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**“COMRADES, PRAISE GAWD FOR LENIN AND THEM!”: IDEOLOGY AND CULTURE
AMONG BLACK COMMUNISTS
IN ALABAMA, 1930-1935¹**

ROBIN D. G. KELLEY*

DATING BACK TO THE “COLD WAR,” historians of American Communism established an uncritical dictum that Afro-Americans were never seriously drawn to left-wing radical movements. Any isolated instances of black support for the Communist Party during the depression were usually explained in terms of duplicity on the part of the Communists. In other words, ignorant and unaware of their true intentions, Afro-Americans were merely victims of Communist intrigue (Record, 1951, 1964; Nolan, 1951; Draper, 1960, chapter 15; Klehr, 1984, 324-348). This idea, however, has been challenged by radical historians, particularly those of the “New Left” school of historiography. Recent scholarship has revealed that Afro-Americans were drawn into the orbit of American Communism because of individual campaigns such as the campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys, the Party’s resolute position on racial equality, or the failure of middle class reformist organizations to take up the strug-

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1 The title is derived from a statement made by Hosea Hudson during my interview with him. In the original phrase, he was explaining the actions of the Communists in Montgomery, Alabama. In his own words, “Man, them folks down there! They used to start the meeting with a prayer, just like they’s in church, be thanking God for Browder and Lenin and Stalin and them” (Hudson, 1986b).

gles of the black working class (Lyons, 1982, 77-84; Martin, 1976, 1979, 1985; Naison, 1978, 1981, 1983; Solomon, 1972).

While recent work thoroughly refutes the notion that black supporters and adherents of the Communist Party were little more than innocent dupes of an organization they barely understood, the problem of analyzing ideology and consciousness has been a much more elusive area of study. Were blacks drawn to the Party as "race conscious" nationalists who used the Communists to put through their own agenda? Were they, as the Party often purported, the "most class conscious" section of the working class? And when they joined the Party or any of its auxiliary organizations, to what extent had their ideas about politics, society, and economy changed?

The Communist experience in Alabama sheds a little light on the ideological complexities of Afro-American working-class radicals. The Party in Alabama, based mainly in the Birmingham-Bessemer industrial complex and in the rural black belt, was overwhelmingly black and working class in its social composition. In 1934, the Party's membership in the state of Alabama reached approximately 1,000, of whom about 95% were black (DW, 1934f and 1934h).² Afro-Americans were so prevalent, Alabama's Communists were commonly referred to as the "nigger party" (DW, 1934f; C. Johnson, 1986; Hudson, 1986a). In fact, during the early to mid-1930s, the Communist Party had several times more members in Birmingham than the local NAACP.³ And when one considers the Communist-sponsored mass organi-

- 2 These figures are for District 17, which in 1934 constituted all of Alabama, Memphis and Oxford, Mississippi. Over 95% of the district's membership was concentrated in the state of Alabama. Hosea Hudson also claimed that the party's membership in this period was about 1,000 (Hudson, 1986b; Painter, 1979, 114). It must be noted that accurate figures are hard to come by. The membership calculations for May occurred in the midst of a series of strikes in Birmingham's coal and ore mines. The party's role in the strikes, as well as the repression leveled against it in the aftermath of the May Day demonstration in Birmingham, increased the party's prestige in the community. It was reported that during a six-week period of anti-radical repression, the Communists gained 300 new members (DW, 1934h). At the beginning of the year, before the wave of strikes, the paid-up membership for the Birmingham district was 496 (Browder papers, 1934).
- 3 The branch did not have enough members to obtain a charter. In 1931, they had only six active members (NAACP Branch Files, 1931a and 1931b).

zations, the Party directly touched the lives of tens of thousands of black Alabamans.

While the numbers were never large in relation to the state's black population, a brief survey of the Alabama cadre should elucidate the underlying ideological and cultural currents of the Party in Alabama during the "Third Period."⁴ In addition, this paper seeks to illustrate the Party's impact in terms of developing a radical class consciousness through methods of pedagogy and praxis.

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci provides a valuable framework for understanding the social and cultural roots of radicalism. For Gramsci, force alone is not enough to sustain a ruling class in power. The existence and reproduction of a class is dependent on its ability to exercise cultural and ideological hegemony over the popular masses. Therefore, the development of a revolutionary working-class consciousness depends on a rejection of the dominant culture, requiring the construction of "counter-hegemonic" ideology and culture (Gramsci, 1971, 52-60, 104-106, 206-208, 416-418).

