

THE CONGO ON THE ROAD TO SOCIALISM

by Sol Dubula

To assert that our continent is not outside history would not attract special notice but for the variety of theories we come across which, in effect, treat it as if it were. The class struggle is said either to be absent altogether or to be overshadowed and made irrelevant by different manifestations of the so-called "African personality". In some areas semi-feudal traditions; in others, the anachronism of tribal relationships; in yet others, religion, have become the inspiration for the strangest collection of doctrinal abominations which pass under names such as African socialism, Arab socialism, Muslim socialism and so on.

But the young Congolese Party of Labour believes passionately that Africa's peoples are subject to the same general laws of social development as all other peoples. For them there is only one valid ideological instrument - scientific socialism whose foundations were laid by Marx and Engels. They believe that in Africa, as elsewhere, the struggle for a higher social order will be fought out between contending economic classes and that the primary question at every given stage is: which class holds power? Without rejecting alliances, they believe that those which, in practice, exclude the existing or emerging expressions of the working people, do not advance the cause of socialism. And, in order to ensure that in the Congo the working people will become the dominant force, the CPL is attempting to mould itself as a workers' revolutionary vanguard party guided by Marxism-Leninism.

This is not to say that the CPL believes that the ways in Africa towards a society free of exploitation of man by man have nothing to do with a country's specific economic, cultural and social heritage. Marien N'Gouabi, chairman of the Central Committee of the CPL and president of the People's Republic of the Congo, stressed the connection between the universal and the particular when he said:

"Marx's science is not a dogma, but an open book. Unfortunately this correct thought is often used to negate Marx and his science, to produce harmful and artificial constructions contrary to Marx's scientific theory. The African is the same as all other people, and the society in which he lives is subject to the same universal laws. Our various peoples lived and laboured in dissimilar conditions. Relying on the universal laws, we must therefore study the concrete phenomena in time and space, that is, apply the scientific approach. It is just as unscientific to ignore the specific situation as it is to negate science in general. That is why we, the peoples of black Africa, can also contribute to human knowledge, enriching rather than negating science.

"We maintain that the future of the world, and of Africa, is associated with socialism. As we see it, therefore, the option today is not, in effect, between types of society but between the way and means of building a socialist society. *One can speak of African ways to socialism, but certainly not of an African socialism.* Then socialism will retain its scientific

character and at the same time take account of the specific conditions (that is, history, morality and customs, geography). This is no novel discovery. It was Lenin who said that all peoples will come to socialism – each in its own way and in different forms.”
(My emphasis, S.D.)

As a ruling party the CPL faces many-sided complexities and dilemmas because the Congo (like every other country in Africa) inherited a post-independence legacy of under-develop-



ment. It is faced too with the reality that despite growing public ownership the Congo's most important economic sectors remain essentially capitalist and are still dominated by imperialism. The economy as a whole is integrated into the world capitalist market and central planning is inevitably complicated by this fundamental fact. Whilst the Congo has a small but politically experienced and articulate working class (30% of the Congolese people live in the urban centres), the peasantry lives and works in primitive tribal subsistence conditions and its political consciousness is relatively low.

In such a situation it is crystal clear that the actual construction of socialism is not reasonably on the agenda as an immediate perspective. It is understandable why the CPL believes that the Congo is still faced with the task of completing the *National Democratic People's* revolution which only had its starting point when the French relinquished their direct political presence. The fact that the ruling party is guided in its actions by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism does not make the country socialist.

But the CPL also believes that advances in the struggle against neo-colonialism, for real independence and for the completion of the National Democratic revolution, depend upon which class or combination of classes holds political power. At this stage (as much as at the stage of the construction of socialism) a party representing the workers and peasants is a necessity and has a role to play throughout Africa. Experience in Africa has proved over and over again that talk of alliances and fronts between proletarian, semi-proletarian, peasantry, revolutionary intelligentsia and so on, can only have real meaning if the working people are able to express themselves organisationally and politically. Where this is not the case, where independent working class organisation is prohibited and trade unions are appendages of the state bureaucracy, the so-called alliance becomes the instrument of domination by a new exploiting group over the mass of the working people.

There are, of course, special problems facing a party, such as the CPL which is in the saddle of government in a state which is not yet socialist. Some of these will be referred to in a later article. The emergence of the CPL as the dominant political force in the Congo must be seen against the following historical background.

