



claudia jones
communist



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Claudia Jones, Communist

Ella Rule, 2015

ISBN: 978-1-874613-26-8

First published in Britain by CPGB-ML, 2015

Second edition published in Britain by H Brar, 2017
Printed in India by Shakun Printers, Shahdara, Delhi-32

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Today is Mother's Day.¹ Claudia Jones too thought often of her mother. At a party given for her in New York, Claudia spoke about the early influences that pointed her in the direction of communism:

On this, my thirty-seventh birthday, I think of my mother. My mother, a machine worker in a garment factory, died when she was just the same age I am today – thirty-seven years old. I think I began then to develop an understanding of the suffering of my people and my class and to look for a way to end them.*

Right from the start, Claudia realised that what she and her family was suffering in New York was also being suffered by working-class people of every race and nationality – even if black people and women were often suffering more.

A recent issue of British stamps featured Claudia Jones, describing her as a 'civil rights activist'. Her best-known achievement is that she is considered the mother of the Notting Hill Carnival, the biggest carnival in Europe. All very respectable, but concealing the fact that, first and foremost, Claudia was a *communist*.

* Speech by Claudia Jones at the Hotel Theresa, New York, 21 February 1952.

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She became a communist at the age of eighteen. Her reason for doing so was that in the United States, where she grew up, the only political party fighting the country's institutionalised racism was the Communist Party. In particular, the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) had taken up the case of the Scottsboro boys,² nine black youths unjustly accused in 1931 of raping two white women and convicted without any serious opportunity to defend themselves by an all-white jury.*

The Communist Party took the lead in this matter, eventually being joined by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in forming the Scottsboro Defense Committee. Because of the work of this committee, five defendants were released and the four other defendants' death sentences were commuted to lengthy terms of imprisonment.

One of the two women who had allegedly been raped courageously withdrew her testimony and admitted that she had succumbed to pressure in Alabama to make false accusations – but still the US 'justice' system was incapable of declaring all the defendants to be innocent.

However, the fact that the CPUSA had mobilised to save their lives, and, in the course of the mobilisation, had also taken a stand against segregation in public services and exposed the inherent racism of the legal system, meant that it gained massive support from working-class black people. It was in this context that Claudia joined the Young Communist League (YCL) in 1934.

In a speech made to a court in February 1953, Claudia explained:

It was out of my Jim Crow³ experiences as a young Negro woman, experiences likewise born of working-class poverty, that led me to join the Young Communist League and to choose the philosophy of my life, the science of Marxism Leninism – that philosophy that not

* Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, Duke University Press, 2007.

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only rejects racist ideas, but is the antithesis of them.*

Intelligent, hard-working, committed, Claudia rose rapidly in the ranks of the YCL. According to Buzz Johnson,

The organiser of the political education classes at the time recalls that Claudia quickly grasped the scientific basis of the economic and historical theories and developed a deep interest in the theory of scientific socialism. She studied and worked hard.†

Claudia was elected to the chair of the National Council of the YCL in 1940, became education officer for New York State in 1940 and national director in the same year. She worked on the YCL's weekly newspaper, for which she wrote regularly, and in due course became its editor.

In 1945, Claudia was accepted into membership of the CPUSA, and was appointed editor for Negro affairs in the party's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*. In 1947, she was appointed executive secretary of the National Women's Commission, and in 1948 was elected to the National Committee of the CPUSA. In 1952, she was assigned to the National Peace Commission, which was leading the opposition to the Korean war,⁴ and in 1953 she became the editor of *Negro Affairs Quarterly*, a party journal.

In these various capacities, Claudia toured the US extensively to speak at meetings in all 48 states (excluding Alaska and Hawaii). She was welcomed as a powerful orator with a deep understanding of the party's policies.

Her devotion to the cause is further proved by the fact that she undertook this punishing schedule despite very poor health. Tuberculosis contracted when she was seventeen had left her with a weak heart, which frequently caused her lengthy hospitalisations.

* Trevor Carter, *Shattering Illusions*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1986.

† Buzz Johnson, 'I Think of My Mother', *Notes on the Life and Times of Claudia Jones*, Karia Press, 1985.

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She did not, however, allow herself to become an invalid, but, on the contrary, undertook a much heavier burden of work than was the norm.

