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*Published in:*  
The Red and the Black

*DOI:*  
[10.7765/9781526144317.00014](https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526144317.00014)

Published: 01/01/2021

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

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*Please cite the original version:*

Weiss, H. (2021). International Communist trade union organisations and the call to black toilers in the interwar Atlantic world. In D. Featherstone, & C. Högsbjerg (Eds.), *The Red and the Black: The Russian Revolution and the Black Atlantic* (pp. 128-156). (Racism, Resistance and Social Change). Manchester university press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526144317.00014>

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## 5 International Communist Trade Union Organizations and the Call to Black Toilers in the Interwar Atlantic World

*Holger Weiss*

Early in 1931, *The International Negro Workers' Review* informed its readers about the struggles of the German harbour workers in Hamburg against intended wage cuts. In Britain and Japan, ship-owners were planning an attack against seamen and harbour workers. The leaders and bureaucrats of the national unions of maritime transport workers, branded as "Social Fascist", were accused to betray the workers by siding with the Capitalist owners by backing the reduction of wages and splitting the maritime working-class. This was no surprise, the journal reminded its readers: The Reformist and "Social Fascist" trade union bosses had "always betrayed the Negro and coloured seamen". However, a new era of radical international solidarity among the maritime workers, the journal assured, had started with the establishment of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers. This organization, the journal declared, was the only one who was prepared to fight back against wage cuts and the reduction of living conditions on board – regardless to race, creed or colour. The announcement ended in calling the black seamen and harbour workers throughout the world to join in the united front with the Hamburg harbour workers and, even more important, to enlist in the militant sections of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers: "UNITE IN INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY! STRUGGLE AGAINST IMPERIALIST WAR!"<sup>1</sup>

A similar but much longer call for radical international solidarity among maritime workers was published half a year later in *The Negro Worker*. Two main points were raised in the article. First, the struggle against the "imperialist war", i.e., the campaign against the (presumed) "imperialist" plan to attack against the Soviet Union, was part of the daily struggle of the maritime transport workers for bettering their conditions on ships, in ports and in the transport industry. Second, the most exploited ones on board as well as ashore were the colonial seamen: "they are nothing but slaves to the ship-owners." The trade unions affiliated to the Amsterdam International, i.e., the International Federation of Trade Unions with its

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<sup>1</sup> NN, 'Negro Seamen and the German Harbour Workers', *The International Negro Workers' Review*, 1:1 (January 1931), 5.

headquarters in Amsterdam, and the International Transport Workers' Federation, were branded as lackeys of the Capitalist owners and "storm brigades and war inciters against the Soviet Union" as well as backing the exploitation of colonial workers and propagating race hatred between black and white maritime workers. The only organisation which championed proletarian international solidarity among black and white maritime workers, the journal stressed, was the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers.<sup>2</sup>

*The International Negro Workers' Review* and *The Negro Worker* were the mouthpiece of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW). This organization had been established in July 1930. Its main task was to establish and maintain contact with trade union organizations in the Black Atlantic. The organization was the brain child of the combined efforts of the Communist International (Comintern), the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) and a handful of African Caribbean/American activists. The headquarters of the ITUCNW were located at 8, Rothesoodstrasse in Hamburg. This was also the address of the International Seamen's Club and Hamburg Port Bureau – and the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (ISH). The latter organization, too, was part of the RILU and had been established in October 1930.<sup>3</sup>

Although the author of the calls to the "Negro" seamen is not known, it is evident that they had been drafted by someone at the ISH headquarters, i.e., the ISH used the journal of the ITUCNW as a propaganda vehicle. A textual analysis of the articles and notes published in the journal clearly indicates that the two calls differed in style and language by using the specific Communist language during the "Class-Against-Class" period, including phrases as "Social Fascist" and calling for the unity of black and white workers. This comes as no surprise as the ITUCNW and the ISH had received strict orders by Moscow to cooperate; in fact, one of the tasks of the ITUCNW was to assist the ISH in its agitation and

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<sup>2</sup> NN, 'August First and the Negro Toilers', *The Negro Worker*, 1:7 (July 1931), 4–6 (quotation from page 6).

<sup>3</sup> On the ISH, see further Holger Weiss, 'The International of Seamen and Harbour Workers – A Radical Global Labour Union of the Waterfront or a Subversive World-Wide Web?', in Holger Weiss (ed.), *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 256–317; Holger Weiss, *För kampen internationellt! Transportarbetarnas globala kampinternational och dess verksamhet i Nordeuropa under 1930-talet* (Helsinki: Työväen perinteen ja historian tutkimuksen seura, 2019); Holger Weiss, *A Global Waterfront: From the International Propaganda Committee of Transport Workers to the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, 1921–1937* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

