

The life and times of Claudia Jones, early Marxist feminist and race liberator

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Claudia Jones was born in 1915 in Port of Spain, Trinidad. She emigrated to the U.S. with her family nine years later because of the collapsing economy. They settled in New York City.

A little history

Trinidad and Tobago, a British colony in the southern Caribbean, is seven miles from Venezuela. It was in the midst of severe economic crisis in the early 20th century – caused in part by the worldwide flu epidemic, and also by the decline in the largely agrarian but industrializing economy.

In November 1919, dockworkers went on strike over bad management and low wages. (This was the same year as the Seattle general strike, which also began with a dockworkers' strike.) Strikebreakers were brought in to keep goods moving through the ports. On December 1, 1919, the striking dockworkers rushed the harbor and chased off the strikebreakers. They then proceeded to march on the government buildings in Port of Spain. Other unions and workers, many with the same grievances, joined the dockworker's strike making it a general strike. The tremendous unity built by the strike between the various ethnic groups was a first. Historian Brinsley Samaroo says that the 1919 strikes "seem to indicate that there was a growing class consciousness after the war and this transcended racial feelings at times."

After arriving in New York City's Harlem in 1924, both of Jones' parents worked low-paid jobs, while Claudia and her three sisters attended public school. She was an honor student, but her parents were too poor to attend her high school graduation. Her mother died at 37 of spinal meningitis. Living conditions were so bad that Claudia came down with tuberculosis that left her with permanent lung damage.

She was too poor to attend college, and instead went to work, but also joined a drama group and began to write a column named "Claudia's Comments" for a Harlem journal.

She wrote:

"Together with my three sisters, our family suffered not only the impoverished lot of working-class native families and its multi-national populace, but early learned the special scourge of indignity stemming from Jim Crow national oppression... My mother had died two years earlier of spinal meningitis suddenly at her machine in a garment shop. The conditions of non-union organization, of that day, of speed up, plus the lot of working women, who are mothers and undoubtedly the weight of immigration to a

new land where conditions were far from as promised or anticipated, contributed to her early death at 37...I was later to learn that this lot was not just an individual matter, but that millions of working-class people and Black people suffered this lot under capitalism.”

In the 1920s and ‘30s, there was also organizing against racism and lynchings, and for unions. The campaign against lynching was begun and led by Ida B. Wells Barnett, born into slavery during the Civil War, a feminist, and journalist.

It was in this era, Jones learned of the attempt, in the state of Alabama, to frame and execute the Scottsboro Boys, nine Black youth arrested on a phony charge of rape. She began looking for organizations defending them and found, and joined, the Communist Party.

The Communist Party (CP) during this period had recruited many U.S. Blacks due to international support for the 1917 Russian Revolution. The Soviet Union’s original constitution legalized abortion and divorce, opposed the oppression of national minorities, decriminalized homosexuality, and opened communal kitchens and childcare for women workers. In the U.S., the CP organized public campaigns against racist practices and recruited many Black workers during the organizing that led to the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Claudia Jones described her reasons for joining the CPUSA:

“I learned that those who fought most consistently for the interest of the workers, for their trade union organization and social needs were the Communists. My daily experiences as a Black youth in the USA led me to search out political forces that were doing something about these things; political forces who not only fought on a day-to-day basis to alleviate these conditions but who had a perspective as to a radical solution of these conditions.”

Jones’s biographer Carole Boyce Davies wrote in *Left of Karl Marx: The Political life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*: “When Claudia Jones entered the Communist Party there were already examples of very active Black communist or leftist women who had visible identities.... In this context, Claudia Jones was not a lone, singular figure, or unusual. What marks her instead is that she became both an organizer and a leading theoretician.”

What also made her different was her intransigent feminism. Claudia Jones called for centering Black women workers. She wrote in 1939,

“Black women—as workers, as Blacks, and as women—are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population... The super-exploitation of the Black woman worker is thus revealed not only in that she receives as woman, less than equal pay for equal work with men, but in that the majority of Black women get less than half the pay of white women.”