Elements of Afro-American working-class culture and ideology, though by no means entirely "counter-hegemonic," were in many ways "oppositional" to the ideological foundations of the Southern ruling classes. As several scholars have pointed out, Afro-Americans have been able to preserve their cultural traditions, and thus maintain a separate, often oppositional, existence from the cultural and ideological hegemony exercised by the status quo (Robinson, 1983; Franklin, 1984). In Alabama, this radical grass-roots ideology and culture not only attracted blacks to the Communists and their allied organizations; to a large extent it also defined the Party's radicalism.

Afro-American Communists shared with the rest of the black working-class community a grass-roots understanding of exploitation and oppression which was based more on scripture than anything else. The prophetic Christian tradition, so characteristic of the Afro-American experience, has historically contained a

4 For the CPUSA and the international Communist movement, the Third Period extends from 1928 to about 1934. I have chosen not to deal with the Popular Front because the party's ideology and social composition changed substantially after 1936.

vehement critique of oppression. Ironically, this radical, prophetic tradition of Christianity was a major factor in drawing blacks into the Communist Party and its mass organizations.

References to God and the bible were not uncommon among Alabama's black radicals. In 1933 the *Daily Worker* (13 April) received an interesting letter from a black Communist from Tallapoosa County, thanking "God and all the friends of the Negro race that are working for the defense and rights of the Negroes. I pray that we may succeed in our struggle for Bread, Land and Freedom." A black woman from Orrville, Alabama explained, "Your movement is the best that I ever heard of. God bless you for opening up the eyes of the Negro race. I pray that your leaders will push the fight. . . . I am praying the good Lord will put your program over" (*DW*, 1935b). Even the party's literature in the South sometimes adopted, probably unwittingly, religious imagery and language. An article by Nat Ross, the party's district organizer for Alabama, declared that the Communists "can and will destroy this hell and build a heaven for the Southern working people right here in Dixie" (*SW*, 1934). Furthermore, not only were most black Communists in Alabama churchgoing Christians; for quite some time, Communists in Montgomery opened all their meetings with a prayer (Hudson, 1986b; Green, 1935: 25).

To many blacks, the Communists represented a movement which believed in, and practiced, righteousness. The party's long-term goals — a non-racist, socialist society — were often seen as the fruits of redemption. In the words of John Garner, a black Birmingham Communist who remained in the Party for over 51 years, "this whole world going to be ruled in righteousness, be somebody right here when it take place, plenty of folk. . . . There's gonna come a new heaven and a new earth, coming down from God to dwell forever. . . . And then we'll inherit all things new" (Garner, 1984, 9). Angelo Herndon, then a young, unemployed miner who joined the party in Birmingham in 1930, originally viewed the role of the Communists in biblical terms. While at an unemployed meeting, he was reminded of a biblical phrase popular among Afro-Americans: "And the day shall come when the bottom rail shall be on top and the top rail on the bottom. The Ethiopians will stretch forth their arms and find their place under the sun" (Herndon, 1937, 75).

What was perhaps most appealing to blacks, from a biblical standpoint, was the Communists' vigilance in the fight for equality and justice. Because of an ideological commitment, whites treated blacks with dignity and respect. To Lemon Johnson (1986), former secretary of the Share Croppers Union (SCU) in Hope Hull, communism and equality meant one and the same thing. "The Communists want, in short," he recalled, "'you treat me like I treat you,' when you talking about color." According to Hosea Hudson (1986b), a leading black Communist in Birmingham throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the party gave working-class blacks a sense of dignity which even the black middle class and bourgeoisie denied them:

The preachers and leaders was calling the Negroes the "low class." In order to get anywhere you had to be part of the "better class." This low class of people was the ones the police was killing what nobody saying nothing about. Outcasts! When the Party come out, these people were somebody. You took these people and made leaders out of them.

White party leaders on trial for sedition very often made strikingly bold statements in Alabama courtrooms. Blaine Owens, one of several Communists arrested and severely beaten in the 1934 post-May Day raids in Birmingham, told a crowded courtroom that he not only believed in social equality, he "would rather associate with Negroes than with police thugs and such elements as the prosecutor. . ." Laura Stark, the district secretary for the ILD who was also on trial with Owens, was laughed at and nearly charged with contempt when she insisted that the court cease using the term "niggers" (*DW*, 1934g).