propaganda work among black seamen.<sup>4</sup>

The Comintern and its trade union wing, the RILU, were slow in adopting a resolute position towards the Black Atlantic. Although the Communists had recognized the importance of ‘Negro work’, i.e., addressing the exploitation of black workers and calling them to join the Communist sections in the trade unions as well as to enlist in the Communist party in the USA and in South Africa during the 1920s, other parts of the Black Atlantic, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean or Europe remained blank spots on the mental map of the Comintern and RILU leadership. In addition, the activities of the Communist Parties in the USA, in Brazil and in South Africa left large parts of the black population untouched.<sup>5</sup> Not least Sub-Saharan Africa was a blind spot in Moscow and vice-versa: only a few Africans resided in Moscow during the 1920s.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Resolution on the Work of the Hamburg Committee, draft, 18.10.1931, fond (f.) 534 opis (o.) 3 delo (d.) 668, 44–46, Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (hereafter: RGASPI), Moscow, and Resolution on the Work of the Hamburg TU Committee, draft, 13.12.1931, f. 495 d. 155 o. 100, 29–31, RGASPI. On the (complex) cooperation between the ITUCNW and ISH, see further David Featherstone, ‘Maritime Labour and Subaltern Geographies of Internationalism: Black Internationalist Seafarers’ Organising in the Interwar Period’, *Political Geography*, 49 (2015), 7–16; Holger Weiss, ‘Against Japanese and Italian Imperialism: The Anti-war Campaigns of Communist International Trade Union Organizations, 1931–1936’, *Moving the Social: Journal of Social History and the History of Social Movements*, 60 (2018), 121–146; Holger Weiss, ‘“Unite in International Solidarity!” The Call of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers to ‘Colonial’ and ‘Negro’ Seamen in the early 1930s’, in Stefano Bellucci and Holger Weiss (eds.), *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question: Ideological Antagonism, Workers’ Movements and the ILO since 1919* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 145–162.

<sup>5</sup> See further Edward T. Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa Before World War II* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1974); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity. Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Marika Sherwood, ‘The Comintern, the CPGB, Colonies and Black Britons, 1920–1938’, *Science & Society*, 60:2 (1996), 137–163; Hakim Adi, ‘The Comintern and Black Workers in Britain and France 1919–37’, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 28: 2–3 (2010), 224–245; Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson, *The Hidden Thread. Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2013); Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014); Aruã Silva de Lima, *Comunismo contra o racismo: autodeterminação e vieses de integração de classe no Brasil e nos Estados Unidos (1919-1939)*, PhD thesis, Universidade de São Paulo (2015); Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919–1939* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Woodford McClellan, ‘Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925–1934’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26:2 (1993), 371–390; John L. Gardner, ‘African Americans in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s: The Development of Transcontinental Protest’, *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 23:3 (1999), 190–201; Holger Weiss, ‘The Making of an African Bolshevik: Bankole Awoonor Renner in Moscow, 1925–1928’, *Ghana Studies*, 9 (2006), 177–220; Woodford McClellan, ‘Black hajj to Red Mecca: Africans and Afro-Americans at KUTV, 1925–1938’, in Maxim Matusevich (ed.), *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounter* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 61–83; Maxim Matusevich, ‘Black in the USSR: Africans, African-Americans, and the Soviet Society’, *Transitions*, 100 (2009), 56–75; Maxim Matusevich, ‘“Harlem Globe-Trotters”: Black Sojourners in Stalin’s Soviet Union’, in Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar (ed.), *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 211–244.

However, a remarkable change occurred in Moscow in 1928 with the establishment of a specific body focusing on work in the Black Atlantic. This was the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the RILU or ITUCNW. In contrast to existing Pan-Africanist organizations, such as the United Negro Improvement Association or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or anticolonial African ones, such as Ligue de la Défense de la Race Negre, the ITUCNW presented itself as a class-organization for black workers only.<sup>7</sup> The ITUCNW belonged to a group of new committees and organizations of the RILU that saw their light during the so-called Third Period when the Comintern inaugurated its “class-against-class” doctrine. Among others, the new policy was a broadside attack against Reformist and Social Democratic trade unions and parties, targeting them as “Social Fascist”. In comparison with the previous “United front from below” tactics that had given a limited space for co-operation between Communist and Reformist labour organizations, the new tactic turned the RILU and its organizations to call for a vigorous ‘revolutionary’ opposition politics within the labour unions.<sup>8</sup> The “class-against-class” tactics were to be fully applied in those countries where Communist parties existed and/or where Communists were members of trade unions. While this was the case throughout Europe as well as in the Americas and in Asia, a different situation prevailed in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>9</sup>

The ITUCNW was an attempt by the RILU and its leading propagandists to sensitize

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators'. Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939* (London: Hurst 2008); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919–1939* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013); Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic. African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014). See further the roundtable discussion on Pan-Africanism and Communism in *Black Perspectives*, <http://www.aaihs.org/introduction-roundtable-on-pan-africanism-and-communism-by-hakim-adi/> (checked 30.3.2017).

<sup>8</sup> On the Third Period, see Matthew Worley (ed.), *In Search of Revolution. International Communist Parties in the Third Period* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004). On the RILU, see Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1920–1937* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> John Callaghan, ‘The Communists and the Colonies: Anti-imperialism between the Wars’, in G. Andrews, N. Fishman & K. Morgan (eds.), *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 3–22; John Callaghan, ‘Storm over Asia: Comintern Colonial Policy in the Third Period’, in Worley (ed.), *In Search of Revolution*, 18–37; Josephine Fowler, ‘From East to West and West to East: Ties of Solidarity in the Pan-Pacific Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, 1923–1934’, *International labor and Working-Class History* 66 (2004), 99–117; Carolien Stolte, ‘Bringing Asia to the World: Indian Trade Unionism and the Long Road Towards the Asiatic Labour Congress, 1919–37’, *Journal of Global History* 7 (2012), 257–278; Klaas Stutje, ‘To Maintain an Independent Course. Interwar Indonesian Nationalism and International Communism on a Dutch-European Stage’, *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies* 39:3 (2015), 204–220.

