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# Self-guided tour of revolutionary history

Tuesday 9 October 2012, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 25 September 2012).

**The newly published proceedings of the Communist International's Fourth Congress, *Toward the United Front*, makes it possible for any socialist activist or independent researcher to make the acquaintance of a wide spectrum of revolutionaries of the 1920s, both prominent and obscure. [1] No guide or interpreter is needed.**

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Toronto socialists have developed a format for such encounters, in which participants present and debate the ideas of various congress delegates, without an opening introduction and often with theatrical flair. Here is a record of one such study session, organized by the Toronto Pape-Danforth branch of the International Socialists on September 7, 2012. A previous Pape-Danforth event dealt with the Communist Women's Movement; another session, on trade unions and other areas of work, is scheduled for November 16.

Preparatory materials for a series of such study classes will be posted on this website in November, when Haymarket Press will publish a low-cost paperback edition of the 1,300-page congress proceedings.

The chosen topic for the September discussion was, 'Colonial Peoples at the Fourth Comintern Congress'. Participants began preparations by reading relevant sections of the book's introduction, which provides a road map to the proceedings. They selected speeches by delegates from India, Indonesia, Tunisia, the United States (African Black Brotherhood), Australia, and the Communist Women's Movement, along with comments in the congress on how much time the congress should devote to revolution in the colonial and semi-colonial countries.

Each of these seven texts was presented by a different participant; there was then general discussion. Here is the introduction provided to participants before the event; their contributions are given in a separate article. [2]

## Guide for a participatory study session

At the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, the last attended by Lenin, delegates from many colonized peoples discussed how to forge a broad revolutionary alliance that could break the yoke of imperialist rule.

*Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress* contains an extensive discussion on the freedom movement in the colonies and semi-colonies of Asia and Africa, which delegates referred to as "the East."

Our study session is based on six Congress speeches on this topic, plus a seventh topic on a procedural dispute regarding the Eastern question. The resolution on this topic and a portion of the editor's introduction are also indicated for reference.

The readings are as follows (page references are to *Toward the United Front*):

1. M.N. Roy (India) 686-94
2. Tan Malaka (Indonesia) 261-65
3. Tahar Boudengha (Tunisia) 700-5
4. Otto Huiswoud ("Billings", U.S.) 800-7
5. William Earsman (Australia) 716-19
6. Varsenika Kasparova (Comintern) and Clara Zetkin (Germany) 868-70 + attached
7. Did the Congress give sufficient attention to the Eastern question? 32-3, 707, 650, 735

#### *Background*

1. Editor's introduction 28-33
2. Resolution 1180-90

### **Marxism strikes roots in Asia**

Immediately before the congress, the Turkish people won a decisive victory in their independence struggle, driving imperialist troops from their soil. The Turkish victory blasted open a breach in the oppressive treaty system imposed by the victors of World War 1 in Versailles in 1919 and shifted the world relationship of forces. This event gave a lift to all anti-colonial struggles, which were beginning to gather strength across Asia.

The Communist International (Comintern) had taken a stand for colonial freedom on its foundation in 1919, and this issue was at the centre of its 1920 congresses in Moscow and Baku. The Comintern maintained that the rise of national freedom struggles in the East was essential to workers' victory in the imperialist countries of Europe and instructed all of its affiliates to give active support to movements for colonial independence.

By 1922, small Communist parties existed in many countries of Asia. The Fourth Congress included delegates from six countries in Asia, two in North Africa, and many Asian nationalities within the Soviet federal republic. Two delegates represented a revolutionary Black organization in the United States, the African Black Brotherhood. The Congress established commissions to draw up resolutions on the Eastern Question and the Black Question, and convention sessions were devoted to debate on these issues.

Delegates from Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and South Africa were also present, but none of them spoke on the question of colonialism.

One delegate, Varsenika Kasparova, spoke on work among women in the East. Since her talk was very brief, it is coupled in this outline with a related article by Clara Zetkin.

## **For an anti-imperialist united front**

The chosen readings cover the following topics:

- M.N. Roy, a pioneer Indian Communist, introduces the concept of a united front of revolutionary forces seeking to overturn colonial and semi-colonial rule.
- Tan Malaka described how such an alliance had been realized with anti-imperialist Muslim forces in Indonesia.
- Tahar Boudengha reported on the obstacle posed by a “Communist Party” in Algeria made up of European settlers who supported colonial rule.
- Otto Huiswoud introduced a resolution for a united Black freedom struggle in both hemispheres.
- William Earsman described the difficulties faced by Communists in Australia in countering white racist sentiments among many workers there.
- Varsenika Kasparova outlined the advances of women working people in many Asian countries. An article by Clara Zetkin, written in 1926, describes work by Communists in the Caucasus to advance the cause of liberation among Muslim women.
- The final selection presents complaints that the congress did not give enough attention to revolution in the colonies and semi-colonies, together with responses by the congress Presidium.

## **Procedure**

The readings for this study session total about 35 pages; participants should read them all. There will be no introductory presentation; instead, seven participants will give short reports.

Each of the seven readings should be assigned to a participant, who will prepare a five-minute presentation. The presenter should consider adopting the voice of the Fourth Congress speaker in order to give the gist of the speech. The presenter should then conclude with a few comments of her/his own.

An open discussion period will follow. If there are more than ten participants, the session can divide into breakout groups.

**John Riddell**

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**P.S.**

\* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/09/25/self-guided-tour-of-revolutionary-history/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] John Riddell, ed., Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the

Communist International, 1922, Leiden: Brill, 2012; Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012.

[2] See on ESSF (article 26595), [Colonial peoples at the Fourth Comintern Congress](#).