Black Liberation Series — No. 4

PAN-AFRICANISM
INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet is part of a series, the Black Liberation Series, published by the Black Liberation Front. They have developed out a number of BLF discussion documents. These discussion documents were first intended to serve as starting points in the discussions which began to take place within the Black Liberation Front from around 1978. They came about because many members of the organisation, which was formed in 1971, became convinced that the old narrow nationalist political line, which the organisation had followed up till then, had done great harm to it and left it completely unprepared to play an active and leading role in the rising struggles of the Black community.

As a result the papers dealt with many questions which were seen as important to the development of a better understanding of the struggle of Black people for freedom. These ranged from general questions, such as understanding how societies work, to more specific ones such as the structure of the Black community in Britain. These discussions were a clear example of the development of the organisation's political understanding since it had published the document "Revolutionary Black Nationalism". This development continues today. During the discussions many changes were made in the original papers, some were rewritten altogether and some were scrapped completely. Nevertheless, this process was an important first step in helping the organisation to break away from its narrow nationalist past and to build a more revolutionary understanding of the nature of Black people's struggle.

The Black Liberation Front has decided to publish these documents for a number of reasons. In the first place they are intended to provide people interested in joining the organisation with an understanding of the organisation's genral political position. Secondly, it is hoped that they will make a contribution to the ongoing discussion within the Black Liberation Movement.
PAN-AFRICANISM

The development of Capitalism in Europe in the 15th century led to European expansion to other parts of the world. European merchants financed sailing expeditions to discover new trade routes and new sources of wealth; the merchant navies of the European states flourished. Driven on by the search for profits this expansion brought death and destruction to the native peoples whom the Europeans encountered — in the Americas the native Indian population was almost completely wiped out; on the African continent the introduction of the slave trade brought untold misery to millions of African people and devastated African social, economic and political development.

The past 400 years of the history of the African people have been a persistent and determined struggle by the African masses against the oppression and exploitation brought by European expansion. From the start, the African people firmly resisted slavery, and this resistance began even before they arrived on the slave plantations of the Caribbean and the Americas. This resistance manifested itself in different ways.

On the continent, so as to avoid capture and enslavement, many African people had to completely change their way of living. No longer were they able to live a settled and reasonably secure life in village communities but they had instead to reorganise their whole life in such a way that they would be able to flee to safety at the first approach of the slavers. The effect of this on the African people was devastating; communities were smashed to pieces; social development and progress was halted — nevertheless, by this change of life-style many African people avoided capture and enslavement. This, however, was not the only form of resistance waged by the African people against enslavement; the fight against slavery was also waged through the armed struggle.

This resistance continued even after capture and enslavement. Many slaves threw themselves overboard to escape slavery; on other occasions slaves on board ship revolted and were even able to take over the ship, as happened with the slave ship AMISTAD. So persistent and determined was the resistance of the African people to slavery that slave ships sailed under a constant fear of rebellion. It is not surprising therefore that some of the most brutal and inhuman treatment in the history of mankind was practised on board these slave ships against the African people — e.g.: chained together and confined in a narrow space; brutally beaten and tortured; the sick, the dying, the dead, the living all roped together. The European sailors who manned these ships were some of the most sadistic brutal in society they were either like that to start with or else were turned that way by their experience of working on the slave ships.

The African revolt against social oppression and enslavement continued on the slave plantations of the U.S.A., South America and the Caribbean. These slave societies lived in a constant terror of slave uprisings and had to live with daily acts of sabotage by the enslaved African population. Farm animals — mules etc — were deliberately mistreated and lamed; agricultural tools — hoes etc — were deliberately broken; every opportunity was taken by the African slaves to either slow down work or stop it altogether whenever the overseer was not present to brutally force them to work hard. It is this attitude of non-cooperation by the enslaved Africans which the European slave-masters and their supporters used as the basis for spreading their propaganda about "lazy blacks". In addition to sabotage, many thousands of African people showed their total opposition to social oppression by running away from the slave plantations. Wherever it was even remotely possible, thousands of Africans fled to the swamps, the forests and the mountains — any place which made it difficult for the Europeans to reach and re-enslave them. In the mountains of Jamaica, the swamps of Florida, in the forests of South America communities of run-away slaves (maroons) sprung up. So determined and dedicated were these maroon communities to maintain their newly-won freedom that in many cases, the European countries, acting in support of the interest of the slave owners, were forced to sign treaties with the maroons, recognising their freedom. On top of all this, slave rebellions were common throughout the slave societies of North and South America, and the Caribbean. Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner in the U.S.A.; Cuffy and Sam Sharpe in the Caribbean and South America — these are just some of the more well-known examples of African revolt to the social oppression of slavery. Rebellion, or the threat of rebellion, by the slaves was a constant worry for the slave owners throughout the Caribbean and the Americas. This fear is well summed-up by a Governor of the slave state of Mississippi (1812) — "scarcely a day passes without my receiving some information relative to the designs of these (African) people to insurrect", he then goes on to say that this information has caused "Considerable alarm amongst the (white) citizens". None of these slave rebellion was totally successful in abolishing the social oppression of slavery; they however spread fear and terror throughout the slave-owning societies of the Americas and the Caribbean and were the most organised form of the resistance of the African people to their enslavement. It was in Haiti, though, that the African slaves succeeded in abolishing slavery — under the leadership of Boukman, Toussaint, Christophe and others the enslaved African population of Haiti rose up, defeated the slave-masters and their European allies and ended slavery in Haiti, making it the first free territory for the African people outside the African continent. The success of the African abolition of slavery in Haiti spread panic throughout the slave owning territories of the Caribbean and the Americas. Because of the unflinching opposition of the enslaved African people, the period of slavery in the Caribbean and the Americas was one of perpetual war waged on different levels.

