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Colonial peoples at the Fourth Comintern Congress

Tuesday 9 October 2012, by [BAKAN Abbie](#), [DONNELLY Brian](#), [GUETTEL Charnie](#), [NIKOV Michael](#), [RIDDELL John](#), [VATIKIOTIS Michael](#) (Date first published: 7 September 2012).

On September 7, 2012, Toronto socialists presented and discussed the thoughts of delegates to the Communist International's Fourth World Congress, 90 years earlier, on the freedom struggle in the colonies and semi-colonies. Six of these short talks are reproduced below, with the presenters' permission. For a description of how this innovative study session was organized [1].

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Tan Malaka (Dutch East Indies). Presented by Abbie Bakan

The Fourth Congress had a solid foundation in earlier congress meetings, with a commitment to support national liberation movements against imperialism and colonialism. But applying this in practice on the ground proved a challenge. Even the allotment of a reasonable amount of time to discuss the "Eastern question" was contentious.

Some delegates identified the changing relationship between Marxist and pan-Islamic currents within the anti-imperialist struggle. Tan Malaka, a delegate to the Fourth Congress from the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia after independence in 1945), addressed the promise of uniting in practice, and the dangers of a sectarian attitude.

"We have a long experience of pan-Islamism.... In Java there is quite a large association called Sarekat Islam (Islamic Federation), which includes many poor peasants. Between 1912 and 1916 this organization had perhaps a million members - it could well have been as many as three or four million.... Our party, with thirteen thousand members, went into the popular movement and carried out propaganda there. In 1921 we were successful in getting Sarekat Islam to adopt our programme. The Islamic association spoke out in the villages for control of the factories and for the slogan: All power to the poor peasants, all power to the proletarians!...

But in 1921 a split occurred as a result of clumsy criticism of the leaders of Sarekat Islam. The government, through its agents in Sarekat Islam, took advantage of this split and also made use of the decision of the Second Congress of the Communist International: 'Struggle against Pan-Islamism!' What did they say to the ordinary peasants? They said: You see, the Communists do not merely want to split your religion, they also want to destroy it....So we had a split."

As Tan Malaka appealed to the delegates to understand this error, and to apply the tactic of the united front consistently, the chair interrupted, "Your time is up". But Tan Malaka replied: "I come from the Indies; I travelled for forty days." At this point, the proceedings indicate "Applause", and Tan Malaka continues to draw lessons for the Comintern.

Clearly there are rich lessons in these discussions for socialists today, who continue to challenge imperialism, and to strive to build global solidarity.

Communist Women's Movement. Presented by Charnie Guettel

Varsenika Kasparova contributed to the Fourth Congress, on the subject of colonialism and socialism as regards women. But I am going to present Clara Zetkin's views on this topic, based on the reading of her article on women in Soviet Transcaucasia. Toward the end, I'll expand on it a bit, in my own words. Here's what Clara tells us.

The Muslim Women's Clubs of the Soviet Republics are of great historical significance, as I learned from visiting the Muslim Women's Club in the town of Tiflis in Transcaucasia. Here the rooms were bursting with women educating each other, to learn to read and write, to learn skills for making a living, to reach equality with men in a patriarchal world where before the revolution women had no rights.

In many ways migration to the cities from the mountains and the steppes and all of the countryside left women worse off than when they were agricultural. Even their traditional skills were in many ways lost, and since everything now came about from money, the male wage in the household left the women more dependent on the men than ever before.

As a consequence of this change, the Muslim women lost their significance in the eyes of their husbands as co-workers preserving the family.

At the Women's Clubs, it is in the hands of the women to educate each other, both in the skills they once had in the country (sewing, embroidery, and other crafts) and the new technical and cultural skills of an industrial society.

The women's struggle is key to the national liberation struggle. We have much to learn from the Muslim women of Tiflis. The Soviet Union, including the Russian Empire, is founded in this stage of proletarian socialism, on transforming private agriculture, a system of millions of poor peasants recently liberated from serfdom, into a socialist economy.

How we collectivize agriculture depends on our understanding of the many peasant cultures and religions that make up the Soviet Union. If we steal their land and land rights with no recompense, destroy their churches, their religious leaders, 'outlaw' their customs, we do so from ignorance and prejudice, setting up the culture of urban secular industrial workers as the only way to live.

It is possible that the proletarian attitude of superiority to country workers (such as mischaracterizing poor peasants as "Kulaks") is ingrained because agricultural work is in

appearance more like the unpaid “women’s work” of the home and childrearing that still leaves the women of our industrial proletariat with a double burden.

And as for religious culture being in and of itself “anti-socialist”: most people, especially the poor who suffer the most, pray, and treasure sustaining systems of worship and prayer (religion).

If you don’t think all too often dogmatic communists aren’t religious, just take a look at how the unacknowledged sectarian practices have already limited our scientific socialism. Faith in socialism has a religious aspect, as the Muslim women of Tiflis could tell you.