The post-WWII conservative backlash called for women to return to the home. Jones and many others condemned that but she also pointed out that sexism was also racialized, especially for domestic workers: “The bourgeois ideologists have not

failed, of course, to develop a special ideological offensive aimed at degrading Black women...They cannot, however, with equanimity or credibility, speak of the Black woman's 'place' as in the home; for Black women are in other peoples' kitchens." She always pointed out the difference between the ruling class that generated and benefited from oppression and exploitation, and the working class that internalized oppressive ideas and behaviors despite their class interests.

In a 1949 essay, "We Seek Full Equality for Women," Claudia wrote:

"The triply-oppressed status of the Black woman is a barometer of the status of all women, and that the fight for the full economic, political and social equality of the Black woman is in the vital self-interest of white workers, in the vital interest of the fight to realize equality for all women."

This didn't mean subordinating issues of oppression to the class struggle, but of challenging the women's movement, trade union movement and her own party to fight every manifestation of sexism and anti-Black racism in order to raise the level of struggle:

"We can accelerate the militancy of Black women to the degree with which we demonstrate that the economic, political, and social demands of Black women are not just ordinary demands, but special demands, flowing from special discrimination facing Black women as women, as workers and as Blacks. It means first, to unfold the struggle for jobs, to organize the unorganized Black women workers in hundreds of open-shop factories and to win these job campaigns. It means overcoming our failure to organize the domestic workers... ..And it means that a struggle for social equality for Black women must be boldly fought for in every sphere of relations between men and women so that the open door of Party membership doesn't become a revolving door because of our failure to conduct this struggle."

Drawing on the militant history of Black women, from fighting slavery to organizing strikes in the 1930s, Claudia Jones theorized the intersection of Black liberation, women's liberation and socialist revolution:

"Only to the extent that we fight all chauvinist expressions and actions as regards the Black people and the fight for full equality of the Black people, can women as a whole advance their struggle for equal rights. For the progressive women's movement, the Black woman, who combines in her status the worker, the Black and the woman, is the vital link to this heightened political consciousness. To the extent, further, that the cause of the Black woman worker is promoted, she will be enabled to take her rightful place in the Black-proletarian leadership of the national liberation movement and, by her active participation contribute to the entire American working class, whose historic mission is the achievement of a Socialist America—the final and full guarantee of woman's emancipation."

Anti-radical witch hunt

U.S. immigration policy of the 1920s had drastically changed by the redbaiting 1950s. Claudia was arrested for being an unauthorized immigrant and for violating the Smith

Act by advocating the overthrow of the U.S. government. She was thrown in jail for six months. After a show trial of Jones and other CP leaders, all 21 defendants were found guilty. When they were allowed to address the court, Jones identified herself as a lifelong fighter for civil rights: “for full and 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.” She said she had learned about racism not in Trinidad but in the United States, “out of my Jim Crow experiences as a young Negro woman...the bitter indignity and humiliation of second-class citizenship, the special status which makes a mockery of our Government’s prated claims of a ‘free America’ in a ‘free world.’ ”

She was deported to England, a place she had never seen, in 1955.

CLR James, a fellow Trinidadian and former Trotskyist, also found himself ending up in England around the same time to avoid being deported.

In England Claudia had no family, no friends, no work or income—and British Communists were not so keen on her insistence on confronting racism, nor in acknowledging women leaders. But Jones persevered. England was in the midst of a wave of immigration of British subjects from the Caribbean, including many WWII vets. They were met with racist hostility, violence, segregation and other discrimination.

Jones jumped right in and took over writing and publishing the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News*, the first major Black newspaper in England. She grew it from a one-page flyer to a regular journal that chronicled news and politics from London, the Islands, and the world. She used a fundraiser for the paper to launch London’s first Caribbean festival—now known as the Notting Hill Carnival.

Her newsroom sat above a record shop in the West Indian community and was visited by leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois, along with anti-colonial leaders from around the world including Kwame Nkrumah.

On August 28, 1963, Jones led a march on the U.S. embassy in solidarity with the March on Washington.

Claudia Jones died at age 49 on Christmas Eve, in 1964, of a heart attack and tuberculosis. She was buried to the left of Karl Marx’s grave in Highgate Cemetery. Hence the title of her biography, *Left of Karl Marx*.

RESOURCES

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Deportations and migration

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