Even in the period following Emancipation the struggle of the African people against their conditions of social oppression in the Americas and
the Caribbean continued. For example, in the U.S.A. the ex-slaves played a leading role in attempting to establish a democratic and just society in the former slave-owning states of the Southern U.S.A.; in the Caribbean the slaves waged a long and determined battle to break away from the control of the plantation and set up independent villages which they owned. As recently as the 1930’s workers and peasants throughout the Caribbean rose in revolt against their continuing social oppression.

On the African continent too this struggle of the African people had never died out. From the struggle of the African people under Nzinga against the establishment of Portuguese rule in Angola to the struggle of the African people under Shaka against the British and Boers in southern Africa to the struggle of the Africans in Zimbabwe under Nehuda the resol of the African masses remained strong. The was launched by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (Mau-Mau) against European occupation of their lands, and the militant demands of the African masses in the various European-created states (e.g. Ghana) for an end to colonial rule are further examples of the determination of the African people, no matter where they were, to struggle unceasingly to bring to an end their social oppression.

This, then was the historical reality out of which developed the ideology of Pan-Africanism, and which was itself in turn influenced by the ideas expressed in that ideology.

The ideology of Pan-Africanism grew out of the historical experience of the African people and at the same time, affected/influenced that historical experience. (Both the ideology and the historical experience acted upon and were influenced in their development by each other—in other words, ideology and practice were in a “dialectical relationship.”)

**WHAT IS PAN-AFRICANISM?**

Pan-Africanism is the ideology which expresses the “unity in struggle” of the African masses throughout the world. Because of the “dialectical relationship” between ideology and the social conditions under which the African people lived, it is obvious that the way in which this ideology of African liberation was expressed varies, depending on time and place. We should not be surprised to find, therefore, that the ideology of Pan-Africanism has, at various times in history, been expressed in the language and ideas of both christianity and socialism. In spite of the various ways in which it was expressed it is possible to trace the historical development of Pan-Africanism.

The social oppression of the African people under European domination and enslavement brought forth a vigorous and persistent war of resistance by the African masses. This struggle gave birth to, and was in turn influenced by a set of ideas which stressed African unity and resistance to European rule. The way in which these ideas were expressed varied according to the particular material (i.e., socio-economic) conditions under which the African people were forced to wage their struggle. Thus, we find that during the days of slavery, where the African people were forcibly indoctrinated into the religion of christianity, slave songs provided the means through which the ideas of Pan-Africanism were expressed. The enslaved African people took the christian songs about the joys of Heaven, and the wonderful life that the christians would have there, and used them as a means of expressing Pan-Africanist ideas. To the slaves, Heaven was Africa and death was welcome because it meant a return to Africa. Songs about flying away home to Zion and crossing the River Jordan (i.e., Atlantic) were seen by the enslaved Africans as meaning the joyful and welcome return to Africa. It is not surprising therefore to find European writers during the time of slavery noting that many African slaves about to be put to death for fighting against enslavement faced death fearlessly and even seemed to welcome it. Even as late as the 19th century a French writer in the U.S.A. found that the idea that when men died their souls went to Africa was still strong among the African people there. It is no surprise therefore to find that for example in the U.S.A. black churches (e.g. the African Methodist Episcopal) provided the first organisational expression of Pan-Africanist ideas. Preachers from these churches were the first to write articles attacking the doctrine of white superiority and African inferiority. It was only the U.S.A. that the African people were giving ideological expression to their daily struggles. In the 18th century Cugoano, an enslaved African who came to England via the slave plantations of Grenada, was demanding the emancipation of the slaves at a time when most white abolitionists were still trying to come to grips with demanding the total abolition of the slave trade.