and radicalize black workers in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean and, ultimately, to promote a class-conscious proletarian solidarity and support the anticolonial aspirations of black urban and rural workers. In contrast, the Comintern and especially its main body which dealt with the so-called “Negro Question”, the Negro Bureau/Secretariat of the Eastern Secretariat, focused on matters concerning the radicalization and organization of black workers in the USA and in South Africa as well as on the anti-colonial agenda and outreach of the Belgian, British and French Communist Parties. As a consequence, Communist activities in the Atlantic world took a dual direction during the interwar period. While the Negro Bureau and its main propagandist, the African American Communist Harry Haywood, focussed on the “American Atlantic” by promoting the so-called Black Belt thesis, the ITUCNW attempted to encompass a larger radical “African Atlantic”. Together with various other political and intellectual networks of Pan-African activists and movements, they formed the Black Atlantic of the interwar period.<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between Moscow and the Black Atlantic reflected uneven power relations and geographies during the interwar period.<sup>11</sup> Radical black workers and intellectuals in the Atlantic world were disappointed by the unfulfilled promises of Wilsonian internationalism and the prospects for the self-determination of colonial people in 1919.<sup>12</sup> Inspired by the Bolshevik revolution, black intellectuals and workers turned to the Communist alternative, the radical agenda of racial justice and equality and national independence.<sup>13</sup> However, the “race-first” perspective of black internationalism and radical political Pan-Africanism was at odds with the “class-first” interpretations of revolutionary

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<sup>10</sup> Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, 144–145; Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A history* (London, 2018), 61–88; Holger Weiss, ‘Framing Black Communist Labour Union Activism in the Atlantic World: James W. Ford and the Establishment of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 1928–1931’, *International Review of Social History*, 62: 2 (2019), 1–30.

<sup>11</sup> David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden histories and geographies of internationalism* (London; Zed Books, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Keys, ‘An African-American Worker in Stalin’s Soviet Union: Race and the Soviet Experiment in International Perspective’, *The Historian*, 71:1 (2009), 31–54; Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, p. 5; Joy Gleason Carew, ‘Translating Whose Vision? Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and the Soviet Experiment’, *Intercultural Communication*, XXIII:2 (2014), 1–16.

socialism, class-struggle and class-against-class of the Comintern and the Communists.<sup>14</sup> Although the Communists in American, British and French labour unions tried to fuse red and black radical agendas, most of the black workers remained lukewarm to the Communist call and most black “fellow travellers” turned their back to the Communists during the latter half of the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> The turning point for the Communist thrust into the Black Atlantic was the Italo-Ethiopian crisis in 1935 when the Comintern remained inactive and paved the way for black internationalism and political Pan-Africanism.<sup>16</sup>

## I. The Comintern and the Black Atlantic

The Pan-Africanists focus on race and colour was a challenge for the Communists. At the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern in 1922, a specific resolution, the *Theses on the Negro Question*, was adopted that dedicated the international communist movement to the task of promoting revolution among the world’s black population. Although the plight of the Africans in the colonies was acknowledged, their political readiness for revolution was unclear, especially as seen from the perspective of Moscow there was not much of an African working class – apart from South Africa, where a communist party had been established as early as 1921. Nevertheless, the *Theses* called for the formation of an international black movement to be organised in order to join the three corners of the Black Atlantic world: in the United States, in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as in Central America and the Caribbean.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, the 1922

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<sup>14</sup> Roderick Bush, *The End of White World Supremacy: Black Internationalism and the Problem of the Color Line* (Philadelphia, 2009), pp. 88–131; Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 135–136.

<sup>15</sup> Adi, ‘The Comintern and Black Workers’; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Susan D. Pennybaker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton and Oxford, 2009); Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the end of Empire* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919–1945* (London and New York, 1999); Joseph Fronczak, ‘Local People’s Global Politics: A Transnational History of the Hands Off Ethiopia Movement of 1935’, *Diplomatic History*, 39:2 (2015), 245–274; Tom Buchanan, ‘“The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged”: Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s’, *Contemporary European History*, 25:4 (2016), 645–665; Neelam Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire, 1930 – 1970* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); Weiss, ‘Against Japanese and Italian Imperialism’.

<sup>17</sup> Fourth Congress of the Communist International, *The Black Question*, 30 November 1922.

*Theses* highlighted the leading role of the African Americans in the global struggle against colonialism.<sup>18</sup>

The position of the Comintern with regards to the Black Atlantic was further elaborated at its Fifth World Congress in 1924. The Congress adopted two resolutions that were directed towards the special challenges in the African Atlantic. Whereas the first document dealt with the “Negro Question” in the USA,<sup>19</sup> the second one focussed on Africa. The main emphasis of the second document, *Resolution concerning the Negro Question in the Colonies*, was on the deployment of African troops against European workers, especially during the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. Also, the Resolution repeated the call for the emancipation and political self-determination of the African colonies and the establishment of independent African governments under the leadership of workers and peasants.<sup>20</sup>

The establishment of an international organ in Moscow to direct agitation and propaganda work in the Black Atlantic had to wait until the aftermath of the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern which convened in Moscow from July 17 to September 1, 1928. The Congress officially inaugurated the new class-against-class strategy which had a direct consequence for work in the ‘semi-colonies’ and colonies. A new strategy was outlined in the *Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in the Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries*, better known as the *Colonial Theses*. The *Colonial Theses* proclaimed a closer unity between revolutionary movements in the colonies and the Soviet Union, and underlined the need for an alliance between the Soviet Union, the Western industrial proletariat and the oppressed masses in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. Consequently, the *Colonial Theses* called for the creation and development of communist parties as well as workers and peasants unions in the colonial areas and rejected all collaboration with nationalist movements.<sup>21</sup>

The Sixth World Congress was a turning point in the Comintern’s relationship with the Black Atlantic. During the Congress, the African American trade union activist James W. Ford

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<sup>18</sup> Roger E. Kanet, “The Comintern and the ‘Negro Question’: Communist Policy in the United States and Africa, 1921–1941,” *Survey: A Journal of East & West Studies* 19 (1973), 86–122, esp 104–107; Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa*, pp. 127–136; Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 42–43.