During the second world war, while the US was fighting on the same side as the Soviet Union against Hitler, the Communist Party was able to build up its forces. At this time, opportunities opened up for the poorest sections of American society, including black people, in war industries and in the armed forces. Once the war was over, however, and the army demobbed, competition for jobs intensified, and it was taken for granted that black people could be dismissed to make way for unemployed white people.

The US ruling class had no compunction whatsoever in exploiting American workers' racist weaknesses to turn their anger against black workers, with frustrated whites resorting with alarming regularity to the lynching of black people, who were subjected to a reign of terror.

In these post-war conditions, communism – which was fighting tooth and nail against racism and to defend the rights of all workers to work and to decent living conditions – became an increasing threat to the US ruling class. It responded by mobilising anti-communist hysteria, using propaganda techniques undoubtedly copied from Nazi Germany.

Legislation was passed that was designed to curtail the activities of communists, and, needless to say, Claudia Jones, as one of the most active and prominent members of the CPUSA, soon found herself being prosecuted and harassed under this legislation.

The two principal acts involved were known as the Smith Act (Alien Registration Act, 1940) and the McCarran Act (Internal Security Act, 1950). The Smith Act made it illegal for any alien to engage in 'subversive activities' – ie, to advocate overthrowing the government of the US by force or violence. The McCarran Act applied to American citizens as well, requiring all Communist Party members to register with the attorney general! This was the act under which Paul

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Robeson had his passport and right to travel revoked by the US government from 1950-58.

Claudia's first arrest was on 19 January 1948, under the Smith Act. She was one of some one hundred and fifty 'aliens' that the US sought to deport at this time. She was liable to deportation because she was technically a Trinidadian, even though she had lived in the US for twenty-four of her thirty-three years and had no links whatever to Trinidad – or, indeed, to anywhere else. She was locked up in a prison on Ellis Island, within sight of the Statue of Liberty, which prompted the editor of the US *Daily Worker* to write:

The Lady with the Lamp, the Statue of Liberty, stands in New York harbour. Her back is squarely turned on the USA. It's no wonder, considering what she would have to look upon. She would weep, if she had to face this way.*

Claudia was bailed out of jail by the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born (a party-supported organisation), and the CPUSA organised for letters of protest to be sent to President Truman. Claudia refused to participate in the hearings on the ground that they were unconstitutional (the US constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech and thought), and the case was adjourned.

However, a deportation order was in the end made in June 1950, against which an appeal was immediately launched. In October 1950, with the appeal against the Smith Act deportation still pending, new proceedings were brought against her under the McCarran Act, which had newly come into effect. Undoubtedly, the principal motivation behind these new proceedings was Claudia's stance, and that of her party, against the war of aggression launched by the US and its allies against Korea in June 1950.

At her trial, held between 31 March 1952 and February 1953, Claudia was convicted and ordered to serve a year and a day in

* 23 January 1948.

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jail, and thereafter to be deported. She appealed. Of course, she lost the appeal and finally commenced serving her jail sentence in January 1955. She was extremely ill with coronary heart disease, yet was denied the salt-free diet she needed, until a court ordered she should have it or be released.

It should be noted that the CPUSA was not an illegal party. In none of the court proceedings did the prosecution admit that the real reason for the persecution of communists – especially those of foreign birth – was to reduce the Communist Party's ability to campaign against racism, against war and in favour of justice for the American poor. Instead, the alleged 'crime' was advocating the overthrow by force of the US government.

Claudia's main defence, which one assumes is the defence the CPUSA wanted her to run, was that the party did not advocate the use of violence to overthrow the US government. In fact, however, conditions were not ripe in the US for overthrowing the US government by force, so the party could not be said to have been advocating this at that time. However, at the time, the party would have adopted Khrushchevite revisionist concepts of there being a peaceful road to socialism, and, in that context, the defence was genuine.

What brought Claudia down was evidence that, in party schools, texts such as Lenin's *State and Revolution* were still studied, and it is certain that, at the time, party members would still have been arguing at such schools of the inevitability of use of force in the process of overthrowing capitalism.

The defence of the unconstitutionality of the laws under which Claudia was being tried was also brought. As one commentator said at the time of the Smith Act:

This law of ill fame is unconstitutional because it violates the first amendment by penalising the advocacy of political ideas. It runs counter to the great American tradition of free speech, which has always held that opinion and advocacy, even of revolution, are permissible in our democracy and that only overt illegal acts or direct

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incitements to such are punishable.*

This comment is equally applicable to the McCarran Act. This defence could have been followed through by pointing out that the United States was established by people who rose up in arms against the 'legitimate' government of Great Britain over the territory. Quite rightly, Claudia pointed out that she was being persecuted because

As a Negro woman, I have dared to challenge the civil rights lip-service cry of [Truman's] reactionary administration, which has yet to lift a finger to prosecute the lynchers, the Ku Klux Klan or the antisemites.