Although the Communists never had a sympathetic ear from the larger, well-established black churches, several ministers and working-class congregations of smaller Baptist churches in and around Birmingham provided critical support for the Communists. In 1935, a group of black churches joined the Communists and the International Labor Defense in opposition to a state-wide anti-sedition bill. In fact, pastors from Peace Baptist Church, 45th Street Baptist Church, Friendship Baptist Church, the Church of Christ and Mt. Sinai Baptist Church each sent petitions to the Governor of Alabama branding the bill as "fascist" and an attack on "militant working-class organizations." Several church leaders

actually sent petitions which resolved to "continue to organize a strong Communist Party in Alabama, as the political leader of the working class. . ." (Gov. Graves papers, 1935b, 1935c, 1935d, 1935e, 1935f, 1935g, 1934h, 1935i).

Nevertheless, the party in Birmingham did not refrain from criticizing local black clergy. Often the severest criticisms came from local blacks, not Northern white Communists. Through the pages of the *Southern Worker*, Alabama's Communists attacked corrupt preachers who used the church for personal gain, or clergy who preached against labor organization, or any form of militant, mass action (for example, *SW*, 1931a, 1931c, 1931e, 1931f, and 1931h). In Birmingham, the party's criticisms were not too far off the mark. The city had a long history of incidents in which preachers not only opposed union organizing, but were subsidized by companies to do so.⁵ Therefore, the recollections of Dobbie Sanders, a black ILD member active in Birmingham, probably reflect the sentiments of a considerable portion of Alabama's black working class in the 1930s:

Man, them preachers is a mess. Most of em ain't no good. Brainwashing, that's what they all about. They should have been race leaders, but instead they are race hold-backers. . . . These preachers go around here charging people to keep them looking back. (Parham and Robinson, 1985, 233.)

The black churches were not always the focus of criticism. The religious institutions of the "oppressor" provided an occasion to elucidate the uses and "misuses" of Christianity. In a poem entitled "The Modern Church," an unemployed Communist contributed to the *Southern Worker* (1931b) a scathing expose of "status quo" religion. The protagonist, a tired and hungry unemployed worker, was told to find salvation in Jesus. After attending a local church service, he:

- 5 In 1919, it was reported that "all the Negro preachers had been subsidized by the companies and were without exception preaching against the Negroes joining unions" (Department of Labor, 1919). During the 1930s there were several outstanding exceptions. The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers had some black clergy, such as Curtis Maggard, who were also organizers in the red ore mines (Maggard, 1984, 2).

*. . . failed to find Jesus there,
 Instead I found a cruel judge,
 Who sent six men to the chair.
 I also found a lawyer,
 Who, for the love of gold,
 Had put a widow's only son
 In a prison gray and cold.
 And above me sat a sheriff,
 Who, just the other day,
 Had drawn a gun on his fellow-man,
 And taken his life away.
 And over here a landlord,
 Who, because she could not pay,
 Had thrown a woman out of doors,
 Only yesterday. . . .*

Since working-class blacks did not attend the same church as the local authorities, landlords and white industrialists, highly religious party members could still empathize with "The Modern Church." Consequently, the party's critique of religion, as manifested in more localized and popular forms of propaganda, rarely attacked black Communists' grass-roots "theology." When the party's literature exhibited opposition to Christianity as a belief, its appeal was usually not based on materialist discourse. A moving example is a 1932 poem entitled "Stop Fooling' Wit' Pray," published in the *Liberator* (1932):

*Sistern an' Brethern,
 Stop foolin wit' pray;
 When black face is lifted
 Lawd turnin' 'way.*

*Heart filled wit' sadness,
 Head bowed down wit' woe;
 In the hour of trouble
 Where's a black man to go?*

*We're buryin' a brother,
 They kill for the crime
 Tryin' to keep
 What was his all the time. . . .*

Challenges to religious beliefs frequently surfaced in per-

sonal conversations and arguments within the party. Such challenges did not only come from white Communists; they were common among some leading blacks. What Hosea Hudson's recollections reveal is that attacks on religion often had little bearing on politics or theory. He was rebuked by comments such as "Ain't no God. . . . Nobody ever seen God. How you know it's a God?" When he cited the Bible as his witness, he recalled a common retort was, "The white man wrote the Bible" (Hudson, 1986b; Painter, 1979, 134-135). In other words, black Communists who questioned the viability of religion had concerns kindred to a good portion of working-class blacks throughout the United States. Therefore, we cannot assume that the party experience itself was the sole reason for "atheism" practiced by a small minority of Communists in Alabama. On the contrary, it is likely that blacks who questioned the existence of an omnipresent God or were simply fed up with clerical corruption, were drawn to the party *because* of its scathing critique of the church.

