
Imperialism and Indian Nationalism.

By M. N. Roy (Moscow).

The annual meeting of the Indian National Congress has passed a resolution declaring complete independence to be its ultimate aim. The practical significance of this resolution is not so great as it may appear on the face of it. Nevertheless, the fact remains that for the first time, since its foundation forty-two years ago, the National Congress has made such a declaration. It is to be read only as the weather signal. Even in the stormiest days of its existence, namely in 1920/22, when the country was in the throes of a powerful mass movement, the National Congress persistently refused to define its object as the attainment of complete independence. The most radical expression of its demand was the Gandhist formula, self-government "within the Empire if possible and without if necessary" to be attained by "all legitimate means", and the cult of Gandhism tabooed any action as "illegitimate" which did not comply with its strict dictum of non-violence. Later on, Das,

who replaced Gandhi as the leader of the National Congress, definitely defined Indian nationalist aspiration as "equal partnership within the British Empire". In doing so he made the theory that membership of a great federation of free nations was a higher ideal than the isolation of national independence. In view of the fact that the National Congress, in all essentials, still remains wedded to the social conservatism of Gandhi and the political reformism of Das, its declaration as regards independence has no practical value.

Although neither the National Congress nor any of the individual nationalist parties ever declared officially in favour of independence as its goal, there existed an under-current in that direction. This was among the petty bourgeois intelligentsia who, however, idealized Gandhi and Das and followed them, although these sternly disapproved of their sentimental extravagance as regards independence and romantic inclination to

wards futile terrorism. The demand for national independence was never given the form of a political programme by the petty bourgeois intelligentsia. It was not popularised among the masses to gain their support in the struggle for it. A programme of national revolution placed before the National Congress by the communists in 1922 and persistently propagated since then, won but partial approbation of the petty bourgeois nationalists. They sympathized with the demand for independence, but did not have the courage openly to press this demand upon the National Congress; for that would require revolt against their idols, Gandhi and Das. The necessity of armed struggle as the means to national independence, maintained in the programme propagated by the communists, also appealed to their imagination; but they did not agree with the communist exposition of the cult of non-violence as counter-revolutionary, believing in the superiority of the "spiritual culture" of India which was able to accomplish something different from the experience in the "materialist West". They did not understand that armed uprising must be connected with a revolutionary mass movement. As a matter of fact, they entirely disagreed with the communists as regards the social programme of the national revolution. Consequently their demand for independence never entered the realm of practical politics. It could be dealt with summarily by the bourgeois leaders in every annual meeting of the Congress behind the scene.

This year the bourgeois directors of the National Congress have allowed the chorus of petty bourgeois intelligentsia to sing out of tune. Considered as an act of the Congress, a feat of bourgeois nationalism, the resolution is a mere stage-show put up with the object of terrorising the imperialist rulers. Even as such it is naive; because imperialism cannot be terrorised so easily. A resolution was adopted declaring that independence is the ultimate goal of the National Congress; but not a word is said as regards how this goal will be reached and what will be the nature of the independent national state. Thus it is but an expression of wish. The bourgeois leaders made this much concession to their petty bourgeois followers, because the latter's services are needed in the constitutional game of boycott of the Royal Commission. The boycott will be a very poor show, if it is practised only by those who will be asked to appear before the Commission to express their views as regards the constitutional progress of India. The number of those directly concerned with the work of the Commission does not exceed a couple of thousand — the representatives of the landowning and capitalist classes. A considerable portion of these have declared against boycott. Some of those, who are now talking of boycott, will climb down eventually. So the prospect of boycott, as such, is not very bright. Imperialist rulers know it, and have taken a rather indifferent attitude towards the threatened boycott. For example, a few days before the National Congress formally passed the resolution to boycott the Royal Commission, the British governor of a province, addressing the provincial parliament, advised the nationalists to take a realist view of the situation and pointed out that the proposed boycott would not hinder the work of the Commission.

On the other hand, past experience leaves the nationalist masses very lukewarm about boycott. The fiasco of the Non-co-operation movement is still fresh in their memory. But to give the boycott the appearance of the expression of a national protest, it is necessary to secure at least some wordy demonstration of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia. Besides, if necessary, their services may be utilised to stir up the masses, but to sabotage the movement whenever it will threaten to exceed the desired limit, as was done in the previous occasion. By the resolution of the Madras Congress the bourgeois leaders recover the confidence of their petty bourgeois following, thus obstructing their deviation towards revolutionary alliance with the masses. At the same time, the petty bourgeois intelligentsia, thus saved from revolution, will lend some mass appearance to the boycott by their enthusiastic noisiness. The boycott, however, will fizzle out in a fiasco, as the Non-co-operation, unless it is used as the lever for developing a revolutionary mass struggle against imperialism; but this cannot be expected from the nationalist bourgeoisie, who are not serious even about the boycott.