In the face of such institutionalised injustice, it was entirely within the American traditions which its constitution claimed to uphold that such an unjust regime ought to be overthrown.

In the end, despite the best efforts of the CPUSA, Claudia Jones decided on her release from jail to abandon her appeals against deportation on the understanding that she would be deported to Britain rather than to Trinidad. It must have been an important consideration that, in Britain, medical treatment was available that would not have been available in Trinidad. She boarded the *Queen Elizabeth* on 9 December 1955, amid a crowd of hundreds, who had come to bid her farewell.

Almost immediately after her arrival in Britain, Claudia was admitted to St Stephen's Hospital in London, suffering from combined hypertensive and arteriosclerotic heart disease, calcifying pleuritis and non-specific bronchitis with emphysema.

* See Corliss Lamont, *Freedom is as Freedom Does*, Horizon Press, 1956, p83.

Claudia in London

Claudia came to London with an enthusiastic endorsement of her capabilities from the Communist Party of the USA. She made contact with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and was enrolled as a member. The CPGB, however, appears to have made little use of her talents, and various people have described her relationship with the party as 'difficult'.

Claudia's biographers, Marikva Sherwood and Carole Boyce Davies, are anti-communists, whose interest in Claudia was sparked by their black nationalist sympathies. Claudia herself, although in the forefront of fighting for the interests of black people, was in no way a black nationalist. She was very clear in her proletarian class orientation. She had already spoken to the US court of her

. . . passionate idea of fighting for full unequivocal equality for my people, the Negro people, which as a communist I believe can only be achieved allied to the cause of the working class.

However, because of Claudia's heroic stance while in the US, and her outstanding achievements in Britain in initiating Carnival and mobilising in this country against racism and racist immigration laws, black nationalists cannot but be interested in her – but this is *despite* her communist affiliations, not because of them.

The black nationalist perspective is always tainted by a belief that racism is *ingrained* in white people, for which reason it is necessary for black people to organise separately *against* white people in order to promote their interests. For this reason, these biographers are anxious to stress the difficulties Claudia appears to have encountered within the CPGB and to attribute these difficulties to the race prejudice of party members.

However, the examples Marika Sherwood gives of race prejudice

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within the party do not support her case very well, because she is forced to admit that after inner-party debate on the issues in question (eg, whether there should be separate black branches, and the removal of somewhat chauvinist formulations regarding the relationship of Britain to the colonies following the establishment of socialism), the progressive side won the argument in every case.

On the other hand, it is strange that Claudia was (a) given no paid employment within the party similar to what she had had in the CPUSA; (b) was never a member of any higher organ of the party, and (c) despite her extensive journalistic experience in the US, rarely contributed articles to the *Daily Worker*.

Clearly all was not well between Claudia and the party. This problem led her to write a memorandum to the party, which is preserved in the CPGB archives:

Another aspect I want to raise is the party's evaluation towards me as an individual regarding getting settled down in this country, both politically and financially . . . I want clarification as to what basis and what estimate they have of my assets to the party. There have been times when I have resisted concluding that either I'm to be retired from political life or so invalidated that I must lead a sedentary life – or if the opposite is true, then not only clarification but some implementation would appear to be required.*

In a tribute at Claudia's funeral, Gertrude Elias mentioned that

One day I ran into her [Claudia] in Oxford Street and I asked her: 'You are probably sent all over the country to address meetings, that's why we never see you on a London platform?' 'Ha,' she said in her very own way, 'not at all. I might as well be dead.'

* Cited in Marika Sherwood, *Claudia Jones*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1999, p73.