The Afro-American tradition of Christianity does not fully explain what attracted these individuals to the party in the first place. Why had they not formed their own organization? Why did they risk their lives to join a party so hated and repressed by local police, industrialists and landlords? While the party's program was surely appealing to the black working class, it alone cannot explain what initially drew them to the Communists. Evidence leads me to suggest that a black folk interpretation of history played a supplemental role in attracting some blacks to the party. Afro-Americans throughout the South had their own oral tradition of Reconstruction and the role of the so-called "carpet-baggers" in the struggle for a democratic South. There was a general folk belief that the "Yankees" would return in order to complete the Reconstruction. Many believed that another Civil War would be waged in the South (see also Naison, 1973, 55). When the party began to organize in Birmingham, Hosea Hudson (1986b) observed:

The Negro began to look. Something's gonna happen now. Man, them folks in the North, them folks in New York, in Russia. We thought we was looking to have a war in the South. And when the organizers of the Party came in there representing what these organizations what the Negro been reading about in the paper and the Governor getting letters

about them, this is what brought the Negroes into the organization. . . . They thought the North was coming back and they was going to have another war.

When Angelo Herndon was first discovered by the Communists in Birmingham, he experienced a similar realization. "Conditions were so bad," he wrote, "that many people believed that the only way they could ever get better was to start a new war. As I read the handbill I very naively was under the impression that the Unemployed Council was calling all Negro and white workers to a new war" (Herndon, 1937, 73).

It seems as though the central difference between this "new war" and the folklore of the Civil War and Reconstruction was that the former took on an international dimension. The Russians became the "new Yankees," and for some, Stalin became the new "Lincoln." The Soviet Union was perceived as a powerful element fighting on behalf of black folks. Southern propaganda which portrayed the Communists as being "Soviet agents" often worked to the party's advantage in the black community. With the collapse of biracial unionism in Birmingham in the twentieth century,⁶ and the failure of black middle-class organizations to create a viable and effective movement, a large portion of the black working class had little confidence in their ability to initiate and sustain a movement without outside assistance. Out-numbered and outgunned, thousands chose migration over militant organization, which many saw as potentially suicidal. But the idea of Soviet and Northern radical support provided a degree of psychological confidence for those blacks intending to wage the long-awaited revolution in the South. A black woman from Orrville, Alabama saw the party as an underground movement organized and led by Northern radicals. "We need some help in pushing this movement here. We will keep all your orders secret.

6 Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United Mine Workers established a tradition of interracial unionism in the coal fields of Alabama. After a series of unsuccessful strikes, the UMWA began to decline after 1906. As long as it was a dominant factor in the Birmingham Trades Council and the Alabama State Federation of Labor, these labor bodies respected, to a certain extent, the rights of black labor. With the decline of the UMWA, blacks were pushed further and further from the ranks of organized labor in Alabama (Straw, 1975; Taft, 1981, 15-16, 21-24, 52-53; Worthman, 1969, 54-58).

Tell us what we must do. Let me hear from you folks up there” (*DW*, 1935b). John Garner (1984; 2-4) honestly believed that the party in Alabama was started by Soviet agents who were sent to Alabama by Stalin. Likewise, Lemon Johnson (1986) felt that without Russian support, they probably could not have organized the SCU. He also believed that all the leaflets, handbills and newspapers were actually printed in Russia.

Alabama’s Communists transformed the “framework” of the Communist Party into a radical movement which was more a reflection of their culture and world view than anything else. But the party, as an international movement based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism, also transformed Alabama’s radicals. Their indigenous world view was given form and definition through praxis and pedagogy.

When the Communists first became active in Birmingham in 1930, establishing a party school was a top priority (U.S. Congress, House, 1930b and 1930c; *SW*, 1930a; Allen, 1984, 62). But Tom Johnson, the district organizer for Alabama, realized from the beginning that black southerners were not well suited for a “workers’ school” in the traditional sense. In a letter to the party’s Agitational Propaganda Department, he pointed out that Alabama’s predominantly black membership

are not old sympathizers of the party who have been on the fringe of the movement for some time and have absorbed some of our theory and philosophy. They are raw green workers, with a much lower educational standard than northern workers. Many are illiterate. They have not the slightest idea when they come into the party of how the party operates. (U.S. Congress, House, 1930a: 106–107.)