<sup>19</sup> Report on the American Negro Question (V. Congress; typewritten document, no date, no author), f. 495, o. 155, d. 20, 3–4, RGASPI.

<sup>20</sup> Resolution zur Negerfrage in den Kolonien (V. Kongress; typewritten document, no date, no author), f. 495, o. 155, d. 20, 1–2, RGASPI.

<sup>21</sup> Kanet, “The Soviet Union and Sub-Saharan Africa”, 85–88; Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa*, 166–167, 171–172.



had strongly criticized the lack of focus by, if not neglect of, the Comintern and the metropolitan Communist parties on the plight of the oppressed masses in the Black Atlantic. Even worse, Ford claimed that neither the Comintern leadership nor the metropolitan parties had fully understood the global importance of activating the oppressed masses throughout the African world.<sup>22</sup> One consequence of Ford's criticism was the establishment of a special "Negro Commission" at the Congress. However, the Commission mainly discussed the "Negro Question" in the USA and eventually drafted a resolution in the issue. The resolution's most disputed part was the call for national liberation of the African American population in the US South (the famous Black Belt Theses). Only one paragraph clearly stressed the link between the conditions in the USA and the oppression of the black race in Atlantic world.<sup>23</sup>

The question in Moscow was how to organize work in the Atlantic world as the Negro Commission had been dissolved after the Congress. A first solution was the establishment of two special 'Negro Bureaus' at the Comintern headquarters in December 1928. The Negro Commission of the Anglo-American secretariat was mainly to focus on the "Negro Question" in the USA and South Africa. The Negro Bureau of the Eastern Secretariat, on the other hand, was to focus on the Colonial Question, i.e., the African and Caribbean colonies.<sup>24</sup> In principle, the activities of the two bureaus were supposed to be integrated. However, it was soon realized that neither of the two were working very effectively and resulted in several changes during 1929. Finally, the two bureaus were merged in November 1929 and continued thereafter as the Negro Section of the Eastern Secretariat.<sup>25</sup> The only crux of the matter was that the Negro Section of the Eastern Secretariat had few, if any links and contacts to radical activists and potential agitators in the Atlantic world. The radicalization and mobilization of the black

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<sup>22</sup> Extract from Ford's speech at the Sixth Congress, published in the *International Press Correspondence*, August 3, 1928, reproduced in James S. Allen and Philip S. Foner, *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History, 1919-1929* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1987), 182.

<sup>23</sup> On the Black Belt Thesis, see further Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley (Chapel Hill, [1984] 2000); Susan Campbell, "'Black Bolsheviks' and the Recognition of African-America's Right to Self-Determination by the Communist Party", *Science & Society* 58:4 (1994/1995), 440-470; Oscar Berland, "The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on the 'Negro Question' in America: 1919-1931. Part One", *Science & Society*, 63:4 (1999-2000), 411-432; Oscar Berland, "The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on the 'Negro Question' in America: 1919-1931. Part Two", *Science & Society*, 64:2 (2000), 194-217; Beverly Tomek, "The Communist International and the Dilemma of the American 'Negro Problem': Limitations of the Black Belt Self-Determination Thesis", *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor & Society* 15 (2012), 549-576.

<sup>24</sup> Protokoll Nr. 14 der Sitzung des Politsekretariats des EKKI, 10.12.1928, f. 495, d. 3, o. 70, 2, RGASPI.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, Memorandum, dated 5.11.2929, f. 495, d. 155, o. 80, 107, RGASPI. See further Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, Chapter 3.1.

working class in the Atlantic world was to be the task of another organization, the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the RILU.

## II. Calling the toilers in the Black Atlantic

The RILU's engagement with the Black Atlantic had oscillated between non-existence (Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean) and, at most, a lukewarm attitude (USA and South Africa) during larger parts of the 1920s. For the RILU, too, 1928 marked the beginning of a new era in the approach towards the Black Atlantic. In March 1928, Ford attended the Fourth Congress of the RILU in Moscow where he highlighted the need for revolutionary work in Africa and criticized the RILU and its sections for underestimating, if not totally neglecting work among the black workers.<sup>26</sup>

Ford's criticism started a process which culminated a few months later. Concurrent with the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, the RILU's Executive Committee held a separate meeting in July 1928, resulting in the organization of an "International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the R.I.L.U." or the ITUCNW. Its objective was to engage the black workers throughout the African Atlantic in the labour and trade unions. New joint unions of white and black workers were to be created, or, if this was not possible due to racial discrimination in the unions, independent black ("Negro") unions were to be established. Much emphasis was laid on the establishment of a global network, i.e., "the work of setting up connections with the Negro workers of the whole world and the unification of the wide masses of Negro workers on the basis of class struggle."<sup>27</sup>

The ITUCNW was the 'Negro Bureau' of the RILU and vehemently articulated a Class-Against-Class rhetoric in its mouthpiece, *The Negro Worker*.<sup>28</sup> Its first issue publicized the RILU resolution on the establishment of the ITUCNW, including the aims and tasks of the organization. The black workers were warned of the International Federation of Trade Unions, also known as the Amsterdam International. Little help was to be received from Reformist

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<sup>26</sup> Ford, *Life and activities* (1932), page 6, f. 495, d. 261, o. 6747, 67, RGASPI. See further Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, Chapter 3.2.