Claudia's political positions

We would almost certainly have more concrete knowledge of her political positions had the political journal which Claudia kept all her life, and from which she was accustomed to reading extracts to her close friends, not disappeared after her death.⁵

The behaviour of the party towards her does suggest that she had major differences with the party leadership, and certainly she fought within the CPGB, as she had within the CPUSA, for the adoption of correct policies and activities on the question of race and internationalism.⁶

It does not follow, however, that racism within the party was the reason for Claudia's isolation. The fact is that throughout Claudia's life in Britain, the CPGB had split the communist movement in Britain by following a Khrushchevite line that demanded (a) the denunciation of Stalin, (b) the adoption of the policy of the possibility of a peaceful road to socialism, and, after 1963 when the Communist Party of China made its criticisms public, (c) the denunciation of China and Mao Zedong because they opposed Khrushchevism.⁷

It seems clear that Claudia was at odds with the party leadership on all these points. As a loyal party member to the end of her life, she did not publicly state her views.

However, the fact that she maintained a close relationship with Comrade Abhimanyu Manchanda, a prominent communist who was expelled from the CPGB for opposing the revisionist policies it adopted after Khrushchev came to power in the USSR, until her death is indicative of her political thinking on the question of Stalin and on the question of China, since Manchanda himself was a strong supporter of both.⁸

Her support for China is further proved by the visit she made to China in 1964, a few months before she died, when she was highly

enthused by everything she saw.

On her return from China she wrote:

I observed first hand with my own eyes the magnificent achievements of fifteen years of socialist construction and its effect on lives, agricultural industry and society of the six hundred and fifty million people of the New Socialist China. I talked and spoke to many of China's leaders – in government, in the people's communes, in light and heavy industry – in the ardent revolutionary men, women, youth and children of New Socialist China who are led by the Chinese Communist Party and their world communist leader, Chairman Mao Tse-tung . . .

The great achievements in socialist construction in New China, based on its policy of self-reliance, which permeates every aspect of its society – in agriculture and industrialisation, in light and heavy industry. A new morality pervades this ancient land, which less than fifteen years ago was engaged in a bitter, protracted anti-imperialist armed struggle to free itself from the ravages of feudalism, semi-colonialism, bureaucratic capitalism and imperialism, and achieved victory over US imperialism, the Kuomintang puppets and the Japanese militarists.*

Claudia was an honoured guest in China in a delegation that went to meet Comrade Mao Zedong himself, whom she met twice – once as part of a South American delegation and once on her own.⁹

The CPGB's record on internationalism and fighting racism at that time was by and large an honourable one. Members of the party had set up a British branch of the Caribbean Labour Congress in

* From an untitled and unpublished draft report made to the Committee of Asian and Afro-Caribbean Organisations, found among the papers of Claudia Jones inherited by Diane Langford on the death of Manchanda. Carole Boyce Davies has deposited all the Claudia Jones papers held by Diane Langford with the Schomburg Library in New York where it is entitled 'The Claudia Jones Memorial Collection'.

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May 1948, and the CLC's paper, *Caribbean News*, was set up in 1952 and kept going until 1956, printed on the CPGB's printing press at no cost to the CLC (although Marika Sherwood claims that the CLC received little support from the party).

Trevor Carter wrote that

The CLC kept up our morale in the face of racism from all sides at the workplace, gave us political direction and enabled us to make a collective contribution to the labour movement as black workers. It was the CLC which was responsible for organising the presence of young black people at the world youth festivals.

As CLC members, we carried out hundreds of speaking engagements at trade union branches up and down the country, either drumming up support for the independence movement in the West Indies, or organising opposition to the first moves towards racist immigration laws in Britain . . .

The CLC, incidentally, was proscribed as a communist front by both the Labour Party and the TUC.

Furthermore, Trevor Carter is forced to admit that the CPGB was the *only* party in Britain that was 'in complete opposition to quotas and controls for Commonwealth immigrants'.

Claudia Jones herself wrote in this context:

All other parties have capitulated in one way or another to this racist measure. A recent statement of the executive committee of the British Communist Party declared its opposition to all forms of restrictions on coloured immigration; declared its readiness to contest every case of discrimination; urged repeal of the Commonwealth Immigration Act; and called for equality of access for employment, rates of wages, promotion to skilled jobs, and opportunities for apprenticeship and vocational training . . .

It also projected the launching of an ideological campaign to com-

bat racialism, which, it noted, infects wide sections of the British working class.*

It is, of course, impossible that the party's entire membership should be completely free of race prejudice. Britain had long justified its imperialist activity on the pretext that 'inferior races' benefited from having Britain controlling their countries, and the belief that black people were inferior was deeply embedded in the psyche of most white British people.