Since illiteracy was a problem, Alabama’s Communists made it the responsibility of literate members to teach others how to read (*DW*, 1935a; Hudson, 1986b).⁷ While being used as literacy tools, the *Southern Worker*, the *Daily Worker* and the *Liberator*

7 The illiteracy rate for blacks in Alabama was extremely high. In 1930, 26.2% of the state’s black population could not read or write. In the black belt it was much higher, as high as 42.2% in Greene County, 35.0% in Lowndes County and 32.9% in Lee County. But those who were semi-literate with only a few years of formal education made up the bulk of the working class. In 1940 it was reported that only 7.5% of the black population in the state

were central to their radicalization. Articles provided relevant information about the world that could not be found in the mainstream press. This was attractive to blacks who had an interest in Africa and other places where people of color were engaged in similar struggles. To Charles Smith (1986), a member of the SCU in Lowndes County, the *Southern Worker* “had some either direct or indirect bearing on the conditions we found ourselves in. The white power structure had somehow gotten themselves planted in these several African countries and they was taking it over. In some cases they take the lands from these black folks, just like here.”

Communist support for self-determination in the black belt was actually a factor, although a minor one, in attracting Afro-Americans. When the *Liberator*, the newspaper of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, was distributed in Alabama, it was usually the most sought after reading material among blacks. The *Liberator* dealt directly with self-determination and issues affecting blacks throughout the world (Hudson, 1986b; Murphy, 1933, 81). Whether or not they believed that self-determination in the black belt could actually be achieved, the idea that they shared a common identity appealed to them. Black Communists and people in the mass organizations saw things in terms of color *and* class. Frequently, black Communist rhetoric in the South was hardly distinguishable from the literary expressions of Garveyism. In 1931 for instance, a black Communist from Birmingham wrote, “Every chance is used to keep the black man in his ‘place.’ Let a Negro raise his voice. Let him resent a kick in the shins, let a black man stand up straight — he’ll be kept put. Get a rope, hang him, burn him, get a gang and beat him to a raw steak in a pool of blood” (*SW*, 1931e).

Circulation of the party press, in actual numbers, was never great. But subscriptions and individual sales were not a true reflection of its readership. In Alabama, people simply could not afford to buy the paper, so “every copy is handed around until it is worn out” (*DW*, 1934i). James Allen, the founding editor of the *Southern Worker*, recalled that in the black community, “a single

attended high school, over 50% having less than four years of schooling (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1935, 236; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1943, 223).

copy would often serve an entire block, to be passed from hand to hand or read aloud to a group" (Allen, 1984, 56). Furthermore, because of "criminal anarchy" laws and seditious literature ordinances, possession of Communist publications often could lead to a six-month jail sentence and a heavy fine.⁸ In the black belt, distribution was particularly problematic. A member of the SCU Executive Committee wrote to the *Daily Worker* (1933b), "It is not easy for us to get the *Daily Worker*, but we sneak it in our cabins. One copy goes from one man to his neighbor. We hide it anywhere we think is safe."⁹

The party press was only a portion of the literature Alabama's Communists distributed and read. Irrespective of one's level of literacy, study groups were formed where they read works in pamphlet form, ranging from James S. Allen's *Negro Liberation*, Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*, to Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*. By the middle of 1934, the Bessemer section of the party decided to devote one half-hour of each meeting to study — fifteen minutes of reading and fifteen minutes devoted to discussing and studying the works they read. The ore mine units in Bessemer were reading Earl Browder's "Report to the Eighth National Convention," as well as *The Communist Manifesto*. There were about five to nine workers in each study group (Hudson, 1986; *DW*, 1934k).

A few Communists from Alabama were occasionally given the opportunity to study at the Workers' School in New York, or in some cases, at the Lenin School in Moscow. Hosea Hudson, who was himself illiterate at the time, had a real interest in obtaining an education. He and two other Communists hoboed all the way to New York in the dead of winter to attend a ten-

8 The Birmingham Criminal Anarchy Ordinance, passed in June 1930, carried a penalty of six months in jail plus a fine of \$180 (City of Birmingham, 1930, 243). In 1934 in Birmingham and Bessemer, seditious literature ordinances were passed, making it unlawful to possess one or more pieces of "Communist" literature. The definition included liberal publications such as the *Nation* and the *New Republic*. Possession of such literature could lead to six months in jail and/or a \$100 fine (Conroy, 1935, 9; McHenry, 1934, 9, 20; Birmingham *Post*, 1934; *DW*, 1934h).