By the insolent policy of imperialism the bourgeois nationalist parties are placed in a very uncomfortable situation. They must make a show of opposition in order to save their

face. Not only the big bourgeois parties of the right, but even the petty bourgeois Swaraj (Congress) Party during the last two years adjusted its activities to prepare "a favourable atmosphere" for the grant of a further instalment of reform by the early appointment of the Statutory Commission provided for in the Reform Act of 1919. The general policy of bourgeois nationalism was to hold up the olive branch expecting that imperialism would meet it half way. The revolutionary mass movement, which had lent such a potentiality to the boycott of the first reforms seven years ago, was destroyed by a consciously counter-revolutionary policy. Every form of revolutionary activity was discouraged and condemned. Mass agitation was replaced by parliamentary obstruction as the main method of nationalist struggle. Even parliamentary obstruction was gradually abandoned so as to create an atmosphere of peace and good-will. The revolutionary workers' and peasants' movement was denounced as "Bolshevik conspiracy". All these counter-revolutionary preparations were made on the speculation over a further instalment of reform which would save bourgeois nationalism from utter bankruptcy and give to the native bourgeoisie some political rights in addition to the considerable economic concessions already made. But they miscalculated the situation. The policy of imperialism is economic concession, but political suppression. Imperialism can afford to make some economic concessions to the Indian bourgeoisie (it is forced to do so by its internal crisis) only in case it maintains the monopoly of political power. Failure to understand this fundamental principle of imperialist policy created in the Indian bourgeois nationalist movement the illusion of "equal partnership inside the Empire". Now it has become brutally clear that the reformist programme of bourgeois nationalism is not realizable. The petty bourgeois Congress (formerly Swaraj) Party, which for several years veiled its programme of compromise with imperialist domination in return for some concessions to native capitalism, in parliamentary obstruction, stands exposed in its native impotence. The resolution of the Madras Congress is only a stratagem to hide this total political bankruptcy.

The crux of the situation lies elsewhere. It is to be found in the remarkable left-ward swing of the Trade Union Congress. This has also declared in favour of boycott. In view of the fact that the working class have no direct concern with the Royal Commission; since as a class their views will not be consulted, the decision of the Trade Union Congress has but one implication, namely, that the working class enter the struggle against imperialism as an independent political force. This gives the new boycott movement potentially much more a revolutionary significance than the previous, when the working class was used by the bourgeoisie as a pawn in the game, and was misled and betrayed by the reactionary petty bourgeoisie. When, six years back, the revolutionary upheaval of the workers' and peasants' masses made the nationalist movement a powerful challenge to imperialist domination and brought it nearly down (the bourgeois nationalist leaders themselves testify to this), there did not exist in the country a revolutionary political party to lead that upheaval. Today the situation has changed essentially, if not entirely. The appearance of the working class as an independent political factor in the present critical situation is due to the fact that they have found their own party which leads them for the promotion of their class interests. Apart from the Communist Party, which could develop but slowly owing to imperialist terror aided and abetted by the hatred and hostility of the nationalist bourgeoisie, there has come into existence the Workers' and Peasants' Party. The activities of the Workers' and Peasants' Party and the revolutionary consciousness created thereby among the masses have pushed the Trade Union Congress to the left and have contributed largely to the resolution of the Madras National Congress.

Nearly a year before the petty bourgeois left wing of the National Congress could have the courage to express its desire for independence, the Workers' and Peasants' Party had placed before the country a comprehensive programme of national revolution. Its representatives on the Congress Executive repeatedly brought this programme for adoption by the Congress, only to be rejected. It is again the Workers' and Peasants' Party and the Communists who from the very beginning pointed out the insufficiency of the slogan of boycott, and proposed that this negative slogan must be supplemented by positive demands. They have begun the agitation for the election of a Constituent

Assembly which should decide the political future of India. If the National Congress and the individual bourgeois parties accept this proposal, a very broad anti-imperialist front will be created and the boycott will not fizzle out as in the previous occasion, but will be the lever to develop a mighty mass movement to realise the desire expressed in the Madras Congress. But there is sufficient reason to doubt that the bourgeoisie will participate in such a revolutionary struggle. Even the petty bourgeois intelligentsia cannot be fully relied upon. Apart from the lessons of the past, the statements made by bourgeois nationalist leaders inside and outside the country warrant such doubt. For example, the Congress leader, **Motilal Nehru** (who, by the way, stayed away from this year's session obviously in order not to commit himself one way or the other) appeared before the General Council of the League against Imperialism held in Brussels on Dec., 9-11, to express bitter disappointment at the behaviour of the British Labour Party. But at the same time, to disassociate himself from any possible revolutionary significance of his action, he took great care to explain that he did not belong to that section of the Nationalist movement which desired separation from the British Empire. When at

the end of the same month, on the motion of his son, the National Congress declared independence as its goal, the old Nehru sat in England looking out for an opening to begin negotiation with **Birkenhead** with the object of tiding over the crisis. Whenever such an opening will be available he will tell British imperialism: "don't take the young chaps at home seriously, I will know how to manage them."

But the real struggle is not held up by the compromise-seeking bourgeois politicians. The workers have begun it. The **Municipal Workers' Union of Bombay** (where the Royal Commission will first touch Indian soil) has decided to strike on the day of the commission's arrival. The British authorities instantly challenged the legality of the strike, but in remarkable contrast to previous experience, the head of the Union, who belongs to the Workers' and Peasants' Party, declared that the workers would strike disregarding the threat of dismissal and prosecution. Very likely the harbour workers and eventually the railwaymen will follow the lead, beginning a real struggle in spite of the counter-revolutionary bourgeois nationalist parties.