The British bourgeoisie, through its control of the media and the labour aristocracy, took advantage of this race prejudice to divert British people into blaming immigrants for the deprivation to which the bourgeoisie subjected the working class, whether they were white or black, and the media were full of hysterical articles about the need to avoid being 'swamped' – much as today the bourgeois media never allow a day to go by without giving a nudge to backward racist thinking with a plethora of articles that explain how the government has 'lost control' of immigration. The implication of all this agitation is that the presence of immigrants in this country is a terrible problem – propaganda of which all bourgeois political parties (not just the extreme right) take full advantage, especially at election time.

However, it is clear that the CPGB *did* give a lead in combating that racism, and, indeed, was the only British party doing so. Of course, it is possible, because of its policy of seeking alliance with the Labour Party, which was then as it is now, a party of imperialism, that it toned down its activity to some extent in order to avoid offending labour aristocrats promoting colour bars in some British unions.

Nevertheless, whatever its weaknesses and whatever the back-

* Quoted in Trevor Carter, *Shattering Illusions*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1986, pp70-71. Carter claims that he has borrowed this quotation from Johnson, but he is mistaken on this.

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wardness of some of its ordinary members, it was possible for party members to work effectively as party members on issues of race.

Trevor Carter quotes a black communist expressing views that Claudia almost certainly shared:

I stayed in the Communist Party because I disagreed with those who claimed that the racism of the left was an inherent and permanent feature of their attitudes. I felt that since racism was part of the ideological structure of a bourgeois capitalist society, those same comrades could learn and change their attitudes.

An important feature in my thinking was that, in order to liberate myself and other black people, we have also got to help liberate our white brothers and sisters. You can't win one struggle without the other. But what convinced me more than anything was seeing how the many black comrades who left the party found themselves in what I would describe as a rudderless ship, and how quickly careerism became of paramount importance in their lives.

I was one of those who went to complain to Johnny Gollan about the lack of black leadership in the party. But I have stuck with it. That was the only serious disagreement I've had with the party in all these years. I don't think the party is dealing properly with racism and sometimes I get angry. But I know who I am. I am a communist and I have come to terms with where I can and can't reach.

I have a sense of fulfilment being a communist and I'm not selling out. The Labour Party occasionally has enticed me, but I know that my political education couldn't improve anywhere but in the Communist Party.*

* Quoted in Trevor Carter, *ibid*, p62.

The West Indian Gazette and carnival

Claudia's arrival in London happened to coincide with the demise of *Caribbean News* (which, for reasons explained above, had never been an official party newspaper). Yet never had the need for such a newspaper been more acute. At the time Claudia arrived in London, black people living in this country were subjected to gross discrimination in the provision of housing and of services.

The Race Relations Act did not become law until 1975, and, before then, colour bars were not illegal and were to be found everywhere. In employment, in rental housing, in the grant of mortgages, in catering and more, black people were subjected to daily humiliation.

Black people were arriving from the West Indies in large numbers partly because immigration to the United States had recently been blocked, and partly because of active recruitment of black people for jobs in the National Health Service (NHS) and in transport in particular.

What could be more natural for Claudia than that, as a communist, she should put herself to work within the black community in order to serve its needs? It would have been self-evident to Claudia that it was a matter of utmost priority for communists to take up the question of racism – both because it is the duty of communists to defend the interests of all sections of the working class and because it is their duty to fight strenuously to prevent the bourgeoisie dividing the working class against itself.

She had acquired, through her work in the Communist Party of the USA, both the journalistic skills and the organisational skills to bring out a replacement newspaper for *Caribbean News*, which she proceeded to do with effect from 1958, some two years after her arrival, although she did not secure free printing facilities from the party.

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She sought, however, to give her *West Indian Gazette* (WIG) a broader appeal than its predecessor by focussing beyond simply the employment issues that had been the latter's main concern. She also dealt extensively with Caribbean people's contribution to the arts, for example.

She also ensured her readership was kept informed of anti-imperialist struggles worldwide, as well as of political developments in the West Indies:

WIG was present to celebrate Castro's revolution by promoting the film *Island Aflame*. It shook its fist at the Congo civil war and the abandonment of Patrice Lumumba. It printed the picture of Lumumba without his spectacles, bound and in a truck to be delivered into the hands of his rival Moïse Tshombe, the west's place-man in Katanga.