<sup>27</sup> Resolution of the Executive Bureau of the RILU on the Organisation of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, f. 534, d. 3, o. 359, 1–6, RGASPI.

<sup>28</sup> See further Susan Campbell, "The Negro Worker. A Comintern Publication 1928–1937. An Introduction", <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/negro-worker/index.htm>.

unions where black members either had to face white chauvinism and open racism or were forbidden to join at all. The RILU and its sections, in contrast, were presented as colour blind: “The RILU includes in its ranks workers of all races. It takes steps to combat all forms of reformism and all white chauvinism.”<sup>29</sup> In the same issue, the Trinidad-born and CPUSA member George Padmore highlighted the “class-before-race” perspective of the international proletarian solidarity: “Negro workers of the world! Organize your labour power and join hands with the class-conscious white workers of the world and oppressed colonial peoples, Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, etc. for the overthrow of capitalism, imperialism, and the liberation of the working class.”<sup>30</sup> The main enemy of the black working class were the “Negro bourgeois leaders” who were branded as traitors of the black workers. Accused for serving as the “tools of the bourgeoisie imperialists,”<sup>31</sup> Padmore was very frank when he declared that “Negro reformism”, most notably “Garveyism”, was the biggest obstacle for sensitizing the class-struggle among the black working class in the Atlantic world: “In the struggle between the imperialist ruling classes, and the oppressed Negro workers and peasants there can be no middle road, but only the road of class struggle.”<sup>32</sup>

The political language used in *The Negro Worker* was that of the Third Period. Almost monthly, the journal published attacks against ‘reformism’ and Pan-Africanist activists as well as calls for a global united front of workers irrespective of their colour. In April 1930, African American Communist Harry Haywood urged the readers to combat all forms of “national reformism among Negro toilers.”<sup>33</sup> One month later, RILU Secretary General Alexandre Lozovksy declared that “the Negro workers are part and parcel of the whole international proletariat,” and underlined that “without the class struggle it is impossible, nor can it be

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<sup>29</sup> “Organisation of an International Negro Trade Union Committee by the R.I.L.U.,” *The Negro Worker: Bulletin of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the R.I.L.U.* 1:2 (August-September 1929), 1.

<sup>30</sup> [George] Padmore, “Problems of Negro Workers in the Colonies – USA”, *The Negro Worker: Bulletin of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the R.I.L.U.* 1:2 (August-September 1929), 15.

<sup>31</sup> J. Reed, “Anti-Imperialist Struggle of the Negro Workers”, *The Negro Worker: Bulletin of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the R.I.L.U.*, 2:5 (December 1929), 1–2.

<sup>32</sup> George Padmore, “Report & Resolution on the Economic Struggles and Task of Negro Workers”, *The Negro Worker, Vol 3 – Special Number: The Hamburg Conference* (15 October 1930), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Harry Haywood, “Forward to the London Conference of Negro Toilers”, *The Negro Worker: Bulletin of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the R.I.L.U.*, 3:6 (April 1930), 1–3.

possible, to abolish race oppression.”<sup>34</sup> In October 1930, George Padmore bashed: “The social-fascist parties and trade union organizations whether affiliated with the Amsterdam and II International or the American Federation of Labour in the United States, have not defended the interests of the black and white workers.”<sup>35</sup>

Ford’s political vision was ‘Pan-African’ in the sense that it embraced the total Atlantic world. The tasks in the struggle against imperialism were independence and self-rule in all countries with a black population, including West, Central and East Africa as well as the Caribbean. In line with official Comintern doctrine, he propagated for the establishment of an independent “Native South African Republic” based upon workers’ and peasants’ organisations with full safeguards and equal rights for all national, including white, minorities and for self-determination of the black population in the “Black Belt” of the US South. Last, but not least, he called for full and complete political, economic and social rights of “Negro subjects” in “Central American” counties. Whether these countries included in his mental map also Brazil and other Latin American countries remains unclear.<sup>36</sup>

Apart from launching a agitation and propaganda campaign for the radicalization of the working class in the Black Atlantic through *The Negro Worker*, Ford’s second task was to organize a world congress of black workers. Initially planned for 1929, the congress convened in Hamburg in early July 1930. The congress resulted in the establishment of a new “independent” organization, or rather re-establishment of an already existing one: The International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers.<sup>37</sup> Its headquarters was placed in Hamburg, with Ford as the person-in-charge of its Secretariat.<sup>38</sup> After the congress, most of the African, Caribbean and African American participants travelled to Moscow where they

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<sup>34</sup> A. Lozovsky, “Negro Workers Awakening”, *The Negro Worker: Bulletin of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the R.I.L.U.*, 3:7 (May 1930), 1.

<sup>35</sup> George Padmore, “Report & Resolution on the Economic Struggles and Task of Negro Workers”, *The Negro Worker, Vol 3 – Special Number: The Hamburg Conference* (15 October 1930), 7.