Further evidence about the strength of Pan-Africanist ideas among the enslaved African masses is provided by the vigorous and consistent struggle waged by Africans in the U.S.A. against schemes to compulsorily deport them to West Africa. Despite the fact that the slaves had a burning desire to return to their homeland Africa, they waged a principled and successful battle—through organisations like the Negro Convention and spokesmen like Martin Delany—even against deportation and for emigration. The important distinction here was that deportation was a device through which some of the most reactionary sectors of the white community hoped to damp down the rebellious spirit of the African masses in the U.S.A. by deporting freed slaves back to Africa; emigration, under the control and direction of the African masses, made possible the slogan “Africa for the African race”. More importantly, the idea of colonisation, was an attempt to split the African population into freedmen and slaves; only the ideology of Pan-Africanism which formed the basis of the emigration movement, could successfully combat this through its emphasis on the “unity in struggle” of the African people, despite the differences in their legal status. A resolution passed at a meeting of legally free Africans in the U.A. in 1817 sums up this Pan-Africanist position quite well—“Be it resolved that we
will never separate ourselves voluntarily from the slave population in this
country; they are our brethren by the ties of consanguinity of suffering, and
of wrong; and we feel that there is more virtue in suffering privations with
them, than fancied advantages for a season."

These expressions of African solidarity were not just limited to within
the U.S.A. As early as 1824 the African president of independent African-
rulled Haiti invited Africans in the U.S.A. to settle in his country. In 1860
Thomas Hodgkin had proposed the idea of forming an "African
Association", composed of African people world-wide, which had as its
objective encouraging the unity of the African people and promoting and
protecting their interests. In 1861 a meeting, attended by a representative
of the Haitian government, was held in London — the purpose of this
meeting was to take steps to achieve the objective of setting up the
Association. In 1897, Henry Sylvester Williams, a Trinidadian lawyer
living in London proposed a conference to be attended by representatives
of the African race from all parts of the world; this conference finally took
place in London in July 1900. The conference adopted a resolution
changing its name from the African Association to the Pan-African
Association and spoke out against the oppression of the African people,
imploving the Europeans to mend their ways and give justice to the
oppressed African masses. This appeal shows that, although the ideas of
Pan-Africanism were still very much alive, they were, as expressed by this
conference, no longer firmly based in the daily experience of struggle of
the African masses. The intellectuals and dignitaries who attended this
conference had become somewhat separated from the mass of toiling
Africans for whom the ideology of Pan-Africanism was a tool for liberation.
It is significant that this Pan-African Conference was opened by the Bishop
of London who gave a speech in which he agreed for the need of the
Africans "to be educated into a sense of responsible self-government". Thus,
despite plans made at that conference to set up regional centres and to
hold conferences every two years, no further conferences were held till
1919 and nothing is known of any regional centres being set up.

In the meantime, the ideas of Pan-Africanism found mass expression
through the Universal Negro Improvement Association under the
leadership of Marcus Garvey. This organisation of African people which
first came to maturity in the U.S.A. spread like wildfire throughout the rest
of the world. Branches sprung up throughout the Caribbean, the Americas
and Africa, and the militant demand of "Africa for the Africans at home and
abroad" served as a rallying call to the African masses world-wide. The
uncompromising commitment of the UNIA to the idea that the African
people were not inferior, — at a time when the African people in the U.S.A.
lived under severe oppression backed up by open terror, — brought
millions of American-based Africans to the red, black and green banner of
the organisation; so powerfully did the slogan "Africa for the Africans"
reflect the aspirations of the oppressed masses in Africa that the European
colonialists were forced to ban the UNIA newspaper throughout Africa.

The second Pan-African Congress took place in London and Paris in
1921. This conference is best remembered for the fact that it decided to
dissociate from the militant Pan-Africanist slogan raised by the UNIA —
"Africa for the Africans", opting instead for the backward tactic of asking
the European oppressors to be nice to the African masses. In fact, the
opening speech of this conference argued that the oppressive European
governments were not the enemies of the African masses — it was the
African who was his own worst enemy! Such a statement completely out
of touch with the historical reality of African struggle, illustrates clearly the
extent to which the intellectuals and dignitaries who organised and
attended these conferences had become out of touch with the harsh reality
of the daily experience of the African masses toiling under the yoke of
European imperialist domination. In the Caribbean and in Africa, the
African people lived under the harsh yoke of colonialism; in the U.S.A. the
African masses were living under the most blatant and barbaric racial
discrimination and social oppression.

It is no surprise, then, to find that the third Pan-African Congress held in
1923 was an anti-climax and virtual non-extent. As W.E.B. DuBois, the
guiding force behind it, conceded — the conference was vague and non-
committal. In the two years after the 1921 conference, the P.A.C.M. (which
was responsible for organising the conferences) was in an even more
desolate condition. A fourth conference held in 1927 in New York was
hardly any better and could only repeat demands made at earlier meetings.
Cut off from involvement in the daily struggles of the African people the
P.A.C.M. had nothing to offer — and the repeated failure of the conferences
showed this quite clearly.

