans to the crisis of the American environment.

The NAACP response is not so much a Negro as an American phenomenon. But precisely because these Americans are Negroes, the mass mobilizations assume the astounding ratio of roughly one out of every fifteen Negroes in the nation. The Negroes are more bitterly oppressed, more disgusted, more humiliated, than any other section of the population. That is the reason why they react so strongly to the stimuli of disintegrating society.

That is what is important, the mass movement towards organizations. It expresses the sense that the conditions are intolerable; that the possibility of change exists; that it is necessary to act. Whenever hundreds of thousands of people take action of any significant kind, that is an infallible sign of social contradictions expressing themselves.

That being said, however, it is now possible to say certain other things. The NAACP, as led by Walter White and his fellow-fakers, is an organization miserably inadequate for the great cause it is designed to serve. For years, it has distinguished itself by its inability to mobilize its followers for mass action. It has done useful work in publicizing such barbarisms as lynching. It has fought cases in the courts. It has carried out a strictly legalistic type of propaganda and agitation.

Militant Negroes have long recognized the NAACP's fear of mass action. Today the same leaders are in the saddle and with their long training, they undoubtedly wish nothing more than to carry on in the manner which has distinguished them in the past.

But history is overtaking them. An organization of one million is vastly different from an organization of one thousand. Furthermore, the Negro population in the United States is predominately proletarian or semi-proletarian, The moment you read a ratio like 1 in 15, it means that a substantial number of that million consists of working class families.

The very size of the organization gives confidence to its membership. They have not joined in order to send more telegrams to Washington or to make more cases before the Supreme Court. They want action. The NAACP is therefore in a state of turmoil. The membership is pressing for action. The leadership searches for some sort of program. It is impossible to give any forecast as to what the result will be.

For the time being, however, this much can be said. The fate of the extraordinary mass movement rests with the great social forces of the nation. This growth of the NAACP is not an accident; it represents the mobilization following World War II which corresponds to the Negro mobilization that followed World War I. That mobilization was the Garvey movement. It took the extravagant form that it did precisely because there was not at that time in the United States an organized labor movement which could stand before the nation as the potential leader of all the oppressed. Today, that is not so.

The Negro people as a whole believe in the CIO more than they believe in any social organization in the nation. In the industrial towns many of the members of the NAACP are good union men. Their education in the union movement has not lessened, but sharpened, their consciousness of their oppression as Negroes. They have heretofore joined the struggle of the NAACP as the most convenient medium for carrying on their own special struggle. It was the social crisis which precipitated the CIO into existence. It was the social crisis which has precipitated the phenomenal growth of the NAACP.

The deepening of the crisis will drive the American proletariat on the road of political action on a scale corresponding to the social explosion which was the CIO. Any such movement will most certainly bring in its train convulsions in the NAACP. The solidity of American capitalist society is undermined, and under our eyes the forces that are to overthrow it are slowly but surely preparing themselves for the gigantic explosions which will usher in the actual revolutionary crisis.

CLR James, "Marcus Garvey" (1940)

Articles in every newspaper and editorials on Garvey have borne witness to the great impression which this extraordinary man made on American life in less than ten years stay in this country. The revolutionary movement is woodenly obtuse to the immense significance of his career. Thereby it shows itself still dominated by the powerful prejudice which belittles or ignores all action and achievements by Negroes.

Garvey landed in America some time during the war and agitated for his organization, the U.N.I.A., the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He had a fantastic program of Back to Africa, fantastic, because Britain, France, and Germany would not fight wars for Africa and then hand it over to Garvey. It is doubtful whether he believed it himself. It is possible that when he began he took the idea seriously, but before long he must have become convinced of its impracticality. But Garvey's ideas are not important.

The first thing to note is that he burst into prominence in the post-war period, when revolution was raging in Europe and the workers were on the move everywhere. The Negro masses felt the stir of the period, and it was that which made Garvey. The next great movement of the American working class was the pro-Roosevelt movement in 1936. It swung hundreds of thousands of Negro votes from the Republican to the Democratic Party. The third great movement of the American workers was the CIO. It swept hundreds of thousands of Negroes into unions for the first time. In every great step forward of the American masses since the war, the Negroes have played their part. Yet the biggest response was to Garvey.

Why? Garvey was a reactionary. He used fierce words but he was opposed to the labor movement and counseled subservience to bosses. One reason for his success was that his movement was strictly a class movement. It appealed to the black Negroes against the Mulattoes. Thus at one strike he excluded the Negro middle class which is very largely of mixed blood. He deliberately aimed at the poorest, most down-trodden and humiliated Negroes. The millions who followed him, the devotion and the money they contributed, show where we can find the deepest strength of the working class movement, the coiled springs of power which lie there waiting for the party which can unloose them.

Garvey, however, was a race fanatic. His appeal was to black against white. He wanted purity of race. A great part of his propaganda was based on the past achievements of blacks, their present misery, their future greatness. With that disregard of facts which characterize the born demagogue, he proclaimed there were 400 million Negroes in the world, when there are certainly not half as many. Who does all this remind us of? Who but Adolf Hitler?

The similarity between the two movements does not end there. The Negroes were too few in America for Garvey to give them excitement by means of baiting whites as Hitler

baited the Jews. But his program had a nebulousness similar to the Nazi program. Was this the reason that long before Hitler, he anticipated the Nazi leader in his emphasis on uniforms, parades, military guards, in short, the dramatic and the spectacular? Stupid people saw in all this merely the antics of backward Negroes. Recent events should give them an opportunity to revise their judgements. Everything that Hitler was to do afterwards in the way of psychological appeal, Garvey was doing in 1921. His array of baronets, etc., with himself as Emperor of Africa was a hangover from his early life in the West Indies.

In one important respect, the Garvey movement was the most remarkable political mass movement that America has ever seen. Note that Garvey promised the Negroes nothing and at the same time everything. His organization was not a trade union which offered higher wages, nor was it a political party which could offer prospects of realizing a program. All he did was to speak of Africa, and near the end of his career he bought one or two leaky ships which made one or two streaky voyages. Yet so deep was the sense of wrong and humiliation among the Negroes and so high did he lift them up that they gave him all that they did, year after year, expecting Garvey to perform some miracle. No revolution is ever made except when the masses have reached this pitch of exaltation, when they see a vision of a new society. That is what Garvey gave them.

Personally, Garvey was one of the great orators of his time. Ill-educated, but with the rhythms of Shakespeare and the Bible in his head, he was a master of rhetoric and invective, capable of great emotional appeals and dramatic intensity. In his late years he could hold English crowds spellbound in Hyde Park while he told them that God would save black Ethiopia because Simon the Cyrenian, a black man, helped Jesus on the way to Calvary. As the great poet says, it ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it. Yet this remarkable movement and the remarkable figure who led it remain unstudied by American Marxists.

Every two-cent revolutionary who has talked to Negroes in cafeterias and therefore knows the Negro question, points out Garvey's errors and absurdities and thinks that thereby a contribution has been made to knowledge. More than in all the theses of the Comintern, a basis for the building of a real mass movement among the Negroes lies in a thorough study of this first great eruption of the Negro people.