<sup>36</sup> [James W.] Ford, “The Negro Question. Report to the IInd World Congress of the League Against Imperialism”, *The Negro Worker: Bulletin of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the R.I.L.U.* 2:4 (August 1929), 8–9.

<sup>37</sup> See further Hakim Adi, “Pan-Africanism and Communism: the Comintern, the ‘Negro Question’ and the First International Conference of Negro Workers”, *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 1:2 (2008), 237–254; Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*; Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*.

<sup>38</sup> “Aims of the ITUCNW,” *The Negro Worker 3. Special Number: The Hamburg Conference* (15 October 1930), 16.

attended the Fifth World Congress of the RILU. This congress, too, highlighted the mobilization of the black working class in the Atlantic world and issued two resolutions on the “Negro Question” with a special focus upon Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>39</sup>

The most notable outcome of the 1930 congresses in Hamburg and Moscow was the reorganization of work at the RILU headquarters. As the ITUCNW was to be presented as a “new” organization, the unit in Moscow was renamed as the Negro Bureau of the RILU (and claimed to have existed since 1928); the person in charge of the unit in Moscow was George Padmore.<sup>40</sup> The ITUCNW was to publish its own journal whereas *The Negro Worker* remained the official organ of the Negro Bureau of the RILU. The task of the RILU Negro Bureau was, first, to stimulate the revolutionary opposition groups within the existing – mainly Reformist dominated – trade unions in Europe, America and South Africa to reach out to and organize black workers throughout the Atlantic world. Second, to promote the revolutionary trade union movement in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean as well as to combat white chauvinism and race prejudice in the trade unions. Third, its task was to combat “Negro bourgeois nationalism.”<sup>41</sup>

The outcome of the reorganization was a hierarchical relationship between the two organizations with the ITUCNW being subordinate to the RILU Negro Bureau. The main task of ITUCNW was to establish and maintain contact with trade union organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean and to coordinate their activities. Of equal importance was the objective to stimulate the organization of trade unions in the African Atlantic in countries where none of such existed. Its official organ was *The International Negro Workers’ Review*. Echoing the RILU Negro Bureau’s mouthpiece, the ITUCNW journal was to denounce the “reactionary principles of Negro bourgeois nationalism” and black trade union reformism in the USA and in South Africa as well as that of the Amsterdam International and the International Labour Office.<sup>42</sup> The specified guidelines in January 1931 dictated further that

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<sup>39</sup> “Tasks of the Revolutionary Movement in Africa” and “Resolution on Work among Negroes in the US and the Colonies,” both published in *The Negro Worker: Special Number on the Fifth Congress of the R.I.L.U.* (1 November 1930).

<sup>40</sup> Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, 286–288.

<sup>41</sup> “Statement to our readers,” *The Negro Worker: Special Number on the Fifth Congress of the R.I.L.U.* (1 November 1930), 1.

<sup>42</sup> “Tasks of the ITUCNW”, *The Negro Worker 3. Special Number: The Hamburg Conference* (15 October 1930), 17; ECCI, The organisation and functions of the International Trade Union Committee of Negroes in Hamburg, 16.11.1930, f. 495, d. 155, o. 87, 432–433, RGASPI.

new organization was to comply to the ‘class-before-race’ approach of the Comintern and RILU: “No initiation or affiliation fees shall be collected by the Committee from the different organisations that will come into relations with it as this might create the impression that the ITUC of NW is a Black International conducted on racial lines and not based on the class struggle.”<sup>43</sup> Already in spring 1931, however, the RILU Negro Bureau decided to stop the publication of its journal and thus to camouflage its links to the Black Atlantic. Instead, the ITUCNW journal was renamed as *The Negro Worker* and became the sole vehicle for communist agitation and propaganda. The ITUCNW, Padmore stressed, was to promote the programme of “militant class struggle.”<sup>44</sup>

However, the RILU never envisioned the ITUCNW to establish itself as an independent actor in the Black Atlantic. Instead, the organization was to be supervised by the European Secretariat of the RILU and adhere to instructions which were prepared in Moscow by the RILU Secretariat, the RILU Negro Bureau or the ECCI. In addition, the ITUCNW was to closely cooperate with the Secretariat of the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers and the International Secretariat of the League Against Imperialism.<sup>45</sup> Initially, and in contrast to the guidelines of January 1931, Ford’s ambition seems to have been to engage the ITUCNW in the agitation and propaganda work among black workers in the USA and Latin America.<sup>46</sup> However, these ideas were heavily criticized in Moscow, not least by Padmore who reminded him that the ITUCNW was not allowed to engage or interfere in US American labour union affairs as this was the duty of the Trade Union Unity League while the Confederacion Sindical Latino-Americana was directing activities on Cuba and Haiti.<sup>47</sup>

What followed was a lengthy debate in Moscow at the RILU headquarters about the geographical outreach of the ITUCNW. In October 1931, the ECCI finally intervened and decided that the activities of the ITUCNW were limited to the British, French, Belgian, Dutch

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<sup>43</sup> Resolution of the Organisation and Functions of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, 24.1.1931, f. 495, o. 155, d. 96, 10–13, RGASPI.

<sup>44</sup> G[eorge] P[admore], “Editor’s Note”, *The Negro Worker* 1:8 (August 1931).

<sup>45</sup> Plan of Work and Immediate Tasks of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers at Hamburg, undated and no author, f. 534, o. 3, d. 668, 6–7, RGASPI.