Before colonial rule established itself by an actual physical

presence, the Congo was part of that West African complex which provided one of the most fertile hunting grounds for slaves. The Kingdom of Bakongo was denuded by the Portuguese and Dutch slave expeditions and it is estimated that in the course of one century alone, approximately 150,000,000 souls were taken by force and transported to serve Western development needs. After that, by the end of the 18th century, direct colonial penetration followed. There was a long period of heroic resistance by the people which was eventually crushed by the imbalance of weaponry and technology. In the early phases of this colonisation, imperialism's presence was exercised by a combination of chartered companies, troops and the Catholic church. The best land was stolen from the people who were compelled to work it by a system of forced and semi-forced labour. Eventually (and partly as a result of excesses by the multi-national private companies which ruled the Congo) the French took over direct administrative control.

The contemporary class structure in the Congo had its beginnings during the colonial period. An urbanised working class and small rural proletariat was created. And, as in the rest of the African continent, privileged indigenous groups were created which served imperialism's administrative machine. Indeed, because Brazzaville became the main administrative capital of the French West African empire, the administrative elite from the Congo was relatively big and serviced and supported a large slice of the colonial apparatus in the whole region. This so-called 'evolvee' who, in the post-Second World War period, were given relatively high political posts, began to enrich themselves through political activity which in turn opened the way for the growth of a small group of businessmen and others who served imperialism in a comprador capacity.

Marien N'Gouabi summarises the class picture as follows: ". . . Colonialism created an urban and rural proletariat (through the policy of concessions) and at the same time spawned privileged classes – the bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie (bureaucratic, comprador and parliamentary) – connected with the old social strata and classes. This connection and resemblance is, amongst other things, clear evidence that pre-colonial society, too, had a class essence. So, as we see, Congolese society consists of classes, with some classes exploiting others, and the contradictions between them are antagonistic. But unlike many other African countries the

Congolese proletariat is conscious of being an exploited class and is therefore highly active on the political scene in order to change this state of affairs.”

In 1959 the French handed over power to the main representative of these new privileged classes -- Abbot Youlou. Like his middle class detribalised counterparts in other parts of the continent, Youlou cultivated tribal sentiment in order to create his political power base. It was through Abbot Youlou (and the privileged groups which surrounded him) that French imperialism continued to exercise its dominance, no longer by direct presence but through collaboration with its local representatives.

The period 1959-1963 witnessed a relatively speedy disenchantment by the Congolese people with the kind of “independence” symbolised by Youlou. The class struggle grew in intensity. It reached its climax on 13th-15th August, 1963, when Africa experienced what was perhaps its first post-independence popular revolution. Defended by French army units which had occupied Brazzaville, Youlou's overthrow was the culmination of a mass upsurge led mainly by the organisations of the working class.

The immediate cause of the upsurge was an attempt by Youlou to dissolve opposition parties and to destroy the power and independence of the trade union movement. The trade unions and other mass organisations called for popular demonstrations of workers, unemployed and students (who were then on vacation). The arrest of the trade union leaders on August 13th led to a protest general strike in Brazzaville, Point Noire and Dolisie. The presidential palace was stormed by the people, the jailed Trade Union leaders were freed by mass force and the Youlou administration was overthrown. The provisional government which came to power faced a multitude of manoeuvres and intrigues by imperialism and its local representatives designed to turn back and destroy the gains of the August Revolution. To meet this challenge, the working class organisations and other progressive forces decided to set up a single mass party -- the National Revolutionary Movement -- (NRM) which held its founding congress in Brazzaville in 1964.

From the outset the NRM proclaimed itself in favour of scientific socialism. But there was a clear gap between the reality and the rhetoric. Within this newly formed organisation, fundamental differences emerged on issues such as which class

holds power and the strategy for carrying forward the revolution and developing the country. As in many other parts of Africa, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie was set on transforming the NRM into an amorphous mass movement which pretended to accommodate all the social groups but which in reality eliminated working class and trade union participation in politics. The leader of the right-wing, Massemba-Debat, made various attempts to eliminate the genuine progressive and revolutionary elements within the NRM. In the face of this attempt, the Congo experienced its second popular uprising in July 1968. A mass upsurge organised by a combination of progressive army men (President N'Gouabi was the most prominent), trade unions, youth, women's and other mass organisations, toppled the government of Massemba-Debat.

The political reassessment which followed led to the establishment in 1969 of the Congolese Party of Labour. The CPL regards itself as a working class party guided by Marxism-Leninism and standing at the head of the Congo's fight against imperialism and for the eventual establishment of a socialist society. It proclaims its world outlook as materialist and rejects all religious and other idealist world-outlooks as false. It recognises the existence both in the past and now of antagonistic social classes in the Congo and aims to conduct the struggle between these classes from the position of the working class.

