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ANALYSIS

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a survey of contemporary events - issued periodically

CONGRESS AND THE MULTI-RACIAL CONFERENCE.

The multi-racial conference met in Johannesburg from Tuesday the third to Thursday the fifth of December 1957. On these three days, some 300 delegates gathered to discuss aspects of what was termed a "multi-racial" society. Who were these delegates? What did they discuss? What was their purpose in meeting?

The proposal for calling this conference came from the gathering of the Interdenominational African Ministers Federation (IDAMF) in 1956 when it met to discuss the Tomlinson report. As a response to this call, a committee was formed, composed of members of the Liberal Party, churchmen, and some members of the Congress movement.

It was planned to have a conference of individuals drawn from every body in the country, but not delegated to represent any movement. To this end members of the main parliamentary parties were invited, as well as members of Congress, Race Relations, the Churches, University staff etc. Although it was not expected that there would be any response from members of either the Nationalist Party or the United Party, the conference personnel was heavily weighted to the right by the professional men, academics and clergymen. Due further to the insistence of representatives of churchbodies the conference was held in mid-week, and thus the vast majority of the workers, farm labourers etc. were tacitly excluded from the deliberations. Thus the overwhelming class composition of the participants was middle-class and the proceedings were dominated by their ~~ideas~~ even though on occasion some progressive voice found its way through the blanket of academic talk.

Our purpose in examining the conference proceedings is to see what the Congress leadership's purpose was in attending. The main theoretical basis ~~arises from their~~ concept of the "united front", and applied to current events this means finding a "broad alliance" to fight the Nats at the coming parliamentary elections. Only by examining these factors will we understand the mixture of enthusiasm displayed by "New Age" in publicising the conference and the fear expressed in "Liberation" that the whole venture might fail. Here we will find the basis for the cautionary note struck by Congressmen when they spoke at the opening session, and here the cause of Liberal contentment at having carried the day.

The problem of parliamentary elections looms large today, and so this must be examined first. The decision to boycott elections goes back to the 1949 conference of the ANC, but this resolution has never been put into operation. In Easter 1957 the SACPO conference passed a resolution to boycott "coloured representatives", in Parliament, and for the first time a Congress movement took a decision that rejected sham representation. But there was a group of Congress leaders, centered mainly in COD who were determined to reverse the decision. They did in fact succeed in obtaining a reversal in December (after the multi-racial conference) in what can only be called a treacherous manouvre. Without abiding by a democratic majority decision, a small set of leaders are set on

subverting the interests of the whole liberatory movement to their own end.

Several articles appeared during the year in "Fighting Talk" and in "Liberation", and the possibility of participating in the elections was discussed. The first definitive statement however came from Chief Lithuli, and was printed in "New Age". In it there appeared the central slogan proposed for the coming period - - "The Nats must Go!" Although the document then proceeds to say that oppression must go, the key-point is the suggestion that the Nationalist Party must be dislodged from its present position inside parliament. The whole struggle shifts itself to the electoral front, even though the tactics suggested for Congress are those of demonstrations etc.

In reviewing Chief Lithuli's statement, we must make it clear that we are not suggesting that we ignore the elections. We are interested in each and every political event that occurs in the country. We believe that Congress must utilise every possible situation to put forward its own demands and draw the people into action in support of them. Thus an election period is a particularly fruitful period for embarking on a campaign.

The Freedom Charter calls for "Votes for All", and in terms of this, Congress tactic must be to utilise the coming elections to demonstrate our demand for the franchise. Congress must declare that no minority parliament can express the needs of the people, and that the present debacle of a weak spineless opposition arises only because both major parties are united in their determination to maintain oppression. Until the people are directly represented in the governing bodies of the country there will be large scale alleviation of our plight.

If we are interested in the elections, it is because it offers the opportunity to demand full citizenship rights. And to make this demand effective Congress has to prepare a campaign to rally the people. The failure to do so, to date, despite the suggestions in Chief Lithuli's statement is a bad omen. We can only hope that the coming workers conference, late as it is, will combine the campaign for higher wages with the demand for full equality, and will organize their demonstrations to coincide with the elections.

