

Africa's National Congresses

JOHN REX and the British Left

Two events of considerable importance have occurred recently which affect the relations between the British Labour Party and the Congress organisations which are the main vehicles of political expression for the Africans of East, Central and South Africa. One was the adoption of the policy statement "The Plural Society," which despite some ambiguities appears to involve the adoption by the Labour Party of the main points of the Congress programmes. The other was the holding of a conference of Commonwealth Labour Parties at Dorking, to which representatives of the Northern Rhodesian and Nyassaland African Congresses were invited. These two moves seemed to involve a completely new attitude on the part of the Labour Party from that which prevailed in 1950, when James Griffiths initiated talks which led to the setting up of Central African Federation against the will of every significant African leader, and when Mr. Attlee, on a fact-finding visit to Northern Rhodesia stayed at the home of the reactionary settler leader Welensky and played the white sahib in his talks with the leaders of the "natives."

This change of attitude within the Labour Party has not been brought about overnight or without persistent argument and agitation. The agitation began during the Central African Federation controversy, when a delegation of Africans from Central Africa, led by Harry Nkumbula, aided by the Africa Bureau which had been set up by Rev. Michael Scott addressed crowded public protest meetings in all the great provincial centres. The success of these meetings took the Labour leadership by surprise and, somewhat reluctantly opposition to the Federation Bill was organised. The opposition was not, of course, whole hearted. Mr. Griffiths did little more than plead for delay until the Africans could be persuaded to accept the scheme, and Mr. Attlee called on his followers to "make Federation work", as soon as the Labour amendment had been defeated. Moreover a small group of Labour M.P.'s refused to vote against the scheme (their names are significant: Hartley Shawcross, George Brown, Richard Stokes, Stanley Evans, Gordon Walker, Maurice Webb, Charles Hobson, M. Phillips Price and Tom Reid). But nonetheless this was the beginning of the development of a new policy. Shortly afterwards the formation of the Movement for Colonial Freedom provided a means whereby members of the Labour Party could be brought into direct touch with colonial leaders, and by 1956 over 100 Labour M.P.'s had become members, and by the tune the

Mau-Mau revolt in Kenya occurred, there were a substantial number of back benchers, who were no longer prepared to allow the acquiescence of the Front Bench to constitute the last word in Labour Colonial Policy. When "The Plural Society" came to be written it embodied a view of Africa's multi-racial societies which had been hammered out in talks with men like Nkumbula of Northern Rhodesia, Mboya of Kenya, or Nyerere of Tanganyika. Its publication served to regain for the Labour Party some of the respect it had enjoyed prior to Mr. Gordon Walker's appointment at the Commonwealth Office and (a sure sign that it was tackling the essential political issues) it put the fear of God into the settlers.

This is not to say, of course, that there is no criticism which could be made of "The Plural Society" from the left. It might be possible to go much further and demand a far less gradualistic transfer of power to the African people. But if we consider the realities of political life it must be obvious that energies of the left will be fully engaged in ensuring that the policy of the Plural Society is fully carried out by the next Labour Colonial Secretary. The principal danger is not that the policy is not revolutionary enough. It is simply that a Labour Colonial Secretary will not have the courage to carry it out. (Already The Economist, which is a shrewd judge of these things, has suggested that Bevan at the Foreign Office would not allow the diversion of energies and resources at the command of a Labour Cabinet to stirring sleeping colonial dogs.)

The next task for those whose agitation has led to the publication of "The Plural Society" is to mobilise an informed public opinion which will demand that its main provisions be carried out. One important step in this direction would be the persuasion of the left of the Labour Party and the left outside the Labour Party that the sort of struggle which the Africans of Northern Rhodesia or Kenya are waging and in which they are gaining some measure of support from Labour, is of central importance for British Socialists. For it is evident at the moment that there is still a considerable amount of suspicion or even hostility on the part of left wing Socialists towards the African Congresses and ipse facto to the new Labour Policy.

The crux of the new Labour Policy is that it declares itself in favour of universal adult suffrage in colonial territories, and that it is not prepared to agree to the granting of self-government to any territory which has not reached this stage. Thus the possibility of a settler-dominated Central Africa or Kenya gaining independence is ruled out. This would involve a reversal of the policy which Mr. Gordon Walker set in motion in 1950 and has been enthusiastically welcomed by Africans, who feel that there is far more hope of organising their own fight for freedom while

there is some outside check on settler domination than there would be in independent white governed states. By the same token the policy has been roundly abused by men like Michael Blundell in Kenya or Roy Welensky in Rhodesia, who have now become determined to wrest their independence from Whitehall before another Socialist Government is returned to power.

The left-wing suspicion of and hostility towards (Congress policy seems to rest on one or more of the following three propositions:

1. Socialists do not foresee the possibility of a genuine social revolution being organised on a nationalistic basis. Nationalist movements are at best irrelevant, at worst positively obstructive to the transition from Capitalism to Socialism.

2. The Congress movements are concerned merely with the capture of Parliamentary power. But in a capitalist society, Parliamentary power cannot be used to achieve any fundamental transformation (cf. British Guiana). Further, some Marxists would add, Parliamentary government is the appropriate form of government for bourgeois society. A socialist society must devise other means (e.g. a system of Soviets).

3. No Socialist can approve a policy which not merely condones, but positively demands a continuance of the colonial status of African territories.

There are examples of this sort of criticism. The New Statesman, for example, has continually dismissed African demands for increased political representation for Africans as racial chauvinism. The New Statesman's own panacea is the common voters' roll. This it claims would, put an end to racialism, but it fails to say whether the common roll proposal would be linked with universal franchise or even with qualification levels which would put Africans in a majority among the voters. So that the Southern Rhodesian system which has ensured settler domination for thirty years would appear to meet with its' approval. Similar positions are often taken up by writers in the Fabian Colonial Bureau's publication "Venture" in dealing with African issues, though usually the Bureau is unwilling these days to discuss anything so controversial as the distribution of political power and devotes itself in a thoroughly Webbian manner to string pulling to achieve economic reforms, which it is believed will one day lead Welensky's successors to exclaim "We're all interracialists now."

But this devotion to economic rather than political change coupled with a certain hostility towards African politicians is to be found much further to the left. Thus, for example, the Trotskyist "Labour Review" has recently criticised "The Plural Society" for the second of the reasons mentioned above, claiming that the great exploiting mining companies cannot be dealt with by Parliamentary

methods. The same arguments have often been used in the literature of the British Communist Party, leading, as Peter Worsley has pointed out in "The New Reasoner" to inadequate attention being given to what might be achieved by constitutional means. More recently Doris Lessing's "Going Home" has appeared. Mrs. Lessing knows full well how much is at stake for the Africans in the next few years and she seeks to defend them against some attacks. But so far is she from appreciating the nature of the Congress movement that her defence amounts to little more than saying "their bitterness is understandable", while freely admitting that the attitudes of most congress members are utterly emotional and irrational. (For those who have read the adulatory reviews of "Going Home" and who feel this assessment unjust, I recommend that they read Chapter Nine and ask themselves whether it is not reminiscent of what a good personnel manager with the interests of the firm at heart might not write about militant shop stewards).

Why then this unwillingness to support African democrats more fully? Partly it is due to the fact that the Communist Party has become a sort of a church with its ritual discussions about the success of collective agriculture in Russia or Eastern Europe or China, and because the lively African political movements are so unlike what the prayer book says revolutionary movements should be like. So also in the Trotskyist reformed church.', And so also in many of the sects which have emerged with the fragmentation of the monolith. The, problem of socialism is still thought of too much as a Russian' problem and British and French Socialists alike have used theoretical discussion of socialism in Russia as a means of escaping their own responsibility for the period of really bloody imperialism which Lyttelton and Lennox Boyd, Mollet and Lacoste have helped to usher in. Partly, also, I am convinced, the failure of British Socialists to take any interest in what goes on in the African colonies is due to unconscious racial prejudice. How else could one explain the refrain of the Universities and Left Review, "If only there was another Spain" (There are still over 20,000 Kikuyu detained without trial" in concentration camps).

But there are also deeper reasons, and they are reasons of Marxist theory. What we have to discuss is what role the African Congresses will have in history. If our socialism is not to be merely Utopian and Romantic we have to ask whether a movement of the Congress type can bring about a genuine social revolution, and how far such a revolution will have advanced us towards a classless, casteless society. Quite a number of Marxists have considered these questions and have answered "No" to the first and "Not at all" to the second. I disagree. And here are my reasons.

Marx concluded that class struggles were the mainspring of history. He believed that classes had their origin in the differences

in the relationship which different groups of men had to the means of production. He did not however show on a theoretical level how a group of men with the same relationship to the means of production became a class, though he was dealing with this very topic at the point at which the manuscript of the fourth volume of "Capital" comes to an end. Thus it has often been pointed out that Marxism gives an insufficient account of the psychology and sociology of the English Middle Classes and also of the non-class-conscious proletarian. This is the sort of problem to which Marx had not given his attention. Had he done so he would undoubtedly have made a still greater contribution to sociology.

I would suggest that if Marxist methods are to be usefully applied in a wide variety of contemporary political situations, two questions must be regarded as open questions, to which there is no dogmatic answer. These are, firstly, "Are the bases of class formation confined to men differential relation to the means of production or do classes arise in other ways?"; and, secondly, "Given that classes have been known to emerge in a certain type of situation, what are the special circumstances (e.g. leadership, possession of an ideology, organisation, etc.) which encourage or discourage their emergence?" The difference between Marxism as a dogma and Marxism as a method of political analysis today is that the former regards these as closed questions. To the first it answers, "Classes arise solely from the differential relation of human beings to the means of production", to the second "a true revolutionary proletariat will only arise when it is led by a Communist political party, such as European experience has taught us is necessary."

For myself I would suggest that the problems of Africa be approached with both of these questions left open. I do not want to deny, in any way, that capitalist exploitation in Africa is a fact. The company reports (e.g. of copper mines paying two to three hundred per cent, dividends) are sufficient evidence of this. But I do want to insist that there are other facts besides this which have as profound an effect on people's lives and which are no less essential for the understanding of their political motivation. The best way to understand this is to consider what life is like for the African in a white-settler-dominated colony.

In the first place, of course, the African is a proletarian. He may still have rights in a piece of land, but this piece of land is quite inadequate to support him, given the new level of his wants as he begins to make contact with a world market economy. He has no rights at all in the land near the railway lines, in the land in which profitable crops like tobacco, coffee or tea may be grown. And of course he has no rights of ownership in the expensive machinery which is necessary for profitable mining.

The position of the white settler in Africa is rather different.

As a white man he can obtain a great deal of help to set himself up as a farmer and many white settlers (often from the slums of England) have become men of property in this way. Incidentally it should be noted that this way out is still open and is still taken by hundreds of English "proletarians." I have rarely addressed a Labour audience on Africa without being buttonholed afterwards by someone who wants to tell me of a relative who has gone to settle in Kenya or the Rhodesias.

But if a settler does not wish to farm, he can in some colonies at least obtain a post in industry. Here, of course, he is as much a proletarian as the African worker, but it would be ludicrous to suggest that even in some potential sense African and white worker belonged to the same class. The European has effective trade unions which have won for him in Northern Rhodesia for instance a wage of £120 per month as a minimum, and which have by debarring Africans from skilled work turned skilled jobs into a form of European property. The African worker on the other hand finds his trade unions smashed at the least provocation by Government action and has a minimum wage of 85/- per thirty working days.

Thus, even if we insist that the only sort of classes which exist are those which arise out of the social relations of production, it is obvious that the class struggle in Africa is not two but three sided. The capitalist class, which includes a high proportion of absentees in Britain and America from time to time finds the cost of European skilled labour prohibitive and attempts to replace it with cheap black labour. But this is difficult because European workers can strike secure in the knowledge that the settler controlled police will never be used against them. At the same time, provided that undercutting is prevented the European worker particularly in the mines is so well paid that he has no particular interest in socialism. Thus the position of the capitalist is secure. The African workers clearly have two alternatives. One is to demand that African workers have access to the same jobs as Europeans. The other is to strike for higher wages. So long as they confine their struggle to the first of these, they will find that they gain sympathetic hearing from the employers and from the employers allies in the British Conservative Party. When they attempt to raise the position of the mass of the Africans however by strike action they find themselves fighting both white workers and employers. It is the settler controlled governments even more than the employers who demand police and military action on such occasions. The only possibly moderating influence will be the action taken by the Labour Party in Britain. On the Northern Rhodesian Copper Belt the Labour Party can claim to have helped the Africans to build up their trade union organisation and to win wage increases by strike action.

The action of employers in playing off one section of workers

against the other is familiar enough to any British Trade Unionist. Moreover it might perhaps be claimed that the settler-workers are so handsomely bribed that they might be expected to become the defenders of capitalist interests and to be entrusted with political authority. There is some truth in this, but it is not the sole truth about mixed societies.

The position of the settlers is not merely that of agents of absentee capitalists. They have their own interests to defend, and to understand what these interests are it is necessary to turn ones attention from the social relations of production to what might be called the social relations of consumption. No-one who has not lived in a colour bar society or under some form of feudalism can readily understand just how different such societies are in their structure from those of capitalist Europe. And the difference is most obvious with respect to the way in which people may spend their money and use their leisure. The central fact about Africa's settler dominated colonies is that one section of the workers together with the farmers have the means to enjoy as high a material standard of life as any other group on the face of the earth. On the other hand the Africans not only lack the means to enjoy a similar standard of life, but are legally debarred from doing so and are compelled to spend a very large part of their own time contributing to the domestic and recreational pleasures of the settler. Thus domestic service ranks third among the sources of employment for Africans in Southern Rhodesia, and one must reckon alongside the class struggle in industry, the class struggle in the home between master and servant. A great many Africans in Rhodesia and in Kenya do not participate directly in production. Their position is like that of women and minor children. Their share in life is what the lord and master is prepared to give them, when he comes home from his work in the mines. Nor is it only the domestic servants who are in this category. So also are a large number of those who work in agriculture and get the bulk of their wages in kind.

The most important fact to notice about Rhodesia or Kenya today is that this struggle has to be won before the struggle against capitalism can begin. The African has to participate directly in the labour market before he can have a say in fixing terms under which he will get his subsistence. The first revolt in Africa must be the revolt of the servants, and with it the revolt against the colour bar, without which the definition of an hereditary servant class would become obscure. The servants must join those Africans who are already in industry or in genuine agricultural work and fight with them to overthrow the rule of the settlers which enables their exploitation to take place.

There are many strands in the political pattern of Africa today but whatever ones position, whether chief or peasant, teacher,

worker or domestic servant, one finds that ones way to the leading of a satisfying and secure life is blocked by settler power. Nor is this power exercised in any obscure way but simply by police violence. If you strike, if you boycott the shops, if you cheek your master, if you resist being moved from your land to make way for settler enterprise, the police will arrest you. They may beat you, torture you or kill you with little risk of protest from overseas (Thus Mr. Lennox-Boyd brazenly admitted recently that a man who had organised and permitted the torture of prisoners was being given a new job so that he could make a fresh start.)

The power of the police derives from the Legislative Council and the Legislative Council typically consists of members appointed by the Governor, on behalf of the Colonial Office, members elected to represent settlers, and a few members elected or nominated to represent Africans. If African servants and labourers are to improve their position at all they must first ensure that the police power may not be used so indiscriminately against them. They can do so only by obtaining a majority in the Legislative Council, and this they may get through the implementation of the policy statement "The Plural Society."

The only other way which the Africans may take is the way of violent revolution. This is a course which is very popular, I find, with some British Trotskyists, whose most dangerous act has been to sell Tribune outside a meeting. It has also been tried in the past and will be tried again by Africans. But it is extremely unlikely that such a movement would lead to the emergence of an effective revolutionary government. Inevitably British troops would be sent to protect "the kith and kin" not only of Lennox Boyd, but of many rank and file members of the Labour Party, and in the long run these troops would crush any revolt as surely as they crushed Mau-Mau. What violence might achieve, as it has done in Kenya is to enable the parliamentary leaders to win concessions by way of a greater transfer of political power to Africans. Whatever course is taken this is the point at which revolutionary change will come. It can come without violence if British socialists are prepared to use the power of the Imperial government to break the settler control of colonial legislatures.

African "nationalism" so-called is the movement which has grown up amongst the people of Africa who have been deprived of their traditional homes and livelihood, who have been given only partial access to the labour market, and who when they work in industry can only do the menial jobs. Wherever the African is he knows that his oppression depends upon something called the colour bar, and that the only revolutionary struggle of any importance at this stage is the struggle to destroy this colour bar. This the Congress leaders are seeking to do by wresting political power from the

settlers. That is what African Nationalism is about. It has nothing to do with the glorification of race or nation. It is no more nor less emotional in its appeal than any other movement to free a people from a condition of near-slavery. It invites the support of democrats of all races and nationalities. In the most highly developed country in Africa that support has been forthcoming and people of all races have united behind "The Freedom Charter"—one of the finest documents produced by any political movement anywhere since the days of the British Chartists.

To what extent will such a movement help in bringing about a socialist revolution in Africa? The answer to this question is that no socialist revolution can begin until the revolution of the people's congress has won for the Africans the right to participate in a modern capitalist economy. When the colour bar and the racial dictatorship which maintains it have been overthrown the fight between the exploited workers and absentee capitalists will begin. There will also be the task of developing new industries to support more people. What policies will be adopted then and which policies will be most practicable is not something which it is possible to predict exactly. There will no doubt be some division between those leaders who would like to see the emergence of an African middle class to take over the positions of power vacated by the whites, and these will be opposed by egalitarians who will seek to reduce or eliminate the differentials which exist. There will also be disagreements about what is practicable by way of transferring industry to social ownership, so long as the territories lack capital and depend for their livelihood upon single products subject to violent price fluctuations on overseas markets. But what is immediately certain is that the present system, whether it be called a caste system, feudalism or racial domination involves a tyranny far more ruthless than anything which England has ever known.' If British Socialists have nothing to say about such a system they will cease to count for anything in this post Bandung world. If they give it their support, or, better,; if they become part of it, they will recapture something of their vision of what Socialism is about.