

# Claudia Jones: Afro-Caribbean communist woman in struggle

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Claudia Jones, second from left in front of banner, at anti-racist march in Notting Hill, London.

As Black History Month 2019 concludes and Women's History Month begins, we want to take time to honor a revolutionary Afro-Caribbean im/migrant woman who unfortunately isn't discussed as widely as she deserves to be, given her immense contributions to Marxist theory and organizing the struggle. Her name is Claudia Jones.

Her life was full of hardship, pain and suffering — but also unbreakable courage and dedication to fight for the full liberation of the Black nation and all oppressed peoples worldwide.

Wherever she lived, Jones was on the front lines, leading movements of resistance against injustice.

Jones was born Claudia Cumberbatch on Feb. 21, 1915, in Port of Spain, the capital city of the island of Trinidad. In 1924, when she was 8 years old, she arrived in New York with her parents, aunt and sisters. Her mother died less than a decade later at the young age of 37. Claudia then became ill with tuberculosis. She would suffer complications throughout her life. Her father, meanwhile, struggled to find steady employment due to racism, anti-migrant bigotry and the economic collapse of the Great Depression.

Jones became one of the most important political organizers in the Communist Party USA as well as an enormously important figure in the Black freedom struggle. Due to her life experiences, from a young age she had a very deep understanding of the class struggle and the way various oppressions intersect.



Claudia Jones addresses a crowd in London's Trafalgar Square, 1962.

## **Joining the Communist Party**

In the mid-1930s, Jones became an activist and organizer on the Scottsboro Nine case. More commonly referred to as the Scottsboro Boys, these nine African-American youths were falsely accused of raping two white women. The Scottsboro Nine were convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to death — without evidence, investigation or a fair trial.

The Communist Party and the NAACP led the defense efforts on behalf of these youths. Legal appeals, demonstrations, international solidarity campaigns and other tactics challenged the corrupt and racist injustice system that was seeking to lynch these young Black men.

This defense campaign was ultimately successful in saving the Scottsboro Nine from being executed — the common fate of Black people targeted with those kinds of

accusations. Jones' experience with the defense led her to join the Communist Party and the Young Communist League.

By the early 1940s, Jones was a leader in the two organizations. She also gained experience as a people's journalist, working as a writer and editor for various Black and progressive publications. She became a member of the CPUSA's National Committee as well as the secretary of the National Women's Commission.

### **Advancing understanding of intersectionality**

Jones developed much needed theory regarding the woman question, the national question and the way these oppressions intersect.

One of her best-known pieces was first published in the June 1949 edition of Political Affairs, the theoretical magazine of the CPUSA, dedicated to "The Struggle Against White Chauvinism." Her widely studied essay, later released as a pamphlet, was called "[An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman.](#)" Following are excerpts from this work:

"An outstanding feature of the present stage of the Negro liberation movement is the growth in the militant participation of Negro women in all aspects of the struggle for peace, civil rights and economic security. Symptomatic of this new militancy is the fact that Negro women have become symbols of the Negro people. This growth of militancy among Negro women has profound meaning, both for the Negro liberation movement and for the emerging anti-fascist, anti-imperialist coalition.

"To understand this militancy correctly, to deepen and extend the role of Negro women in the struggle for peace and for all interests of the working class and the Negro people, means primarily to overcome the gross neglect of the special problems of Negro women. This neglect has too long permeated the ranks of the

labor movement generally, of Left-progressives, and also of the Communist Party. The most serious assessment of these shortcomings by progressives, especially by Marxist-Leninists, is vitally necessary if we are to help accelerate this development and integrate Negro women in the progressive and labor movement and in our own Party.

"The bourgeoisie is fearful of the militancy of the Negro woman, and for good reason. The capitalists know, far better than many progressives seem to know, that once Negro women begin to undertake action, the militancy of the whole Negro people, and thus of the anti-imperialist coalition, is greatly enhanced.

"Historically, the Negro woman has been the guardian, the protector, of the Negro family. From the days of the slave traders down to the present, the Negro woman has had the responsibility of caring for the needs of the family, of militantly shielding it from the blows of Jim Crow insults, of rearing children in an atmosphere of lynch terror, segregation and police brutality, and of fighting for an education for the children.

