

## Red International and Black Caribbean

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Communists in New York City,  
Mexico and the West Indies, 1919–1939

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# Introduction

A truth little known and even less understood is that black workers in the West Indies were critical to the historical development of Communism between World War I and World War II. This revolutionary praxis was not a provincial phenomenon; rather, Communists and black workers in the Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanophone Caribbean as well as in New York City and Mexico were collectively implicated in an eruption of progressive forces whose magnitude was manifested at local, hemispheric and indeed global levels. Several points must be made plain. First, the anti-racist legacy of Communism cannot be fully assessed without examining the struggles of black workers in the colonial outposts of empire. Second, it is incumbent upon scholars of twentieth-century black radicalism not to offer revisionist paradigms—i.e. paradigms that retroactively obscure or even worse, erase, the Communist organizations which often anchored the fight for freedom from racist oppression in which so many black working people were historically engaged.

*Red International and Black Caribbean* brings coherence to an under-acknowledged network of organizations, individuals and Communist parties between 1919 and 1939, referred to herein as the “interwar period,” that were headquartered in New York City and Mexico as well as in certain parts of the British West Indies, Haiti and the Afro-Latin Caribbean islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico. I refer to this geopolitical space as the “Black Caribbean.” Mexico’s thematic function in the book is unique yet indispensable, precisely because of its position as the first people-of-color Communist hub in the hemisphere; as such, this renders it a critical force—at times an anchor and at times as a counterweight—to the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) for experimenting with Communist praxis in largely peasant-based and non-white spaces. In so doing, this book describes the inner workings of one aspect of a revolutionary global political network that emerged in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution under a Moscow-based umbrella called the Third International, or the Communist International (Comintern), designated at times herein as the “Red International.”

What follows is an organization-based history. A collection of roughly one dozen groupings—five of them Communist parties and six of them radical Communist-led organizations—form the thematic core of this investigation. The CPUSA, based in New York City, operated in tandem with the Communist parties then operating in Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Haiti as well as with Comintern affiliate organizations in the British West Indies. While we are careful not to occlude the role of European-based Communist parties in the trajectory of radicalism for black workers in the Caribbean, we make a case for the fact that the CPUSA played a critical role in the activities of Communist parties in Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Haiti as well as non-Communist organizations in the British West Indies. Not only did Communist parties lead black workers in the Caribbean but in turn, black workers' uprisings and struggle in the Caribbean pushed Communists and their vision of world revolution to the left.

In addition to examining actual Communist parties in the region, we look at Communist-led "front" organizations that were designed to extend Communist political influence beyond the relatively small spheres of individual parties and into the larger mass of workers in the regions under question. As such, the Anti-Imperialist League (AIL), International Labor Defense (ILD), American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC), League of Struggle of Negro Rights (LSNR), International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) and the National Negro Congress (NNC) were all organizations that were deliberately created to carry out the political strategy of the Communist International at different points in the years from 1925 to 1939. Each of these organizations had some kind of outpost or headquarters in New York City—either in lower Manhattan or uptown in Harlem. Taken together, these organizations offer historians and political theorists a new vantage point from which to assess not only Communist praxis but also the radicalism of black workers across the region.

Newspaper history is inseparable from this focus on organizations in the Comintern network, rather than an issue to be treated in a different study. The reason is simple: a century ago, and really up until the past decade, many organizations promoted their ideas, described their actions, and debated important political strategies by way of newspapers which were the optimal mechanism for communication of the written word to large numbers of people. The various newspapers are not only an important object or medium of expression for the organizations, but they are also an archive for Communist history in the same way that surveillance reports from the US State Department are archives. In this way, this book offers an extremely close reading of leading presses published by Communists and also newspapers and writings from black radicals in the network of Communist organization though not directly within the International itself. The emphasis on newspapers outside of western

metropolises alongside an analysis of largely New York-based newspapers allows for a fuller analysis of this newspaper history and its role in black anti-colonialism and anti-racism in the interwar period. This focus on newspapers complements our emphasis on organizations and parties, and illuminates the Communist history as praxis, and the role of black working-class struggle also as a constant interplay between emancipatory ideas and militant action.