<sup>46</sup> “Our Aims”, *The International Negro Workers’ Review* 1:1 (January 1931), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Padmore to Ford, 13.2.1931 and 17.3.1931, f. 534, o. 3, d. 668, 57 and 60, RGASPI.

and Portuguese colonies in Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>48</sup> When Padmore replaced Ford as Secretary for the Hamburg Committee in November 1931, the objectives of the ITUCNW remained unchanged, namely being a class not a race organization, “organizing and leading the fight in the interests of Negro workers in Africa, the West Indies and other colonies” as well as to fight against “white chauvinism, social-reformism and the reformist programmes of Negro capitalist misleaders” in the USA, South Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>49</sup> The challenge of the ITUCNW was to expose and denounce the ‘Negro reformists’, underlined the Surinamese Communist Otto Huiswoud who had replaced Padmore as head of the RILU Negro Bureau.<sup>50</sup>

### **Postscript: Communism or Pan-Africanism?**

It took the political theorists in Moscow ten years to formulate an agenda to address the black workers in the Atlantic world but only one year to narrow the focus of the ITUCNW from a “maximal” to a ‘limited’ vision of activity. Two perspectives were to clash. The first one was articulated in Moscow and the (white) functionaries at the RILU units in Berlin and Hamburg who monitored and supported the activities of the ITUCNW, namely the European Secretariat of the RILU and the International Secretariat of the ISH. Here, the official Comintern and RILU dogma dictated theoretical considerations and political actions, marked by the combination of an uncompromising attitude against political and trade union reformism on the one hand and on the other, anticolonial and anti-imperial agitation and the support to the fight for national self-determination and independence of “semi-colonial” and colonial subjects.<sup>51</sup>

The second position was that of Padmore at the ITUCNW headquarters in Hamburg. Initially, he backed cooperation with the ISH and had published an appeal to African and Caribbean seamen and harbour workers in *The Negro Worker* in April 1932. In line with the

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<sup>48</sup> Protokoll Nr 187 der Sitzung der Politischen Kommission des Pol.Sekr am 13.10.1931, f. 495, d. 4, o. 145, 1–2, RGASPI. See further Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, p. 292–298. The debates in Moscow concerning the outreach of the ITUCNW are not discussed by Adi. Makalani (*In the Cause of Freedom*, 163 and 173) claims that the ITUCNW had been a product of ‘(t)he black radical vision of a diasporic international’ and that black Communists, including Ford and Padmore, prospected the ITUCNW to develop into a black international.

<sup>49</sup> “What is the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers?” *The Negro Worker* 1:10-11 (October-November 1931), 45.

<sup>50</sup> O.E. Huiswoud, “The Economic Crisis and the Negro Workers”, *The Negro Worker* 2:4 (April 1932), 25–27; Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, 298–299.

<sup>51</sup> See further Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*.

official RILU position, the appeal started by underlining the unity of “White, Black and Yellow water transport workers” and invited them all to participate at the forthcoming world congress of the ISH. Noting that the “Negro workers in Africa, England, France, America, and the West Indies are among the worst paid and treated slaves of the ship-owners and other capitalists”, the invitation to participate was especially directed to them. The Appeal reminded that the reformist national unions in the United Kingdom and France had turned their back to the black workers. Instead, the black maritime workers were reminded that the only organization that defended their rights and called them to join their ranks in the ISH and its affiliated national sections in the USA, United Kingdom, France and in South Africa.<sup>52</sup> Soon, however, Padmore declared that the ITUCNW and its journal were not the propaganda vehicles of the ISH. At the ISH World Congress in Altona in May 1932, the rift became an open one when he and likeminded black Communist and radical agitators vehemently criticized the chauvinist and racial attitudes of British party and union activists.<sup>53</sup> Instead, the ITUCNW during Padmore’s term as secretary increasingly turned to address issues of a racial rather than class character throughout the Black Atlantic, such as the international Scottsboro campaign.<sup>54</sup>

The two positions on the objectives of Communist agitation and propaganda in the Black Atlantic clashed in 1933. Starting with the Nazi takeover and the crushing of Communist organisations and structures in Germany in 1933, the political changes in Europe promoted a re-evaluation of the uncompromising stands of the Communists towards the Social Democrats and paved the way for experimenting with the popular front between left-wing and liberal bourgeois parties in France and Spain in 1934. Officially, however, official Comintern policy had not changed. Finally, at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in August-

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<sup>52</sup> NN, ‘Appeal to Negro Seamen and Dockers’, *The Negro Worker*, 2:4 (April 1932), 20–24.

<sup>53</sup> See further Sherwood, ‘The Comintern, the CPGB, Colonies and Black Britons’ and Featherstone, ‘Maritime Labour and Subaltern Geographies’ as well Christian Høgsbjerg, ‘Mariner, Renegade and Castaway: Chris Braithwaite, Seamen’s Organiser, Socialist and Militant Pan-Africanist’, *Race & Class*, 53 (2011), 36–57; David Featherstone, ‘Harry O’Connell, Maritime Labour and the Racialised Politics of Place,’ *Race & Class*, 57:3 (2016), 71–87.

<sup>54</sup> On the international campaign to free the nine ‘Scottsboro Boys’ who had been sentenced to death by a local court in Alabama, USA, see further James A. Miller, Susan D. Pennybacker, and Eve Rosenhaft, ‘Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931–1934’, *The American Historical Review*, 106:2 (2001), 387–430, Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), James A. Miller, *Remembering Scottsboro: The Legacy of an Infamous Trial* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), and Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, 392–397.