"The intensified oppression of the Negro people, which has been the hallmark of the postwar reactionary offensive, cannot therefore but lead to an acceleration of the militancy of the Negro woman. As mother, as Negro, and as worker, the Negro woman fights against the wiping out of the Negro family, against the Jim Crow ghetto existence which destroys the health, morale and very life of millions of her sisters, brothers and children.

"Viewed in this light, it is not accidental that the American bourgeoisie has intensified its oppression, not only of the Negro people in general, but of Negro women in particular. Nothing so exposes the drive to fascism in the nation as the callous attitude which the bourgeoisie displays and cultivates toward Negro women."

## **Surveillance, repression, deportation**

Jones was targeted by the state as her theoretical contributions and political organizing increasingly posed a threat to white supremacist capitalism. She had been monitored by the FBI since the early days of her membership in the CPUSA.

Jones was first arrested in January 1948, during the early days of the Cold War witch hunt, based on her migrant status and radical political organizing. She was soon released after posting bail, but it was only the beginning of her travails with the criminal injustice system.

She had applied for and sought citizenship status for many years but was denied time and time again because of her affiliation with the CPUSA. (To this day, U.S. citizenship can be denied to migrants based on membership in a communist organization, affiliation with anyone who is a member, or any other political stand deemed hostile to U.S. imperialism.)

The state next targeted her through the McCarran Act and the Smith Act, federal measures used against the organizing efforts of revolutionary organizations and particularly those members who were most vulnerable by lacking citizenship status.

By the early 1950s, Claudia Jones was in a women's prison awaiting deportation. Due to her health problems and the horrendous living conditions in prison, she suffered a heart attack.

Many public figures, community members and communist organizers came to her defense, including her friend Paul Robeson, who demanded Jones' release from prison and that she be given proper medical attention.

Jones was finally released in late October 1955 while deportation orders were being prepared. A farewell was held at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem. Hundreds of people showed up to express their solidarity and commitment to continuing the struggle.

This was the same hotel where Fidel Castro stayed in 1960 and held his historic meeting with Malcolm X.

Blocked from returning to her native Trinidad in the midst of the growing anti-colonial movement in the British-ruled islands of the Caribbean, Jones was deported to Britain. This certainly didn't stop her from continuing her radical organizing.

### **Repression breeds resistance**

While Jones was dealing with her deportation and worsening health, she remained dedicated to the struggle against imperialism, capitalism and all of its tools of repression. Though hospitalized for long periods, she continued to expand her work through all of this hardship. She became a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and joined the West Indian Forum.

Jones was active in organizing the Caribbean migrant population in London. By 1958, she had co-founded the West Indian Workers' and Students' Association and the West Indian Gazette newspaper. It would later be renamed the West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News. The publication played a major role in the Caribbean diaspora community, helping to found the first Caribbean carnival in London. It later became the Notting Hill Carnival, an annual event that continues to this day.

Jones helped to organize the Afro-Asian Caribbean Conference. In 1964, she traveled to China and met with communist leader Mao Zedong. She also attended women's conferences in the Soviet Union.

She organized demonstrations against apartheid in South Africa, along with rallies calling for the freedom of political prisoner Nelson Mandela. Jones embodied the spirit of international proletarian solidarity.

### **Left of Karl Marx**

Claudia Jones died of heart failure in December 1964 at age 49. She was buried in the east section of Highgate Cemetery in London. Her gravestone is located near that of Karl Marx, directly to the left.

Marx's tomb has been in the news recently due to two separate acts of vandalism. It's crucial that we defend against these attacks on the legacy of Karl Marx — a tradition that Claudia Jones continued and developed.

Jones' gravestone reads, "Valiant fighter against racism and imperialism who dedicated her life to the progress of socialism and the liberation of her own Black people."

In the spirit of Claudia Jones, the struggle continues!

*Sources: Carole Boyce-Davies, "Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones," Duke University Press, 2008; Carole Boyce-Davies, "Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment," Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2011; Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman," Political Affairs, 1949; Claudia Jones, West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News.*



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