

‘May First and the Revolutionary Traditions of the Negro Masses’

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IMPERIALISM attempts to justify its vicious and murderous oppression of the Negro masses by advancing the myth of white superiority. Stripped of its pseudo-scientific trappings (obligingly supplied by prostitute bourgeois science) the theory of white superiority boils down to the ridiculous conclusion that since the Negro has been enslaved by the white master class, and is today even after his so-called emancipation still ruthlessly exploited and brutally oppressed by the white imperialists, the Negro is per se inferior. “White men would never submit to such treatment as the Negroes accept,” “white men would long ago have revolted,” “the Negro is innately servile,” etc., are some of the specious arguments advanced by the imperialist exponents of white superiority to “prove” their point. They seek to prove that the Negro has never played “a leading role upon the stage of history,” that his “immemorial” character and role have been backward and subordinate, respectively.

In support of the imperialist position, the utmost care is taken by bourgeois historians to consistently present the picture of the Negro as a slave, satisfied with his slave status and incapable of revolt. A conspiracy of silence is maintained on the role played by the Negro in ancient society, his dominance in Egypt, the Songhai, Ethiopia, etc.

The conspiracy of silence extends to the revolutionary traditions of the race in modern historical times.

There is no better occasion than May Day, replete with its traditions of revolutionary workers of all races and all parts of the world, to make a brief survey of some of the revolutionary traditions of the Negro masses.

To the Negro masses belongs the undying glory of staging the first and only successful unaided slave revolt in all history—the Haitian revolution, which affords the only instance of a slave uprising succeeding without outside aid. By itself, the Haitian revolution would be sufficient to smashingly refute the nonsense of Negro servility and incapacity for militant struggle against oppression. Not only did the heroic Negro slaves of Haiti give to the world the only recorded example of a people, weakened and degraded by chattel slavery, successfully tearing off its fetters, but these same slaves had no sooner accounted for their owners and oppressors than they were called upon to face the gathering might of the three greatest imperialist powers of the time. The Negroes met and conquered the flower of Napoleon’s armies long before the imperialist vulture met defeat at the hands of rival imperialists. These same Negroes destroyed

several Spanish armies sent against them and defeated a British army which, in characteristic imperialist manner, tried to take advantage of the confusion in the island to conquer Haiti for British imperialism. Toussaint L'Ouverture, Christophe, Dessalines, Francois were some of the revolutionary leaders of the Haitian revolution.

The history of the Negro in the United States is also rich in revolutionary tradition. The slave regime was more than once terror-stricken at the attempts of black men to break their chains. Three of the most daring and audacious of these attempts were those led by Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey.

The plans of Gabriel were most formidable and but for a terrific storm on the day appointed for mobilization must have succeeded in their immediate objectives at least. The storm forced postponement, and with bridges washed away and roads inundated it was impossible for more than a few hundred to assemble at the point of rendezvous. And before Gabriel and his lieutenants could recognize their plans they were betrayed. Even in defeat, however, these daring Negro revolutionaries left traditions of which the Negro masses can well be proud. "Like almost all leaders of slave insurrections, they showed a courage which their enemies could not gainsay." (T. W. Higginson's "Travellers and Outlaws."). In facing his judges, Gabriel minced no words. So stern and bitter was his indictment of chattel slavery that the authorities "found it good policy to omit his statement" from the records. John Scott, Jack Bowler, Solomon Prosser (Gabriel's brother) were some of his able lieutenants.

Denmark Vesey's plans for revolt in South Carolina were also thwarted by betrayal. A slave who was a class leader in a Methodist church gave information against the conspirators. However, the newspapers of that day agreed that "in boldness of conception and thoroughness of preparation there has been nothing to compare with it." The leaders were arrested. Thirty-five were executed. All met death bravely. The outstanding leaders were Denmark Vesey, Peter Poyas, his chief lieutenant, Jack Purcell, Tom Russell, Poydoe Faber, Bacchus Hammett, William Garner, Mingo Harth, Lot Forrester, Ned Bennett.

The judge's remarks in sentencing these revolutionaries fully exposed the role played by religion in the slave system. Rising to heights of "righteous indignation" this instrument of the slave system thundered at the men he had condemned to death for the crime of seeking to free themselves and their fellow slaves from the inhuman system of chattel slavery:

"Are you incapable of the heavenly influence of that gospel, all whose paths are peace? It was to reconcile us to our destiny on earth, and to enable us to discharge with fidelity all duties, whether as master or servant (slave) that those inspired precepts were imparted by Heaven to fallen man."

In Virginia, in 1831, the slave insurrection led by Nat Turner progressed to an openly revolutionary stage with the daring Nat Turner taking the offensive with six men.

Turner's strategy consisted of a swift attack on the slave-owners and the securing of recruits from each plantation they came to. This plan was imminently successful at the start, and Turner soon had a troop of sixty determined men. With these he defeated two forces of white planters as the latter rallied against the insurrections. In the end, however, he was defeated because of lack of sufficient mobility and failure to reach the town of Jerusalem where he could have rallied hundreds of Negroes and obtained arms for his force.

In the West Indies and in South America there exists to this day the memory of name of terror to the white imperialists. "Maroons" was the name given to the escaped slaves who had banded together in the mountains of Jamaica, where for years they successfully defied the British and were, in fact, never conquered, in spite of many attempts by British governors of Jamaica. The name also applied to the escaped slaves who took refuge in the swamps and forests of Surinam (Dutch Guiana) where they resisted all attempts of the mercenary troops of Holland to re-enslave them.

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