We must furthermore reject Chief Lithuli's false call for a UP government to replace the Nationalists, for this is not our aim. It might or might not be true that the UP will respond more to our pressure - for our part we remember the government of Smuts as the one that shot down the people mercilessly - but that is not what we are fighting for. We demand the right of the people of the country to be free, to regain possession of the land that is denied them, to have their rightful share of the wealth of the country. Because of this we also demand the vote now, as one aspect of the democracy we want. This has nothing in common with trying to influence a minority electorate to vote for one or other of the parliamentary parties. If in our demonstrations we do influence a section of the people, and do gain sympathy for our demands, well and good. If however our actions have the opposite effect on the majority of the electorate, we will not stop our demonstrations, nor will it halt our determination to liberate ourselves. Let us get a clear indication that the leadership will not conclude alliances with any body behind our backs that will hinder us in our campaigns.

Over and over we will repeat - our aim is not to obtain parliamentary changes but to secure freedom, and all our activity is directed to this one end. Thus we reject the slogan "The Nats must Go!" The only slogan we know in election time

is "The Full Unfettered Franchise!" Our only goal is to break down exploitation and to take our rightful share of the wealth of the country.

The Congress approach to Parliament is part of a larger theme - the call for a "United Front" to fight oppressive legislation in general and the Nationalist government in particular, and we thus turn our attention to the bigger problem.

There is a myth current in some quarters of the Congress movement that we must learn from the experiences of China, for there, it is argued, the forces of Mao-Tse-Tung showed how constant alliances were able to turn the struggle in their favour. Without discussing the merits of the present regime in China, we must get the perspective correct. No matter whether Mao-Tse-Tung's tactics were always correct or not, they were always based on the organisational strength of the forces at his disposal. That was his genius. When he proposed alliances, it was based on the solid force of his armies - he argued from strength and could hope always to advance in strength as the result of any set of actions.

In South Africa it is just the opposite. Congress in most cases is calling for "United Fronts" with other bodies when it itself is organisationally weak; when it has failed to build up its own strength; when its resources are squandered through inefficiency, bureaucratic control and a leadership that is divorced from the rank-and-file as the current discontent in the Transvaal ANC amply testifies.

"United Front" can only advance the struggle in proportion to Congress' own internal strength, and is no substitute for the need to get down to the solid organisation of branches in every area across the length and breadth of South Africa. The first task to-day is to build up a strong united Trade Union movement that will give a fighting determination to the struggle in the towns. It is time to stop treating S.A.C.T.U. as the unwanted foster-child, for our strength in the towns is dependent on the organisation of the workers in the factories and the shops.

Branching out from the town there must next be the organisation of the farm workers for we will be powerless without the support of the majority of the people who are spread out on the farms and in the reserves. As long as Congress can not intervene to help the people of Zeerust, of Izaneen, of the Transkei etc. it cannot claim to be the leading voice of the oppressed people of South Africa.

There must be a close link between building our own forces and entering into pacts with other bodies to fight specific struggles - but there must be the clear realisation that we can never achieve more than our own organisational strength allows. No tactic, no campaign can ever overcome the weaknesses within our own ranks.

Nine-tenths of the struggle for freedom lies in the tireless organising and education of the people. And whereas at times we can speed the process precisely through well-placed alliances with forces that have moved close to us on any one issue, we can lose the initiative to other bodies if we place our entire perspective on alliances with them on their terms. The development of the alliance between Congress and the Liberals in Durban might well be an example of the abdication of our forces if the position is not carefully watched. In this

province, where the Liberal Party is more militant than elsewhere in the country, their ideology has already seeped deeply into the movement - and by narrowing the differences between the Liberals and ourselves we are playing right into their hands.

It is also instructive to ask why Congress always turns towards the Liberals in attempting an United Front and never to potential allies that arise from amongst the ranks of the mass of exploited people. Generally speaking they always place their reliance on "white" politics thus perpetuating the mistakes of the past five decades.

There is no doubt that these middle class elements that make up the liberal ranks are more radical to-day than ever before, and that there is much more fire in their language. The very holding of the multi-racial conference is testimony of this direction. But as yet it is radicalisation of language only, and we have to see signs of action from these people. We must be warned now, that these liberals will water down our action in the future, and though we will have to work with them as far as they will go, there must be no illusions amongst Congressmen about the role the Liberals can and will play. Alliances in the future will be made, but success will depend on the clarity within the ranks of Congress, for only a clear-sighted rank and file can understand the part the middle class politicians of the Liberal Party can play.