9 Papers were usually hidden in a barn or a hollow tree to be picked up later by local Communists or SCU activists (Allen, 1984, 56; L. Johnson, 1986; C. Johnson, 1986). This practice was still common during World War II (North, 1958, 192).

week training school. Hudson left New York with what he considered a clearer understanding of capitalism and a sharper theoretical perspective. This increased his confidence as a party organizer. As he put it, "I felt like I'm somebody. . . . I'm talking about political economy, about the society itself, how it automatically would breed war and fascism. I'm discussing about the danger of imperialist war" (Painter, 1979, 224).¹⁰

Regardless of how much one learned at party school, the trip itself made a substantial impact on the lives of blacks, many of whom had never been outside of the rural South. Between 1932–1934, at least five black Alabamans traveled to the Soviet Union to study at the Lenin School (Howell, 1932; C. Johnson, 1986; Hudson, 1986b; Painter, 1979, 115, 124). Even when traveling did not involve education in a direct sort of way, it still greatly impacted the lives of black Communists. Capitola Tasker and her husband, James Tasker, started out as poor sharecroppers in Montgomery County. Soon after joining the party, Capitola suddenly found herself in Paris, France addressing the Women's International Congress Against War and Fascism on behalf of the Women's Auxiliary of the SCU (*DW*, 1934j; Bloor, 1940, 256).¹¹ Afterward she described to renowned Communist leader, "Mother" Ella Bloor, her impressions of the trip and the conference:

Mother, when I get back to Alabama and go out to that cotton patch of our little old shack, I'll stand there thinking to myself, "Capitola, did you really go over there to Paris and see all those wonderful women and hear all those great talks, or was it just a dream that you were over there?" And if it turns out that it really wasn't a dream, why Mother, I'm just going to broadcast all over Alabama all that I've learned over here, and tell them how women from all over the world are fighting to stop the kind of terror we have in the South, and to stop war (Bloor, 1940, 256; also quoted in Davis, 1981, 158).

10 In 1932, a white district leader remarked that the Workers' School had an adverse affect on black southern Communists. "It does look like the Negro comrades who went north develop some kind of idea that they know something more now and don't need to be down here where so many backward workers are" (Draper Papers, 1932, 4-5).

11 The *Daily Worker* has her listed as "Equile McKeithen," undoubtedly to protect her identity.

Through a real grass-roots pedagogy, many of Alabama's Communists were able to obtain a basic understanding of Marxism. The Party's leadership, during this period, never tried to "fool" its supporters into believing that it was anything else but a radical organization. Nor were black Communists reluctant to introduce non-party working people to a whole new world of Marxist theory. Even the barber shop became a forum for Alabama's cadre of black Communists. As Hosea Hudson (1986b) recalls,

I'd be discussing socialism in the barber shop We'd start the conversation off, then we'd talk about socialism, and how the workers conditions would be improved under socialism. That barber shop, boy, I had a lot of contacts. They'd sit down there . . . wouldn't interrupt what I'm saying. They wanted to see what I had to tell.

The combination of praxis, theory, and a pre-existing "radical" world view, created an outlook which incorporated a clearer critique of capitalism, an inchoate vision of a new world and new economic system to replace the old, and for some, advocacy of militant class struggle. Through letters to the *Daily Worker*, Alabama's black militants exhibited a somewhat clearer understanding of class distinctions and capitalism as a system. Viola Cobb, the wife of Ned Cobb, revealed a keen understanding of the problems of "New Deal" capitalism. In a letter published in the *Daily Worker* (1934a) thanking the ILD for sending money to her incarcerated husband, she described the present situation as she understood it:

The government say that it is doing everything it can to help the poor people but the landlords gets all the profits for they rents the land at top prices and then draw the government money. And the storekeepers sell their stuff at double price and at that rate the government won't have to help us long because we all will be perished and froze to death.