Otto Huiswoud (African Black Brotherhood). Presented by Suzanne Weiss

Hello, I am Otto Huiswoud. I was born in 1893 in Suriname. I’m a Black political activist, and a charter member of the Communist Party of America. I was the Party’s representative to the Executive Committee of the Communist International in 1922.

I want to summarize the views I presented at this congress, comrades.

The Black question is a part of the racial and colonial question, but it has until now not received any special attention in the Communist movement. The Black question is chiefly economic in nature both in the U.S. and Africa.

The fact is that the 12 million Blacks in the U.S., where I live, bear the mark of slavery. Comrades, “you would believe yourselves to be in Dante’s inferno” in the South of the U.S. It is as if it were a separate country. The class struggle there is waged in its most brutal form, in a life-and-death struggle where Blacks are lynched at times as occasions for enjoyment.

The bourgeoisie fully understands the usefulness of Blacks. Blacks are sent to the northern industrialized cities as strike breakers with promises of higher wages and better conditions. The trade union bureaucrats have refused Blacks membership. The capitalist and reactionary Black press exploited this fact in order to turn Black workers against the unions and white workers. But the bourgeoisie had set its task as infecting the Black population with bourgeois ideology.

However, it is inevitable that Blacks would find a way of defending themselves against the oppression that it suffers.

At first, Blacks were permitted to organize only through churches. This continues today, however, there are three Black organizations that have significance. The first is the NAACP, composed of proletarian forces but led by bourgeois intellectuals. Its activity is essentially begging the capitalist to improve the conditions of Blacks;

There is the Black nationalist Garvey movement. It has a membership that reaches deep into Africa. It has awakened Black consciousness and against imperialism.

All the Black organizations are to some degree against capital. But organization with which I stand is the African Blood Brothers whose program is based on the destruction of capitalism. This rebellious movement is growing.

The Comintern commission on Blacks has drafted theses which, comrades, must be applied immediately and diligently. The three points of Communist focus is:

1. It is essential to support every form of the Black movement that undermines capitalism and

imperialism in Africa, the U.S. and among the colonial peoples.

2. Black workers must be organized everywhere.

3. The Russian revolution and the great revolts of Asian and Muslim people have awakened the consciousness of millions of Blacks. We should call a conference of Blacks here in Moscow.

Upon reflection, I, Suzanne, note that Huiswoud, and other Blacks from the U.S., much like the women at the Fourth Congress, had to be forceful in focusing the attention of the delegates on the Black question. Huiswoud and the other Black delegate, Claude McKay, thoroughly understood the international nature of capitalism and imperialism and applied it to the Black struggle.

Their eloquent intervention reminded me of Malcolm X and his efforts to internationalize the Black struggle, making ties between the U.S. Blacks and those in Africa. After a rough beginning, Malcolm urged unity among Blacks, and recognized the enemy was not the white worker, but capital both here and abroad. He and Huiswoud and McKay would have made a fine team at the Fourth Congress. Fundamentally, Malcolm X was making inroads, and in my opinion, that is why he was assassinated.

M. N. Roy (India). Presented by Michael Nikov

M.N. Roy begins his contribution to the Fourth Congress by expressing his displeasure at both the lack of discussion on the national question prior to the Congress, and the lack of time allocated, saying:

“Comrades, the Eastern question should have been dealt with many times already. It should have been taken up in connection with the capitalist offensive, for when you speak of this offensive, you should not ignore the reserves on which capitalism is based and which it can call on in the future. But this was not the case. And now that this question finally is posed for debate, the time allowed for that is so limited that it is in practice simply not possible to handle the question in anything like a clear manner.”

This being said, Roy quickly moves on to confirming that in the wake of the Russian Revolution, “the national movement in the colonial and semi-colonial countries is objectively revolutionary, and thus forms part of the worldwide revolutionary struggle.”

However, Roy cautions that “today we know that the Eastern countries cannot be treated as a politically, economically, or socially homogeneous entity,” and special care must be taken to understand the particular “social character” of the “East”.

To Roy, the East can be divided into three categories, each with its own “objective factors” and challenges:

1. Firstly, there are “countries in which capitalism has reached a rather high level of development” (p.2). He argues that revolutionaries should not have any illusions about the revolutionary potential of the native bourgeois in these countries, stating:

“[T]he highest layer of the bourgeoisie, that is, the layer that already owns what one might call a

stake in the country and has invested significant capital and built up industry, now considers it more advantageous for them to shelter under imperialist protection.”

The native bourgeois, as a result of its late arrival on the scene, is “in no way ready to play further the role as a liberator.” The native bourgeois will make compromises with their imperial masters to maintain “law and order” and may even force concessions. However, these concessions will create the “seeds of future conflicts.”

2. “Secondly, there are countries where capitalist development has begun but is still at an elementary level, and feudalism still constitutes the backbone of society.” Here, compromises will be offered, but Roy argues that:

“[T]he results of this policy have been less satisfactory than in the [more developed] countries. The interests of the feudal bureaucracy and the colonial feudal lords cannot be as readily appeased as is possible between the imperialist and native bourgeoisies.”