The primary contradiction with which this work is preoccupied is the following: the medium through which Communists collectively organized between World War I and World War II, the Comintern, reinscribed rather than overturned several of the weaknesses embedded in the capitalist oppression that it was dedicated to challenging. First, it created individual, distinct national parties that would, in turn, act as a coalition, under the direction of the Soviet Union, as a means of forging international classless society. And while such a mobilization opened the door to hitherto nonexistent opportunities for coordinated, systematic efforts toward fighting racism, colonialism and fascism, each of these parties and even the Soviet Union was to some degree bound within the limitations of a nation-state social construct that negated elements of this emancipatory project. Second, the Comintern created individual organizations, committees and bureaus for addressing what it termed the “colonial” and “Negro” questions, rather than threading the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles into the fabric of every aspect of the world socialist project. In other words, the fight to liberate people of color around the world from racism and colonialism became a subsidiary—though always significant—struggle within the Communist movement rather than the fundamental basis for uniting all oppressed peoples. Examination of the years from 1919 to 1939 in the region in question points toward the tremendous pioneering efforts in social, political and economic empowerment for black workers in this Communist matrix; at the same time, this book reveals that the Comintern in significant ways succumbed to elements of the very racism and national chauvinism that it in so many ways had weakened.

*Red International and Black Caribbean* places black workers in the Caribbean at the center of a narrative about Communism—and this alone is significant. But this work also makes four major interventions in historical methodology in general and Communist and black radical history in particular that must be highlighted. First, it refutes the revisionist tendency to theorize twentieth-century black radicalism as a “tradition” of “great men” which ultimately dismisses the role of black workers as a class and also the collective organizations through which they mobilized forces and grew in consciousness—often alongside non-black comrades. Second, while it is true that western metropolises such as Paris, London, Hamburg and New York City were operational hubs for Communist engagement with anti-racism and anti-colonial internationalism, this story places emphasis instead on the fluid interplay of radicalism between

these metropolises and colonized and semi-colonized epicenters in Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, British Guiana and Mexico that contributed to the total force of the Communist International. Third, this narrative complicates the tendency to posit a false dichotomy between Communism and Garveyism with respect to black radical workers. In short, the Garvey movement, under the Jamaican pioneering black internationalist Marcus Garvey's leadership, was politically opposed to many of the critical tenets of workers' power that the Communists put forward from the post-World War I days of the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) through the labor struggles of the 1930s. At the same time, however, when examining the lived experiences of many black radical workers, it becomes evident that from the Caribbean vantage point, they often straddled between and within these organizational poles rather than being anchored solely at one end or the other. Finally, this project is cautious not to join the seemingly hegemonic tendency toward anti-Stalinist rhetoric in academic works and attempts a more even-handed, objective approach to the Soviet Union and to Moscow-based Comintern leadership.

Ultimately, the spatio-temporal shift to the "Black Caribbean" in this book casts the entire political trajectory of global Communist periodization from 1919 to 1939 in a new light, illuminating it with developments in the Caribbean, Mexico and Harlem. That is: some of the first "bolshevization" campaigns took place among Mexican peasants in Vera Cruz; the sharpest class-against-class tensions of the "Third Period" were manifest in Scottsboro campaigns in Haiti; the most grassroots and radical "Popular Front" sit-down strikes of the late 1930s were arguably in sugar plantations in Barbados, and some of the fiercest displays of fascist genocide in the world first took place at the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Using the lens of this hemispheric space allows us to see Communist interwar history through a richer and more complex set of practices and contradictions. Moreover, shifting our emphasis away from the West and onto this space allows us to reconceive the general "red line" of history in a healthier, more objective—because it is more anti-racist—manner.

Indeed, tracing this "red line" takes us past, or prior to, October 1917. How might we begin to draw parallels between the nineteenth-century African Djuka maroons of Dutch Guiana, or the Kromanti maroons of Jamaica, and the Bolsheviks in Russia after World War I? Just as the former peoples had to forge treaties and make compromises with their colonial slave masters as a means of winning peace and developing their own societies absent of racist chattel slavery, so too did the new Union have to strike deals with western imperialists as it developed its internal capacity for socialism. The hemispheric lens of this project, therefore, opens up an abundance of ways to understand the contradictions of revolution and freedom that have been born of class struggle in the immediate and distant past that we often refer to blankly as "modernity."

The roughly one dozen political organizations that form the core of this



study are plotted thematically on a spatio-temporal axis. That is, specific Communist organizations and parties are featured in relevant chapters, and these organizations are the anchoring mechanism for the narrative in each chapter. In turn, the chapters are defined chronologically by major historical conjunctures during the 1919–39 interwar period of global Communist activity. The term “periodization” is applied to the ways in which Communist history is commonly marked by strategic shifts in the Comintern’s orientation toward global working-class struggle, ensuing fascism and socialist transition. Since Communist mass organizations rose and fell according to these strategic shifts in political organization, their presence in the book is necessarily determined by the periods in which they were formed and liquidated by the Comintern. While this book does not seek to reconfigure or shift the common-held periodization of Communist praxis in the period from 1919 to 1939, it does suggest that shifts in political strategy were often in response to rather than in anticipation of working-class resistance to imperialism and racist exploitation in regions like the Caribbean. In other words, radical workers at the periphery of empire often pushed the Communist movement into a more radical direction—and not just the reverse.