Alabama's Communists were convinced that black sharecroppers and workers could never improve their conditions merely through a change of conscience on the part of "good white people." Rather, they viewed change as a struggle for power — a struggle which they believed the Communist Party was capable of leading. The Communists experienced enough

repression and violence to recognize the importance of force as a factor in transforming society. John Garner, a devout Christian and devout Communist, did not minimize the importance of force. He explained that any oppressed people must free themselves by force. "You can't set still and let it go on forever. And you might call it rebellion. But you got to punch your way out. . ." (Garner, 1984, 4). Similarly, a Communist from Dadeville, Alabama, wrote, "I hope to see the day, when we all get together and fight, so we workers will be strong enough to take the land, have plenty of bread and clothing and all. Let the damn bosses know what we really mean" (*DW*, 1934c).

Fighting oppression and what was perceived as "fascism" in *Alabama* was the "good fight" for Afro-American militants. Alabama's black militants very often took the position that even minor campaigns had long-term significance for revolutionary change. A group of black Birmingham workers, organized by the Communists to protest the state anti-sedition bill, passed a resolution warning the Governor that if the bill became law, "you are [going] to start a Revelushon up on ya Bosses. [W]e will not stand for more fasices terror. . ." (Gov. Graves papers, 1935a). A black woman from Dadeville who had organized a group of unemployed women in 1931 in an attempt to obtain relief from the local welfare office, was convinced that militant, mass struggles were the only means for achieving even the most basic demands. "Comrades," she wrote, "all I see now is mass action, and go to them just like you would fight fire, and let them know we are humanity just like them. Let them know we are organizing the masses in such a way as to smash this dirty, lowdown Southern ruling class" (*DW*, 1934d).

Smashing the "lowdown Southern ruling class" was only part of the chore which lay ahead. Capitalism had to be replaced with some form of economic "justice." A black Communist from Tallapoosa County wrote, "[W]e cannot make it without a change. The capitalists have everything clenched in their hands and we must fight to weaken their tight grip and then we can eat and wear as the ruling class does. . . . We must organize into stronger masses and demand the bosses to give us what we want" (*DW*, 1934b).

While the party's Marxist-Leninist understanding of the world partially contributed to the formation of a radical con-

sciousness, the combination of black and white Southern cultural mediums and socialist ideology influenced the party's culture. The development of a radical folk music tradition combined with Communist activity in the South had its roots in the North Carolina textile strikes and the Kentucky coal miners' struggles of the early 1930s. Ella May Wiggins, a young white textile worker who was felled by a bullet during the Gastonia textile strike, "Aunt" Molly Jackson and Florence Reece, natives of Kentucky who were active in the National Miners Union, left a wealth of radical folk songs, blues and spirituals describing and praising the activities of the Communists and the ILD in the South (Greenway, 1971, 245-275; Denisoff, 1971, 19-26; Larkin, 1929, 3-4; Reece, 1972, 23-24; Hevener, 1978, 61, 67-68).

By the early 1930s, the Communists "discovered" a revolutionary tradition in Afro-American music. Spirituals were treated by Communist cultural theoreticians as the most basic and class-conscious genre of protest in black music (Frank, 1929, 28-29; Gellert, 1930, 10-11; Denisoff, 1971, 37; Gellert and Siegmeister, 1936). The "revolutionary spirit" of black religious music was recognized in Alabama as well. During the ore miners' strike of 1934, the Communist-led Unemployed Local of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Bessemer staged a show in order to raise enough money to send a delegate to the union's national convention. Black women provided the singing, consisting mainly of spirituals and gospel hymns, "which express the deep revolutionary spirit of an oppressed people" (*DW*, 1934).

Perhaps the most commonly used spiritual was the ever so popular "Give Me That Old Time Religion." The verse was changed to "Give Me That Old Communist Spirit," and party members closed out each stanza with "It was good enough for Lenin, and it's good enough for me." Closer to home, Ralph Gray, the first SCU martyr, replaced Lenin in the final line of the phrase (*DW*, 1934e, 1935c; *SW*, 1936a; *SFL*, 1936a, 1936b).¹² This same melody was also transformed into "The Scottsboro Song":

12 As early as 1932, the same song was sung by black Communists in Chicago, but their version was slightly different, referring to the "New Communist Spirit" (*DW*, 1932; Denisoff, 1971, 37).