In this case, Roy is more favorable to the developing native bourgeois taking a leadership role in the national struggle, although warning “that this objective factor must not be accepted unconditionally.”

3. And finally, a third category exists, “where primitive conditions still prevail, and the social order is dominated by patriarchal feudalism.”

Roy looks to “another social factor” that can decisively intervene in the national struggle, assume leadership, and redirect it. In the more capitalistically advanced Eastern states, this must be the proletarian class, while in countries with feudalistic and military cliques, the peasantry (i.e. the “agrarian movement” to Roy) will assume this role.

While Roy does not explicitly rule out an alliance with the revolutionary bourgeois parties, he holds more hope in the proletarian classes in Western imperial countries forming an anti-imperial united front with their comrades in the East.

This would ensure that the Eastern proletarian parties will be free from depending on the “wavering bourgeois and bring the masses more actively into the vanguard.”

Tahar Boudengha (Tunisia). Presented by Brian Donnelly

We know very little about Tahar Boudengha except that he was a delegate from Tunisia, where he was a postal worker. What he said in the congress was very influential. Here’s a summary:

French imperialism has colonies close to Europe, with troops readily available to suppress socialism and revolution even in France itself.

There is discontent among the native people in North Africa. Tunisian communists orient to workers and peasants with daily papers and public meetings in Arabic. These have been too successful, and there is repression across all of North Africa.

French comrades who have visited confirm that the objective forces for proletarian revolution are present. We need an international campaign, a single party initiative that unites comrades in the colonies, in France, and elsewhere. The French party needs a single colonial policy that is clear about nationalism of the oppressed.

Progressive, reformist nationalist movements want a constitution, native rights, and land, but they are beaten down by the French army. We need to support genuine liberation movements.

The Communist Party in Algeria is focused on elections that exclude the native majority. has an electoral focus instead. They say the Comintern's call for liberation of Algeria and Tunisia was a mistake, hurting their electoral chances. They say the Algerian natives can only be liberated by revolution in France.

We should not bow to electoral concerns of "pseudo-Communists" in Algeria. They have too much influence on International's colonial policy. They get it backwards: the revolution in France can't succeed without the anti-colonial struggle in North Africa. The British Communists also lag in support for India and Egypt (and Ireland).

It is cowardly to abandon the oppressed. We need unity of oppressed peoples.

We should support pan-Islamism, as Tan Malaka has argued. Religion has been barrier to Communism, but Islam does not recognize wage labor, calls for the wealthy to give to the poor and unemployed. Rural land in Algeria is already under collective ownership. Muslims adopt communist ideas rapidly.

The International must not wait for the right conditions; it must lead this struggle now.

William Earsman (Australia). Presented by John Riddell

Good evening, comrades. My name is William Earsman. I'm a 38-year-old lathe operator representing the Australian Communist Party. I'm an Englishman, actually, but I've lived in Australia for 12 years.

Regarding the colonial question, our main challenge is the prejudices among white workers aroused by fear of cheap coloured labour. Australia's laws against coloured immigration reflect this fear. The capitalists have brought in masses of Indian and Chinese contract labourers to South Sea islands and are getting ready to do that in Australia. In response, workers are uniting in defense of the White Australia policy. I hear that something like this is also happening in your country, Canada.

At this year's trade-union conference in Melbourne, the Communist Party explained that these White Australia laws are harmful to the workers' cause. The laws defend the interests of Australian workers against those in Japan, China, and other nearby countries.

We have just succeeded in getting the revolutionary unions to drop their ban against coloured members. The unions organize 80% of Australian workers, and they are strong enough to force every coloured worker who comes to the country to join the unions.

The Comintern has underlined the growing danger of war in the Pacific. The capitalists will try to reinforce existing fears of the "yellow peril" with fear of a "yellow invasion." This could rally support war in numbers never seen before.

The Melbourne trade-union conference called for a pan-Pacific congress as the best way to reach agreement among workers from China, India, the Malay islands, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and elsewhere in the region. This congress will enable them to decide on the best ways to explain to workers the reactionary character of their support for the colour bar in Australia.

I ask your support for this project. Thank you.

Now for a comment. Earsman deserves credit for facing squarely the issue of racism among Australian workers and denouncing the White Australia policy. Previously, Australian labour had been aligned with the white-chauvinist forces in the Second International. He describes the colour bar as a concession to workers' pressure, missing the role of capitalism in promoting racist feeling.

He has a patronising attitude to racialized workers, saying they will be "forced" into the unions. In fact, they may bring with them the spirit of the Asian revolution. He does not see the energy and commitment they can contribute to the Australian workers movement.

Earsman's speech reflects how urgent and also how difficult it was to overcome chauvinist feelings among privileged workers in the imperialist countries, a chauvinism sometimes expressed even within the Communist International.

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/09/25/colonial-peoples-at-the-fourth-comintern-congress/>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 26594), "[Colonial peoples at the Fourth Comintern Congress](#)."