It reported the Sharpeville massacre and the Rivonia trials. The names of Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Robert Sobukwe were known to WIG's readers – freedom fighters labelled by the British national broadsheets as troublemakers at best and terrorists by definition. There was no louder voice than WIG's on Commonwealth issues or on decolonisation.*

In other words, it was not a black nationalist paper, but a progressive paper that sided with the struggles of the proletariat at a national level and with anti-imperialist struggles internationally.

In the summer of 1958, only five months after the first issue of the *West Indian Gazette* appeared, the racist ideology being promoted by the media and the various bourgeois political parties erupted into riots – first in Nottingham and then in Notting Hill, in areas with large black populations, but where the poor, both black and white, were crowded into substandard accommodation.

* 'The West Indian Gazette: Claudia Jones and the black press in Britain' by Donald Hinds, *Race and Class*, July 2008.

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In Notting Hill, the riots broke out on 30 August 1958, arising out of taunts made by white lumpen elements to a mixed-race couple. Egged on by Oswald Moseley's fascist 'Union movement' and other racist organisations, crowds would gather in the area to shout slogans such as 'Let's find another nigger'.

PC Michael Leach wrote:

There were several hundred people, all white, congregated about the footway and . . . shouting obscene remarks like 'We will get the black bastards'.*

Thus mobilised, disaffected white youth set out to attack defenceless black people, who, in their turn, formed self-defence groups and fought back. Although the main riots ended on 5 September, the situation was tense for several months, and, on 17 May the following year, a young black student, Kelso Cochrane from the Caribbean island of St Vincent, was murdered by a gang of six white youths, who were never caught or brought to trial.

The riots, according to Carter,

. . . changed the way we saw ourselves. We had been used to the everyday verbal abuse in the streets, in shops, factories and on the buses; teddy boys used to pick fights, but we did not fear for our lives or think that our houses could be burned down.†

In these circumstances, the *West Indian Gazette* came into its own as a campaigning tool. It supported those organising self-defence and anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigns, and it raised money for the defence of both black and white youths who were being prosecuted for putting up resistance to fascist violence.

* According to a statement made at the time of the riots by Police Constable Michael Leach, based in Notting Hill. Quoted in 'The Home Office cover-up of Notting Hill's race riots' by Ian Burrell, *Independent*, 23 August 2003.

† Trevor Carter, *op cit*, p66.

Claudia Jones and Abhimanyu Manchanda became founder members of a broad organisation designed to unite all those who could be united against racist violence and the institutionalised racism of the British state apparatus. The organisation in question was the Association for the Advancement of Coloured People which was

. . . modelled by its founder, Amy Ashwood Garvey, on her US experience with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.*

The organisation was broad enough to include various petty-bourgeois elements who were earnest in their desire to promote its aims, including such establishment figures as David Pitt (subsequently made a life peer) and Fenner Brockway MP, who were both members of the Labour Party. Following the murder of Kelso Cochrane, the organisation was broadened still further and became the Inter-Racial Friendship Coordinating Council, of which Claudia became co-vice chair, while Manchanda undertook secretarial duties.

Subsequently, the British bourgeoisie 'responded' to the riots with proposals to limit black immigration into Britain that ultimately culminated into the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962. This was the first of a whole series of enactments that continue to this day, promoted by Labour as much as by the Tories. Such legislation aims to create the impression that the problems faced by the working class – unemployment, poor housing, poor schooling, poor healthcare, etc – are caused by black immigration and can be alleviated by halting it.

The *West Indian Gazette* campaigned vigorously against these racist laws, exposing the hypocrisy of the Tory and Labour politicians who supported them, tirelessly organising demonstrations and pickets.

* Quoted in Marika Sherwood, *op cit*, p92.

Although all this work was not able to free Britain from racist legislation, it cannot be denied that the consciousness-raising that it brought about was fundamental to the eventual passing of the Race Relations Act 1975, which Fenner Brockway had been sponsoring for many years before it was finally treated seriously, and which has, notwithstanding its many weaknesses, played an important part in reducing the injustice meted out to people on the basis of their skin colour.

Carnival

The Notting Hill carnival arose out of all the activity surrounding the response to the Notting Hill riots. Claudia Jones was very much its moving spirit. She saw it as a way of putting people back in touch with their cultural traditions, reminding them of all they had to be proud of, while at the same time extending the hand of friendship to white people by sharing this joyous culture with them.