More concretely the programme of the CPL sees the main contradiction in the Congo as being between

“the revolutionary forces, including the working class which though numerically small and ideologically immature, is the pillar of the revolution: its ally, the peasantry, comprising a large but still unorganised group; and the still vacillating intermediate strata (petit bourgeoisie, the youth and students) . . . ”

and

“the reactionary forces, including international, and particularly French, imperialism and its Congolese allies, the bureaucratic and comprador bourgeoisie and the feudal element.”

The state is seen as an instrument of class dictatorship and the CPL is dedicated to the destruction of the previous colonial and neo-colonial structures and replacing these by a government apparatus serving the mass of the people. The process of bringing about people's participation in government is being advanced through the Popular Councils elected directly by the

people. In the first elections in 1973, 68% of the electorate voted. Steps have also been taken to reorganise the various instruments of force – the police, the army and the courts – to serve the interests of the working people.

In the economic sphere the CPL aims to achieve eventual public ownership of all the means of production. Land is constitutionally proclaimed to be the property of all the people. All property that can serve society is earmarked for eventual nationalisation. Solidarity with liberation movements and co-operation with socialist countries is a vital point in the CPL's foreign policy.

But although the fundamental and conscious aim of the CPL is the abolition of all exploitation of man by man in the Congo, it sees the achievement of this as a long and difficult process. This was not always appreciated by every section of the CPL. In its early years there were still a number within its ranks who advocated leftist and adventurist policies based on the argument that once the party espoused Marxism-Leninism as a guide to action the Congo was already a socialist country. The abortive coup by these elements in February 1972 underscored the need for a sharper definition of the stage through which the Congolese revolution was passing. A special congress was held in December 1972 and it accepted that the country was passing through the stage of National, Democratic and People's revolution.

Marien N'Gouabi says of this important congress:

"Now the confusion was resolved: revolution means one class overthrowing another and assuming power, but it also means that revolutionary change is a long process. In the People's Republic of the Congo we shall have to resolve the main contradiction between the people and imperialism, before we can advance to the next stage, socialism." He goes on to state that the revolution which is underway is *National* because its goal is to end French imperialist domination which still controls the national economy and therefore "factually controls also the political situation". It is *National* too because one of its goals at this stage is to create the objective and subjective conditions for the formation of a Congolese nation and to rid the country of tribalism and regionalism. The revolution is *Democratic* because it replaces minority rule and because it draws its support from the masses. It is a *People's* revolution because it is attempting to create the foundations

for the next stage, the socialist revolution, and is preparing all the prerequisites for this by mobilising the masses under the banner of the proletariat and its vanguard the Congolese Party of Labour.

“In other words, at the present stage of the national liberation struggle, at the stage of national, democratic and people’s revolution, all our activities must rest on alliance of the revolutionary classes and patriotic forces within a united anti-imperialist front. Its purpose is to mobilise the broad masses on the basis of their interests, and unite, under the leadership of the working class party, the CPL, the women, youth, peasants, small tradesmen and artisans, as well as trade unions, religious groups and cultural associations.”

This brief outline of the proclaimed aims of the CPL shows not only that it is committed to marxist ideology in general but also that an attempt is being made to find Marxist solutions to the specific problems of the Congolese road to socialism. The leaders of the CPL are the first to admit that there are no easy solutions. Indeed one is impressed by the modesty of their claims, their awareness that the road ahead is hard and complex and a recognition that there are many problems which still have to be resolved in the course of revolutionary practice.

Perhaps one of the most complex questions facing Marxists in newly independent states which are still in the economic grip of imperialism, is the relationship between the struggle against foreign domination and the internal class struggle. On the one hand there is the need to mobilise the broadest possible alliance in the interests of achieving a true national independence. On the other hand there is the obvious danger that in such an alliance the vital internal social struggles may be postponed or relegated into the background with the result that a new internal exploiting class becomes the beneficiary of the people’s sacrifices. The CPL is conscious that in the Congo the “struggle against imperialism, which is regarded as the principal enemy of the Congolese people, must not overshadow the struggle against the exploiter classes within the country”. (Marien N’Gouabi) An assessment of the way in which the CPL is in practice attempting to achieve a balance between these two foundations of its immediate policy, is beyond the scope of this article. (All quotations from Marien N’Gouabi are from “Scientific Socialism in Africa”. *African Agenda*, June-July 1975.)