*The Scottsboro verdict,
The Scottsboro verdict,
The Scottsboro verdict,
Is not good enuf for me.*

*Its good for big fat bosses,
For workers double-crossers,
For low down slaves and hosses.
But it ain't good enough for me. . .
(SW, 1931g.)*

“A Stone Came Rolling Out of Babylon,” a classic black gospel song, went on to become the “official” ILD song in the South. Renamed “We Got a Stone,” the words were written by a black woman in Birmingham. The chorus was changed to “Come a-rollin’ through Dixie/ Come a-rollin’ through Dixie/ A-tearing down the Kingdom of the boss.” The verses referred to the militant example of the ILD and the role of workers in the class struggle (*DW*, 1933a; Denisoff, 1971, 37; Preece, 1938, 14).¹³

Some gospel songs to which words were adapted subsequently became popular songs of the civil rights movement. “We Shall Not Be Moved” was one of those songs. Known as the “theme song” of the SCU, it was renamed “Alabama” by Party members in the black belt. The song actually remained the same, with the exception of the first line of each verse. “I’m on my way to glory” was replaced by phrases such as “We’re from Alabama,” “We fight against evictions,” and “We fight against terror.” Each verse concluded exactly like the original: “Just like a tree that’s planted by water/ We shall not be moved” (*Johnson Papers*, 1936; *Labor Defender*, 1936, 80).

The blues were treated as an efficacious example of resistance. Although it is really not clear, it appears that readers of the *Southern Worker* and party members sent in transcriptions of blues they may have heard or wrote themselves.¹⁴ One of the earliest editions of the *Southern Worker* (1930b) carried a piece entitled, “Autumn Blues”:

13 The song apparently was also called “My Mother’s Got a Stone That Was Hewn Out of a Mountain.”

14 One scholar of black culture and American Communism has argued that the party never approved of “the rural expression of exploitation, the blues. . .” This was certainly not the case in the South (Simama, 1978, 44).

*The 'baccar ain't a sellin'
The corn is dryin' up,
There ain't a bit of tellin'
Where the army worms will sup.*

*The weevil eats the cotton,
The beetle eats the beans,
Do you think it's any wonder,
There's nothing in my jeans?*

The blues were also utilized to describe the conditions of industrial workers in the urban areas, especially Birmingham. A woman who labored as a bedspread maker provided the *Southern Worker* (1936b) with just such a melodic expression entitled "The Bedspread Blues":

*Work from early morning
Until ten at night;
All the dishes dirty;
Kitchen in a sight;
Landlord comes a-knocking
Says he wants his rent,
All that I can tell him
Haven't got a cent.
I've got the blues;
I've got the blues,
The tufted bedspread blues. . .*

"Autumn Blues" and "The Bedspread Blues" mirror the traditional style of black musical expression in their description of real conditions. There were other songs which paralleled the party's notion of class struggle much more directly. Authored by "A Comrade," the song "Money Gettin' Small" (SW, 1930c) exemplifies the radicalism characteristic of the Communist Party in Alabama:

*Greenbacks are gettin' smaller,
Times is gettin' harder;
If there ain't no change we'll be a
horse
Eatin' corn an fodder.*

*The bosses have all the money
They shut down on us tight,
If they don't turn the money loose,
We'll whack them out of sight.*

Despite these examples, the development of a radical cultural movement in the South was not stressed by party leadership during this period. The day-to-day frustrations of organizing an underground movement in the face of repression dominated the work of the party. Nevertheless, these songs are representative of a radical consciousness, articulated through media common to Alabama's working people.

Our brief investigation of Afro-American thought and the Communist experience in Alabama is but a tiny example of the complex relationship between left-wing radicalism and black urban and rural working people. What this small group of black Alabama radicals represents is the confrontation and combining of two different traditions. A handful of working-class blacks from Birmingham and the black belt joined and/or supported an organization whose purported principles were based on Marxism-Leninism and "proletarian internationalism." But when one looks at the social character of the party's recruits, the majority of black Communists were semi-literate, devout Christians. They saw within the party a venue for improving their day-to-day conditions in the short run, and possibly an essential element in achieving some form of "deliverance" in the long run. Although the party's interpretation of Marxism added to that which already characterized the Afro-American working-class experience, blacks in turn transformed the party into an institution which mirrored their own culture and ideology. In short, the dynamic of an overwhelmingly black, working-class Communist Party in the deep South, rooted in the cultural traditions of the Afro-American South, gave rise to complex ideological constructions which defy simple categorization. For Alabama's black Communists, the party meant much more than jobs, relief and freedom for the Scottsboro Boys.

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Abbreviations:

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