Not only did she organise the first carnival – an indoor event that took place at St Pancras town hall – but she also arranged for it to be televised and broadcast to the nation. Again, the *West Indian Gazette* was invaluable for ensuring the success of this event – for its interest in Caribbean artistic developments, for making the necessary contacts, and for making sure it was packed out.

While Claudia was alive, Carnival continued to be an indoor event, but it ultimately moved outdoors to Notting Hill to join traditional British celebrations that had been held there on the August bank holidays. So popular were the Caribbean contributions that it was not long before the Notting Hill carnival became the celebration of Caribbean culture enjoyed not only by people of Caribbean background but by all sections of British society.

Conclusion

Because she was a communist, Claudia Jones could not be hurt by white racism. Her attitude would be that, as a communist, her duty was to do all in her power to help white people overcome the prejudices that tied them to their exploiters and oppressors – the common enemy of white and black proletarians alike. For this reason, she could never have been seduced by the siren songs of black nationalism, as the record of her political activity proves.

Claudia fully understood the class basis of racism. Not only that, she realised *why* this racism was festering among the working class, fostered by the labour aristocracy:

These artificial divisions and antagonisms between British and colonial workers, already costly in toll of generations of colonial wars and ever-recurrent crises, have delayed fundamental social change in Britain, and form the very basis of colour prejudice. The small top section of the working class, bribed and corrupted, and benefiting from this colonial robbery, have been imbued with this racist 'white superiority' poison.*

Claudia was a loyal communist with a deep understanding of Marxism Leninism. She was a born organiser and an indomitable spirit, and we in Britain are extremely lucky to have had her among us for the last nine years of her life. Her spirit and commitment are an example to us all, when we remember that she would get up out of her hospital bed to attend political meetings and then return to it.

Let us remember Claudia, pay homage to her, and strive to follow the example that she set in literally giving her life to the movement, thereby living forever in the hearts and minds of progressive people

* 'Caribbean community in Britain', reproduced in Buzz Johnson, *op cit*, p144.

the world over.

Ella Rule

London, March 2009

NOTES

1. This presentation was first made to the Stalin Society in London, England by Ella Rule on 22 March 2009.
2. To quote *blackpast.org*, 'The Scottsboro Boys were nine young black men, falsely accused of raping two white women on board a train near Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931. Convicted and facing execution, the case of Charlie Weems, Ozie Powell, Clarence Norris, Olen Montgomery, Willie Roberson, Haywood Patterson, Eugene Williams, and Andrew and Leroy Wright sparked international demonstrations and succeeded in both highlighting the racism of the American legal system and in overturning the conviction.

'On 25 March 1931, nine unemployed young black men, illegally riding the rails and looking for work, were taken off a freight train at Scottsboro, Alabama and held on a minor charge. The Scottsboro deputies found two white women, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, and pressured them into accusing the nine youths of raping them on board the train. The charge of raping white women was an explosive accusation, and within two weeks the Scottsboro Boys were convicted and eight sentenced to death, the youngest, Leroy Wright at age 13, to life imprisonment.

'The American Communist Party (CP), in this period at the height of its organising focus in the American south against racism and economic exploitation, immediately took the case on, and, largely through activist efforts, sparked a mass defence movement. The CP brought in its legal arm, the International Labour Defence (ILD) to represent the nine. After two trials in which an all-white jury, fuelled by a biased Alabama press, convicted the nine, the ILD and the CP began a national protest campaign to overturn the conviction, marked by numerous street marches, national and international speaking tours, and popular songs.

'Because of its principled leadership in the campaign, the CP gained much

widespread respect among African Americans and civil rights activists. When they travelled to Washington DC to demonstrate, the CP's activists stopped at segregated restaurants to stage sit-ins against discrimination, helping to turn the campaign into a trial of the system of segregation and racism in America, presaging the sit-in tactics of the 1960s civil rights movement.

'Although initially hostile to the communists and wary of being involved in the touchy issue of black men raping white women, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) ultimately joined with the CP and other civil rights organisations to form the Scottsboro Defense Committee. Eventually, one of the white women, Ruby Bates, came forward to repudiate her testimony, acknowledging that she and Price had been pressured into falsely accusing the Scottsboro Boys, and she became part of the campaign to save their lives.

'The case went to the United States Supreme Court in 1937, and the lives of the nine were saved, though it was almost 20 years before the last defendant was freed from prison. The trial of the Scottsboro Boys is perhaps one of the proudest moments of American radicalism, in which a mass movement of blacks and whites – led by communists and radicals – successfully beat the Jim Crow legal system.'

