Overcoming barriers of racism at the 1922 Comintern congress

Sunday 16 December 2012, by RIDDELL John (Date first published: 15 December 2012).

We have been having study sessions in Toronto on *Toward the United Front*, my book publishing the Fourth Comintern Congress proceedings, now available in paperback from Haymarket Books. Here's my account of a recent session on discussion of anti-colonial struggle at the congress, reprinted from *Socialist Worker* (Canada) [1].

It was 1922, during the first hours of anti-colonial movements. Three activists in the colonial liberation movement came to Moscow to discuss their struggle with revolutionaries from around the world. They came from Tunisia, Indonesia, and Harlem, New York.

What did they have in common? Some members of the Toronto International Socialists met December 8 to discuss this, based on a reading of their speeches printed in the newly available book, Toward the United Front. Our discussion revealed that all three had experienced problems collaborating with socialists in the colonizing countries.

• **Tahar Boudengha**, from Tunisia, told the Moscow congress that self-styled communists in North Africa were building a party opposed to colonial liberation and supportive of French rule.

• **Otto Huiswoud**, from Harlem, said that the question of Black liberation had received "no special attention" from socialists; his group, the African Black Brotherhood, had few ties to the U.S. Communist movement.

• **Ibrahim Tan Malaka**, from Indonesia (then called the Dutch Indies), said that the work of his communist group there had been disrupted by an ill-considered attack on "pan-Islamism" at a world communist congress in Moscow two years earlier.

What was it, then, that drew all three, and many more activists from the colonies, to the Moscow communist congress? Our December 8 discussion concluded that the main factor was the world communist movement's overall commitment to colonial liberation, as demonstrated in the policies of the Russian Soviet government.

The three speakers from the colonies were new to the world revolutionary movement and still unknown. Yet, as was remarked in our discussion, the three delegates came to Moscow not so much as students but as teachers, confident that they had essential insights to offer their more experienced comrades.

• Boudengha insisted that pro-colonial "communists" had to be expelled from the North African movement, and the French party must commit itself to anti-colonial struggle.

• Huiswoud called on world revolutionaries to "support every form of the Black movement" that undermines or limits capitalism and imperialism.

• Tan Malaka asked for a policy of alliance with revolutionary anti-colonial Muslim movements.

All three proposals received approval from the world congress in Moscow. Our discussion identified five types of unity proposed in these three speeches: with revolutionary nationalists; with Islamic anti-colonialists; with racialized peoples; with peasants in the colonies; with revolutionary workers in the colonizing countries. Unity with women in colonial countries was discussed in another part of the Moscow congress. All these themes have echoed through anti-colonial movements over the last hundred years.

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P.S.

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http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/12/15/overcoming-barriers-of-racism-at-a-comintern-congress/

* The December 8 study group is one of a series of discussions in Toronto in recent months of Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, available from Resistance Press Bookroom. Study guides are also available. For more information, call 416-972-6391 or write reports socialist.ca.

Footnotes

[1] http://socialistworkercanada.com/