Now let us turn to the Conference itself. It was obvious throughout the three days that there were two distinct trends at work. The one was academic and wished to talk of the ill-effects of apartheid. The other wished to go beyond this talk for they felt that they knew precisely what the burden of apartheid meant - they wished to discuss methods of fighting the oppressive system. Such in broad outline was the difference between academic liberals and churchmen on the one hand and congressmen and radicals on the other. Over and over again this manifested itself with most of the papers presented at plenary sessions leaning heavily to the right and much of the discussion in commissions veering over to talk about action.

There was a complete spectrum of political thought, although the deliberations veered heavily to the right and leftist ideas were smothered in the atmosphere of concession and temperance. Unfortunately, Congress contributed its mite to the sterility of thought at most sessions, although prior to conference, an article by Brian Bunting in "Liberation" seemed to promise that this might not be the case.

In his article, Bunting explained that as the ANC was composed predominantly of workers, it was the task of Congress to show the close tie between the colour bar and class discrimination, and to show that the struggle against apartheid was bound up with the fight against economic exploitation. In other words it had been suggested that there should be an analysis of the class struggle to give more meaning to the discussions at Conference.

But this was never done, and the outcome was twofold. For one the Liberal ideology prevailed at conference and the only people who offered an alternative were not Congressmen but rather men like Madzunya (an Africanist) and independents like R. Segal. Certainly Congressmen made themselves heard, and many were obviously in the fore. But no vivid impact was made by

them, and because of this they failed to provide a clear lead.

The central debate at conference revolved around the question of the vote - and as the "Freedom Charter" calls for votes for all, Congressmen put up a valiant fight for having this accepted by conference. They met strong opposition against the immediate full franchise, and the verbal battle reached its bitterest in these discussions.

Congress had to fight for this resolution and here at least they did not fail, even though they did not carry the rest of the delegates with them. However, the compromise resolution was vague and could only report that no agreement had been reached on the implementation of the vote.

We would like to suggest however that by placing all this emphasis on the vote, Congress has been sidetracked. While never compromising on this issue there should be the understanding that the vote is only one of the things we are fighting for. Political democracy without economic democracy is an empty shell, and we must constantly show this relationship. Perhaps Congress has become too intent on arguing with the Liberals - perhaps we are losing sight of the demands of the toiling masses of South Africa - let us return in the future to the people's demands and give a fuller picture of what the franchise means to us.

The subdivision of conference time into sessions on Education, on ~~Civil Rights~~, ~~or~~ Economics and on Politics made it difficult to show the ~~interconnection~~ ~~between~~ these aspects of society. And hence the economic findings were separated from the political resolutions. This fitted in no doubt with the thinking process of the right wing. It is tragic that Congress allowed the proceedings to continue without showing the link. The lack of clarity in the movement about societal relations is directly responsible for this omission.

The conference closed after a brief session that was to discuss future action, and again there was little agreement. Conference opinions ranged from those who wanted no action at all (the Roman Catholic Church) to those who wanted some action to emerge from the deliberations.

Congress as we suggested at the beginning, came to conference hoping to sound out attitudes for a united front - on the other hand it expected nothing to come from the conference itself as there were no bodies directly represented and delegates were present as individuals. Furthermore, Congress realised that there would be difficulty in binding together the conservative elements that were at conference with the demands of the people whose militancy stands out the very opposite of the mood of these people.

We cannot help but feel that there is something wrong in the Congress approach and hence an inability to solve the problem presented by a gathering such as the multi-racial conference. What is required is that Congress should clearly state what the coming tasks are. The entire movement must be geared in that direction and all plans made. In terms of that we can enquire what allies we can find in the struggle. Towards such an end we can set about making such alliances.

But to go to gatherings such as the multi-racial conference to sound out public opinion is the wrong direction. Alliances are made by direct public approach to existing bodies, and they will exist only when the pressure of the people in action force the vacillating elements towards us. If there is the desire for united action there will be no need for us to compromise on ideas or to placate the conservative elements. As this conference could never hope to lead to such a united front, in view of its composition and terms of reference Congress failed miserably in not providing precisely that analysis that Bunting foreshadowed.

Even on the very short range project of the coming parliamentary elections nothing could be said at Conference and we fear from events unfolding in SACPO, that instead of militant demonstrations we are going to be served up with a compromise between Congress and the Liberals forged behind the scenes and without the ratification of the Congress rank and file.

Of the future of the multi-racial body it is too early to speak - but one thing is clear :- If Congress does not move over to action in fighting the oppressive system, it will be reduced to useless talk which will leave it trailing far behind the people.

K. Shanker

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