Coupled with the chronological demarcations are a series of geographic shifts in emphasis within the Caribbean-US-Mexican space. Emphasis is placed upon which organizations and parties appear to have been most sharply engaged in questions such as peasant-based uprising, anti-racist campaigns, anti-American imperialist movements, and labor organizing in specific places. In this way, the tracing of anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles, and the “red line” of history, are themselves unevenly mapped through time and space. Take Haiti as an example. Chapter 3 reveals how class struggle in Haiti in 1929 makes it a vanguard locale for shaping Communist anti-racist activity across the United States. But in 1937, as the final chapter reveals, Haiti re-emerges when the fascist attacks on Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic make this same island the forefront of Communist political retreat.

The book is divided into three sections that help bring coherence to the political networks operating across the US, Mexico and the Caribbean. Part I “Bolshevism in Caribbean Context” consists of three chapters; it extends from 1919 to 1929 and focuses primarily on the ways that radical black workers in the West Indies played an important role in the formation of Communism in the United States. Chapter 1 uncovers the impact of labor struggles emanating from the Caribbean which informed the growth of the African Blood Brotherhood as well as “New Negro” newspapers such as *Emancipator* and *Crusader*. This post-war process presents one critical aspect of the geopolitical genesis of Communism’s intersection with black workers’ resistance in the hemisphere.

Insofar as the Communist Party of Mexico is formed at roughly the same time as its US counterpart, Chapter 2 is organized around the work of the

Communist Party of Mexico, WP, All-American Anti-Imperialist League, and these groups' relationships with Mexican peasants and Latino workers in Cuba and Puerto Rico. This aspect of the hemispheric Bolshevism has a dialectical interplay with US-based Communism and partially informs the spread of Communist parties several years later in Haiti. Chapter 3 places Haiti and New York City as the central geographical locales, and the focus shifts to the anti-racist praxis embodied by the workers' uprising in Haiti in 1929. The Communist mass organizations which emerged in this context, beginning in 1925, were again the Anti-Imperialist League, but also the International Labor Defense, and the American Negro Labor Congress as well as the Haiti Patriotic Union. This first segment of the book therefore introduces a cast of radical characters, some of whom become foundational members of the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles of the Communist movement during the interwar period, including: Richard Moore, Otto Huiswoud, Navares Sager, Grace Campbell, Henri Rosemund, Rose Pastor Stokes, Manuel Gomez and Wilfred Domingo.

Part II, "Two Steps Forward," not only presupposes "One Step Backward"—which will soon come—but also implies that this particular phase of interwar Communist movement, from 1930 to 1934, is indeed a representation of some of the finest work of the Comintern in advancing anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle. Chapter 4, "Scottsboro in Every Country," depicts how Cuba displaced Mexico as the hub of Communist and anti-racist praxis in the hemisphere. The US, Mexican and Cuban Communist parties as well as Anti-Imperialist League and International Labor Defense are the anchoring organizations. Chapter 5 describes the headway that Communists made among black workers in the British West Indies and Haiti during the period of Scottsboro campaign organization, but also as black radical organizations emerging out of Trinidad and British Guiana began to overtly collude with Comintern forces at the global level. The Communist Party of Haiti and the CPUSA, in addition to the International Labor Defense, League of Struggle for Negro Rights, British Guiana Labour Union and Trinidad Workingman's Associations are all critical for this understanding.

Part III, "Race, Nation and the Uneven Development of the Popular Front," traces the years from 1935 to 1939 and captures both the apparent militancy and latent potential of the intense labor uprisings across the British West Indies in the wake of the invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, and also the tragic implications of popular front collusion with non-Communist progressives in Cuba, Mexico and Puerto Rico in the same period. Chapter 6 focuses on the British West Indies and the transition from the ITUCNW to the NNC and a series of "defense leagues" based out of Harlem such as the Jamaica Defense League, as well as radical newspapers such as the *Barbados Observer*, which all become part of the popular front network of anti-racist organizations. In Chapter 7,

the Communist Party of Puerto Rico becomes critical to understanding anti-racist praxis in Spanish Harlem led by the CPUSA at the attendant internal networks of Communist collaboration between Puerto Rico, Cuba and Mexico. At the same time, this chapter introduces how the “50 per cent law” in Cuba in 1935 is at first denounced but ultimately supported by Communists and contributes to the mass deportation of Jamaican and Haitian workers back to their countries. Finally, Chapter 8 unveils the tragic flaw in the Comintern’s efforts toward fighting racism by returning to the question of Haiti during the period of Jacques Roumain’s persecution and subsequent release from jail but, with Communist parties in retreat, the massacre of over 30,000 Haitian workers with little response from Communists in the Black Caribbean matrix.