3. 'Jim Crow' laws were segregation laws enacted particularly in the southern states of America under the slogan 'Separate but equal'. In fact, of course, they were separate and *unequal*. It was possible to pass these laws in the southern states, notwithstanding a majority black population, because of laws that disenfranchised (prevented from voting) those unable to pay a poll tax, or unable to read, etc. The laws passed therefore reflected the attitudes of the white middle class in those states.
4. Eric Levy (see Note 9 below) remembers that Claudia's peace activism was not of a bourgeois-pacifist variety. She strongly held the view that as long as the imperialist powers had atomic weapons, then all other countries were entitled to have them as well, that being the best guarantee of peace.
5. Mikki Doyle, a CPGB stalwart, apparently had access to Claudia's possessions at some point between the time when Claudia died on 25 December 1964 and the emergency grant of Letters of Administration to Claudia's close friend Abhimanyu Manchanda on 13 January 1965. Clearly, if the journal was critical of the CPGB, Mrs Doyle had every reason to destroy it to prevent Manchanda using it against the CPGB. Indeed, one suspects that she would have considered it her duty to do so in defence of her party's interests.

Suggestions have been made that Manchanda himself might have destroyed Claudia's journal because it may have contained details of differences Claudia

may have had with him, but this seems quite improbable, since, if he had control of the document, he had no need to destroy it as there was no danger of it being used against him.

6. Ivor Kenna, at the Stalin Society meeting at which this presentation was made, drew attention to the details given in Sherwood (pp74-75) of struggle at the 1957 congress of the CPGB over references in party literature to 'helping backward peoples' (by which was meant the populations of oppressed countries), for, as Claudia Jones pointed out at this congress, 'the anti-imperialist struggles of the backward Afro-Asian nations, from Egypt to Ghana, are today leading the progressive anti-imperialist struggle'.
7. For a full explanation of the political differences that split the communist movement in the 1960s, see CPGB-ML pamphlet *Revisionism and the Demise of the Soviet Union*, available via cpgb-ml.org.
8. Boyce Jones claims that Claudia was not a Stalinist because she did not write any articles supporting 'Stalinist positions'. It is far more significant, however, that, following Khrushchev's secret speech condemning Stalin, Claudia never joined the ranks of those who rushed to echo Khrushchev's malign accusations. Furthermore, although the CPGB did not give her the paid employment that might have been expected given her previous journalistic and organisational experience in the US, she did secure employment as a journalist with the London bureau of Xinhua, the leading Chinese government publication, reflecting the Chinese government's political line.
9. At the Stalin Society meeting at which this presentation was made, another speaker, Eric Levy, who knew Claudia Jones personally, lived in another flat in the same building, and was the person who found her body by climbing in through a window of her apartment when she failed to meet up with him as had been arranged, confirmed that Claudia Jones was an ardent admirer of Comrade Mao Zedong.

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Claudia Jones' best-known achievement is that she is considered the mother of the Notting Hill Carnival, the biggest carnival in Europe. Some years ago, a stamp was issued in Britain that celebrated her as a 'civil rights activist'. All very respectable, but concealing the fact that, first and foremost, Claudia was a *communist*.

Having been first jailed and then deported from the USA as an 'alien' (she was born in Trinidad) during the McCarthy anticommunist witch-hunts, Claudia spent the last decade of her life in Britain, founding the influential *West Indian Gazette* as part of her anti-racist and anti-imperialist work here.

Claudia fully understood the class basis of racism. Not only that, she realised *why* racism was festering among the working class. She wrote in one article:

"These artificial divisions and antagonisms between British and colonial workers, already costly in toll of generations of colonial wars and ever-recurrent crises, have delayed fundamental social change in Britain, and form the very basis of colour prejudice. The small top section of the working class, bribed and corrupted, and benefiting from this colonial robbery, have been imbued with this racist 'white superiority' poison."

Claudia was a loyal communist with a deep understanding of Marxism Leninism. She was a born organiser and an indomitable spirit, who would get up out of her hospital bed to attend political meetings and then return to it when the work was done. In this way, despite periods of illness, the contribution Claudia made to our movement in her short time here was a significant one, and her dedication continues to inspire new generations of communists.

ISBN: 978-1-874613-26-8

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Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist)