

“AFRICANISM” UNDER THE MICROSCOPE



by JOE MATTHEWS

THE Pan-Africanist Congress which met during the Easter weekend in Johannesburg is reported to have devoted much time to the discussion of policy. Unfortunately the Conference was held largely behind closed doors. The public was thus not able to judge the attitudes of the Africanists first hand.

Nevertheless it is known that the conference considered two statements of policy. These were the opening speech by Mr. R. M. Sobukwe, elected President of the Pan-Africanists, and also a Manifesto presented by Mr. P. Raboroko.

The manifesto is couched in terms so tortuous as to be almost incomprehensible. The opening speech by Mr. Sobukwe contains certain propositions which cannot be left unchallenged.

After a few introductory remarks Mr. Sobukwe paid tribute to the scientific achievements that were fast establishing man's control over nature but remarked on the unwillingness or inability of man to solve the social relations between man and man. It is this failure, according to Mr. Sobukwe, which has resulted in the existence in the world of the capitalist and socialist sectors of the world. This facile explanation of the origins of capitalism and socialism is designed to conceal rather than clarify the realities of the present world situation.

Every schoolboy knows that there was a time when the economic system of production known as capitalism held sway throughout the whole world. By 1913 the capitalist system, after replacing feudalism, had established itself as the dominant mode of production. In that year capitalism was in that phase of development in which the supremacy of monopolies and finance-capital had established itself; in which the export of capital had acquired a great importance; in which the division of the world among the big international trusts had begun; in which the partition of all territories of the earth amongst the great capitalist powers had been completed. That is the phase scientifically referred to as Imperialism. It is precisely imperialism which reduced the whole of Africa into a colonial hunting-ground of capitalist exploitation. It is then that the problem of African freedom from imperialism and colonialism arose. Africa was divided amongst six or seven imperialist powers and that still represents the basic

problem of the African continent today. No African patriot can forget this and divert the attention of his people away from this reality. There was no Soviet Union in 1913 and the whole of Africa was suffering under the iron heel of the imperialists.

In 1917 one-sixth of the earth broke away from the imperialist system and the first state controlled by the have-nots came into existence in the Soviet Union.

Today more than one-third of mankind are no longer under imperialism and are building their countries anew on the basis of a completely planned economy in which the profit motive has no part.

It does not help for Mr. Sobukwe to pretend that Africa is somehow exempt from the inevitable historical processes that are at work in the rest of the world. Mr. Sobukwe says that Africa is being wooed now by the two opposed systems or blocs. He says there is a new scramble for Africa. He employs other picturesque expressions. But he avoids saying categorically that Africa suffers today and has suffered for generations from the ravages of the Imperialist powers, Britain, United States, Belgium, Portugal, France etc. In Kenya, Algeria, and elsewhere foreign troops are attempting to halt the march to freedom of the African people. These same powers prevented Banda from accepting the invitation of the Africanists to open their conference. There is not one single private of the Red Army on African soil.

Borrowing terminology from the armoury of the capitalist press Mr. Sobukwe gives the impression that the Soviet Union is somehow trying to gain control of Africa. Knowing that there is not a tittle of evidence to substantiate this he confines himself to vague generalities.

Mr. Sobukwe is at least generous enough to acknowledge the superiority of the socialist economy over the capitalist. He has no choice. The most bitter enemies of socialism cannot deny this any longer. But he then goes on to deplore what he calls "totalitarianism" which he alleges exists in the socialist countries. In the name of the Africanists he makes a choice in favour of "political democracy as understood in the West". Mr. Sobukwe knows nothing of the socialist countries except what he hears from the capitalists. But at least he should have experienced "Western Democracy."

"WESTERN DEMOCRACY"

Can any African forget what Western democracy has meant to us? Has it not meant colonial slavery? Is Western Democracy to us not the suppression of liberty in Angola, Algeria, Nyasaland, Rhodesia and elsewhere? Has this western democracy not meant racial discrimination in the United States and South Africa? Mr. Sobukwe must not be surprised if he finds little enthusiasm amongst the African people for Western democracy. To us it means national oppression and exploitation.

For Mr. Sobukwe to say that Africa will borrow the best from the East and West is merely begging the question. He is inviting the Africans to ride astride two horses going in opposite directions. The whole world is marching to socialism and the only argument is on how to carry out the re-organisation of society on the basis of socialism.

The speech deals to some extent with National movements in Africa. It is a pity that Mr. Sobukwe does not describe what a national movement is and how it differs from a political party. If he had done this he would have been compelled to acknowledge that a national Movement unites all the people of an oppressed national group which has lost or is in danger of losing its independence. The National movement brings together the oppressed nationality as a whole no matter to what class they belong as long as they are prepared to fight for national freedom. In the interest of the struggle for national freedom the people sink their political, religious and other differences in the interests of the struggle. It is fatal for such a movement to start witch-hunts of "communists" or "Charterists". Those who engage in these witch-hunts can only be regarded as disrupters of the national movement in the interests of the ruling class which they assist objectively. As long as the African people have not achieved national freedom they will reject attempts to divide them on the basis of ideology. That is why splinter groups have been decisively rejected by the people for the past forty years. The African National Congress which is their mouthpiece remains their primary organisation for that reason.

Mr. Sobukwe deals in his speech with the question of the Indian people. His ideas of the political trends among the Indian people belongs to a past era — thirty five years ago. According to him the merchant class among the Indian people provide the leadership of the Indians. He claims that the merchant class identifies itself with the oppressors in South Africa. I am certain that the Indian merchant class which is faced with ruin under the Group Areas Act would be pleased if the ruling class in South Africa showed some appreciation of the identification which it is alleged to exhibit towards the oppressors. That, however, is by the way. What must be contested is Mr. Sobukwe's claim that the merchant class constitutes the leadership of the Indian people. Has Mr. Sobukwe never heard of the struggle whereby the representatives of the merchant class were thrown out of the leadership of the Indian Congress in 1945? Does he not know the history of the Dadoo-Naicker leadership which took over the Indian Congress in the name of the masses? It is well-known that the merchants then formed their own organisation — the South African Indian Organisation. They broke away from the South African Indian Congress on the grounds that it was under the control of "leftists" and "communists". They complained of the Indian Congress policy of co-operation with other groups including the Africans. The Indian merchants demanded the formation of an all-Indian organisation where the Indian people will be by themselves without interference. Has Mr. Sobukwe heard these aims before? Is not the language of the Indian merchants very similar to his own?

No Mr. Sobukwe the correct thing to do is to study Indian history and learn a little of the struggle of the Indian national group against oppression in South Africa. The majority of the Indian people follow the lead of the Indian Congress which wholeheartedly supports the policy of the African National Congress.

In dealing with the ultimate goals of the Africanists Mr. Sobukwe remarked that the Africanists "do not all subscribe to the fashionable doc-

trine of South African Exceptionalism." This would be admirable if it were true. He, in common with other Africanists for instance, seem to deny that the Africans in South Africa suffer class oppression. They affirm that the Africans only suffer national oppression. There is no class struggle in South Africa, say the Africanists. This is the worst example of South African exceptionalism. The fact is that the African people suffer double oppression — national and class oppression. National or caste oppression means that all Africans whatever their class position suffer certain disabilities as such. But of course there are other disabilities that they suffer in common with workers of all races as part of the working class. In Ghana they have freed themselves from national oppression. But the class oppression still remains. In a certain historical situation the class struggle may be blurred by the national struggle but to forget it is treason to the masses of the people. Perhaps that is why the long opening speech by Mr. Sobukwe contains not one word of interest to the long suffering masses of our people — the farm labourers, peasants and urban workers.

NEW DEFINITION

Finally Mr. Sobukwe proposed a new definition of an African and affirmed the refusal of the Africanists to guarantee the rights of minorities. He was prepared to accept as an African everybody who owes loyalty to Africa and who accepted the democratic rule of an African majority. There is much in that definition which would be of great interest to students of logic. As far as we are concerned Africans will remain Africans no matter what definitions are adopted. The real point of importance is the fact that the Africanist policy is to refuse guarantee of rights to minority groups. According to Mr. Sobukwe only individual rights are recognised in the Africanist conception of democracy. Very generous indeed to at least recognise the rights of individuals!

But the whole point is that in countries where the population is not homogeneous, where there are a number of national groups, it becomes necessary to go further than merely to recognise the right of each individual citizen of the state. It becomes essential to create conditions under which those who do not belong to the numerically superior national groups are able to develop their languages, culture and customs without let or hindrance.

The Pan-Africanist Congress adopted as its policy the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. They ought to remember that this Declaration was adopted after a world war caused by groups which refused to respect minority rights. The Nazis practised oppression of the Jewish minority by the majority. It is the "democratic German majority" which oppressed the Jews. True enough each individual Jew had equal rights theoretically in the state in common with other individuals. But no rights as a minority group.

The guarantee of full rights to minority groups is fundamental in any truly democratic society.

And it must be emphasised that this has nothing to do with the preser-

vation of the privileged position of dominant minority groups exercised at the expense of the majority. In various parts of Africa, notably in Kenya, white minorities are demanding guarantees of their present privileged position even after the achievement of power by the Africans. Quite obviously this cannot be mistaken for the guarantee of the democratic rights of minorities. But the aims of the African people can clearly not be to replace the present set-up with one in which minorities are suppressed.

The African National Congress throughout the whole of its history has always been most careful about the safeguarding of the rights of minorities. Despite the sufferings inflicted upon the African people by non-African minorities, our national organisation has never allowed bitterness and desperation to dictate its policies on this question. The Africanists must take a look at what is happening to the English in South Africa and the manner in which their rights are fast disappearing. It is almost becoming a crime to speak English. Yet the English have equal rights with the Afrikaners as individuals! The Africans do not want to repeat the mistakes of Afrikaner Nationalism.

The question still remains as to the plan of the Africanists for the people NOW. The African people are under attack now more than ever. The issues that face them must be taken up with courage no matter what the odds are against which they are pitted. The people want a clear lead. They want "positive action" to use the popular expression of genuine African Nationalists throughout Africa.

On these matters Mr. Sobukwe gives us not a clue. Or is it perhaps that the risks of challenging the Nationalist government are too great? Every second African is a master of oratory and rhetoric. We do not need these any more. Even more important than what we will do when we are free is the immediate question of what we are prepared to do now. On that basis the people will judge any political group which desires to lead them. Visions, no matter how vividly portrayed, can never take the place of present-day realities.

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