September 1935, the class-against-class policy was scrapped and replaced by the popular front tactics.

The ITUCNW was directly affected by the changes in tactics in Moscow. Padmore, who had moved the ITUCNW headquarters from Hamburg to Paris in March 1933, wanted to scrap the class-against-class approach and apply his version of a “united front” approach. He started to cooperate with black activists and together with Garan Kouyaté planned to call for a “Negro World Unity Congress” and the formation of a universal organization “destined to direct the future of the Negro movement in all countries,” i.e. a Black International.<sup>55</sup> However, the plan did not receive any backing in Moscow. Instead, Padmore was accused of sidestepping official policies and was replaced by Otto Huiswoud as secretary of the ITUCNW in spring 1934. Padmore was finally expelled from the CPUSA and the Comintern in March 1934, accused by the International Control Commission for having declined Moscow’s order as well as for undermining the “class unity of Negro toilers.”<sup>56</sup>

In the United States, the old policy was to remain as the official guidelines throughout 1934. Harry Haywood, the head of the CPUSA Negro Department, declared the struggle against Black Nationalism as a major priority and condemned any rapprochement with “Negro reformists.”<sup>57</sup> Padmore, in turn, was publicly discredited by black Communists in the USA for being a renegade and having sided with the enemies of the black working class.<sup>58</sup> Ford was amongst them and authored a pamphlet where he denounced him.<sup>59</sup> Huiswoud, too, attacked Padmore for having betrayed the black working class.<sup>60</sup> Padmore, in turn, accused his former comrades for being “Little Red Uncle Toms” and condemned the Comintern and the Soviet Union for having sold out the workers in the Black Atlantic.<sup>61</sup>

The cause of the ITUCNW and Communist engagement in the Black Atlantic received a decisive blow in 1935. Padmore’s radical political Pan-Africanist approach was to triumph

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<sup>55</sup> See further Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 269, 275–282.

<sup>56</sup> Statement of the International Control Commission, 20.3.1934, f. 495, d. 261, o. 4718, 3, RGASPI.

<sup>57</sup> Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 108–109.

<sup>58</sup> See further Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 131–132.

<sup>59</sup> James W. Ford, *World Problems of the Negro People: A Refutation of George Padmore* (New York, no date [1934]).

<sup>60</sup> [Otto Huiswoud,] “A Betrayer of the Negro Liberation Struggle”, *The Negro Worker* IV:3 (1934), 6–10.

<sup>61</sup> George Padmore, Open letter to Earl Browder, no date [ca. 1934], f. 495, o. 155, d. 102, 123–125, RGASPI.

over the incapability of Huiswoud, the ITUCNW and the Comintern to launch a global campaign against Italian imperialism in Ethiopia.<sup>62</sup> Ford, who participated at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern, had together with other black delegates called for the establishment for a new platform, termed the International Negro Liberation Committee. In accordance with the new Popular Front policies of the Comintern, the black delegates envisioned a kind of “broad united people’s front among the Negro people.”<sup>63</sup> In their mind, the ITUCNW had lost its role in the Black Atlantic. Nevertheless, the plan was rejected by the Comintern. Huiswoud, in turn, wanted to transform the ITUCNW into a Black International but this plan, too, was scrapped.<sup>64</sup> By 1936, the ITUCNW was barely existing and was quietly dissolved by the ECCI in 1937.

An assessment of ITUCNW as a vehicle for the radicalization of the black working class in the Atlantic world gives conflicting conclusions. Moscow’s aim clearly ended in a cul-de-sac, if not outright collapse. This was the standpoint of, among others, George Padmore and C. L. James, who claimed that the ITUCNW-initiated struggle against colonial exploitation, racism and for self-determination and political freedom in the Black Atlantic had been sacrificed by Stalin and Soviet Realpolitik after 1933.<sup>65</sup> A similar critical assessment was already presented by William L. Patterson in 1936: after the debacle in 1935, the ITUCNW had few, if any, connections to activists and organizations the Black Atlantic.<sup>66</sup> The indirect impact of the ITUCNW, and especially its mouthpiece, *The Negro Worker*, in the radicalization and ideological mobilization of black activists is much more difficult to assess.<sup>67</sup> By the end of 1932, the journal had reached 5,000 copies per issue and was spread – and read – throughout the Black Atlantic. However, by March 1934, the print-run of the journal had to be reduced to

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<sup>62</sup> See further Weiss, “Against Japanese and Italian Imperialism.”

<sup>63</sup> (Declaration,) The International Negro Liberation Committee, no author, no date [ca. 1935], f. 495, d. 155, o. 102, 25–26, RGASPI.

<sup>64</sup> See further Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, 698–699.

<sup>65</sup> C.L.R. James, *World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017 [1937]); George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1956).

<sup>66</sup> See Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, 709–711.

<sup>67</sup> Brent Hayes Edward’s claim that the *Negro Worker* emerged as the key channel for Padmore’s radical Pan-African vision rather than a vehicle for orthodox rhetoric is a valid one but the ‘class-before-race’ perspective should not be lost in articles authored by Padmore and other black/non-black communists. See Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 257.

2,000 copies.<sup>68</sup> The reactions of its readers are difficult to trace. A few of them sent letter to the editors (who sometimes published them) but most of the correspondence is lost (only part of Padmore's is archived in the Comintern archives in Moscow). A critical assessment of the impact and legacy of *The Negro Worker* is yet to be made.

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<sup>68</sup> Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*, 533–566, 633.