Ultimately, no one was immune to the force of Russia’s revolution, and yet, not every instance of class struggle and racial consciousness equally resulted in the creation of Communist cells of organization, much less actual Communist parties aligned with and part of the Third International. Nor can Communist growth be seen as the sole or primary litmus test in every instance for possibilities at achieving emancipation. Certainly when the Russians won in 1917, as did the Haitians in 1804, common folk suffering under the bitter lash of socio-economic exploitation identified with the new victors. Just as non-wage enslaved Africans from New Orleans to Sao Paolo looked to Haiti in the nineteenth century, wage enslaved Africans looked to Russia in the twentieth. But, as we will see in what follows, in the aftermath of World War I they also continued to look to Africa, the “fatherland,” or sometimes called the “motherland,” as they had for centuries prior. An affinity for the former did not altogether erase an ideological and felt generation-based commitment to the redemption of the latter. Hence, the political and geographical landscape for imagining emancipation was varied and vast in 1919. So the Bolshevik experiment in social transformation was relevant to anyone interested in fighting back. And this was true on the docks in Jamaica just as it was true on the soap boxes of 135<sup>th</sup> and Lennox.

By denying today’s youth around the world, and in the Western Hemisphere in particular, access to this complex, heroic, and at times tragic history, they have been prevented from engaging as proactively as possible in overturning the crumbling infrastructure that is today the late capitalist order. The youth of today have inherited membership into a working class which experiences not just the successes but just as significantly the failures of what the last century’s social movements did not achieve: unions are gone or deeply weakened; police brutality is the modern form of lynching; the drug economy has become the single most viable form of economic sustenance for poverty-stricken masses whether it be in Mexico or New Jersey; public schools in urban centers have been stripped of any meaningful enterprises; natural disasters kill countless more humans than modern technology makes admissible, while forced migration the world over has displaced more people than ever before in human history.

The progeny of the working class around the world has little understanding of or pride in their class history, origin and historical function; indeed, it has been shattered before they have learned to “like” Black Lives Matter protests on Facebook. Any youth aged 21 or younger growing up in almost any nation on the planet has had nearly their whole life subsumed by some degree of military conflict. While today’s strongest capitalist power in the world refuses to allow its judicial system to indict the vast majority of police officers engaged in the sustained and systemic murder of youth of color, Communists prevented nine young black men from Scottsboro, Alabama, from being executed in racially segregated Jim Crow courts over eighty years ago. Though time moves forward, political possibility does not always do the same.

Ultimately, the preponderance of mass bourgeois consciousness has stripped today’s youth of any sense of pride in the successes that organized class struggle achieved in the past hundred years. In the face of interminable political repression from colonial and fascist authorities, in the face of internal political weaknesses wrought in large part by national chauvinism and sustained racist thinking, in the face of being relative novices in the art of organizing along multiracial lines and seizing state power and the means of production in the name of workers’ control, Communists and radical workers before World War II fought valiantly to pioneer almost every significant social and political right that the workers of today enjoy. Yet the average young American today—or young person from any part of the world—when asked to name famous black people in history would more than likely mention Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and perhaps Barack Obama. If Haitian, the youth might prefer to name Toussaint L’Ouverture; if Jamaican, Marcus Garvey or Michael Manley; if Trinidadian, Eric Williams; if Cuban, Jose Marti or Fidel Castro. But what knowledge do any of these youth have of George Padmore, Otto Huiswoud, Richard Moore, Claudia Jones, Henri Rosemund, Rose Pastor Stokes, Wilfred Domingo, or Sandalio Junco, all of whom, as we will see, were critical in the global struggle to raise the consciousness of workers in the fight against racism and colonialism from a socialist vantage point? What is more, each of these unsung revolutionaries committed to transcending boundaries of nation—even as they fought for the right to national independence—were all in some sense part of the “red line” of history. In short, the Communist International was an experiment in social transformation that was unparalleled in humankind—positively visionary in scope and decisively heroic in action. This book is an attempt to describe one set of factors in a much larger equation which scholars and activists alike have yet to fully compute.