It was not till 1945 that a fifth Pan-African Congress was held, this time
in Manchester in England. This conference, attended by Nkrumah, Kenyatta
and other students and intellectuals tried to re-establish the links with the
daily struggles of the African masses. The conference expressed its support
for the struggle for independence of the African people through non-violent
means. This at least recognised and gave support to the increasingly powerful
demand of the African masses on the continent for an end to European colonial rule. The correctness of this
demand is illustrated by the fact that the idea of independence was fully
supported by the African masses. Furthermore, the ideas of the unity of the
African people and particularly the unification of the African continent
under African rule — which were embraced and popularised by the most
radical sections of the national liberation movements — were further
attempts to bring the ideology of Pan-Africanism back into the heart of the
historical struggle of the African masses.

The period following the end of the second world war saw an upsurge in
the struggle of the African people against European domination of the
African homeland. For centuries the African people had daily fought, in
many ways, against the murder, terror, brutality, exploitation and
inhuman treatment to which they were subjected under the heel of European colonial rule. With the European colonial nations coming out of W.W.II seriously weakened economically, and the U.S.A., firmly established as the major capitalist nation and the saviour of capitalism in Europe, demanding increased economic access to exploit the colonies as the price to pay for U.S. support, the conditions for the success of the African struggle, against colonial rule were more favourable. Thus it was that this period witnessed the outbreak of mass anti-colonial struggles throughout the continent - armed uprising in Kenya and Algeria, mass nationalist parties in Zaire, Ghana, etc. This phase of the struggle led to the emergence, from the late 1950's through to the 1960s of constitutionally independent states on the continent, with Africans as Prime Minister etc. European colonialism in Africa - i.e. - the direct rule by Europe of Africa was brought to an end; and the struggle of the African masses had been the principal force in this process of decolonisation.

The ideology of Pan-Africanism played an important part in this struggle to end colonial rule and it was the ideology to which almost all the African independence movements had to pay at least lip-service. The idea of unity in struggle - which is the central aspect of Pan-Africanism reflected the historical experience and aspirations of the African masses, and provided a basis around which they could be mobilised. For the African people, the battle against colonial domination was the same regardless of whether it was British colonial rule or French colonial rule. Thus almost every African independence movement in the post world war II period had to recognise this strong desire of the African masses to create an independent and free Africa and it is therefore not surprising to find that in this period there was much talk about creating regional unity as a first step towards the unification of the whole continent. However, these aspirations of the masses were not fulfilled as the petty bourgeois leadership of the national independence movements, in their compromises with the ex-colonial powers, chose instead to accept the territorial boundaries imposed by the European colonialists and abandoned the militant demand of the African masses to struggle for a united and independent Africa. Nevertheless, the demand for African unity continues to be a powerful force. Thus, in the period following the end of colonial rule and the rise to positions of power by elements of the small but aspiring African petty - bourgeoisie we see once more the emergence of the effort to turn Pan-Africanism away from the path of being a weapon in the hands of the masses in the struggle for total liberation. The petty bourgeoisie, which in most cases dominated the leadership positions of the mass organisations during the anti-colonial struggle, have firmly allied themselves with maintaining and defending capitalism thereby bringing into the open their betrayal of the interests of the African masses. Following 'independence', the masses remained economically exploited, socially suppressed, and politically powerless; this time though Africans had replaced Europeans as the most visible agents of this oppression - colonialism had been replaced by neo-colonialism.

Today, the battle to maintain the ideology of Pan-Africanism as a weapon in the continuing liberation struggle of the African masses still continues. Two main lines of Pan-Africanism are now clearly locked in battle. Firstly, there is the tendency (represented by such hardened reactionaries as Senghor) which seeks to rob Pan-Africanism of its mass content by portraying it as simply a movement to end colonialism. For this tendency, the idea of African unity is based on some mystical concept of "oneness", "African-ness" which can exist side by side with the neo-colonial exploitation of African resources and the growing impoverishment of the African masses. Pan-Africanism therefore is stripped of any idea of struggle against social oppression; it is hardly surprising that the African leaders who support this line see socialism not as the major threat. Opposed to this line is the tendency which seeks to root Pan-Africanism back in the struggle of the African people against capitalism and imperialism and for socialism. This tendency gains its practical expression in, for example the successful armed struggle waged by the Mozambican people against European capitalist domination and their continuing battle to build socialism in their country. This tendency, which was clearly expressed at the sixth Pan-African Conference in Tanzania in 1974, is well represented by the writings of Walter Rodney and Samora Machel.

open and firm condemnation of the actions of the apartheid regime.

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