

25. THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

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The 41st annual session of the Indian National Congress was celebrated during the last days of December. The annual session of the Congress is the most important occasion in the annals of the nationalist movement. Important political decisions are taken there which govern the conduct of the movement during the following twelve months. The character of this year's session is indicated by the following quotation from the presidential address:

"No scheme of selfgovernment will be acceptable which denies full control of the civil service, the military, naval and air forces, and political relations with the Indian states, and which refuses India dominion status upon the same terms as those determined by the imperial conference."

This can be taken as the program of the Indian nationalist movement for the immediate future. The program formulated in these words may be extreme or moderate according to the interpretation that will be put upon them eventually. But in the midst of this ambiguity one thing is very clear, i.e., that the leaders who are very definitely against a revolutionary struggle are being pushed unwillingly towards a more extreme position under the pressure of the rank and file.

In spite of this general left tendency the Congress, as a whole, presented not a very encouraging spectacle. While three years ago as many as thirty thousand delegates attended it, this year the number of delegates dropped to two thousand five hundred. In other words, from a gigantic mass demonstration—the annual session of the National Congress has become a meeting of a certain section of the nationalist movement.

Traditionally and theoretically, the National Congress is not a party organisation; it is called the national parliament. As a matter of fact, since its foundation in 1885, up till the stormy years immediately following the imperialist war, the National Congress represented the political platform of the native bourgeoisie. In the period of 1919-22 the Congress was a gigantic mass organisation focusing the revolutionary will of the entire people to become free from imperialist domination. But even during this revolutionary period the Congress essentially remained under bourgeois leadership. Its political outlook was reformist and its social ideology was decidedly reactionary. Although the conscious representatives of the big bourgeoisie left the Congress, the petty-bourgeois nationalists who led the movement actually represented the bourgeoisie. They tried to use the revolutionary mass movement to further the reformist demands of native capitalism. This contradiction eventually led to the collapse of the movement. The Swaraj Party which during the last two years has captured the National Congress arose out of this collapse of the revolutionary mass movement.

The Swaraj Party itself embodied the two conflicting tendencies inside the nationalist movement. The leadership was reformist while the rank and file inclined towards revolution. The central slogan of the nationalist movement during the acutely revolutionary period of 1919-22 was the refusal to cooperate with the British government in any way. Essentially this was a very revolutionary slogan and in reality it did develop into revolutionary action. The National Congress in 1920 decided to boycott the pseudoparliamentary institutions introduced by the reforms of 1919. That was the central pivot of the noncooperation movement. The Swaraj Party was born in the opposition to the program of boycotting the parliamentary institutions. In other words, the Swaraj Party was born by practically repudiating the program of refusing to cooperate with the British government. It proposed to fight imperialist absolutism through constitutional parliamentary ways. The essence of this program was not an unconditional fight against imperialism but to negotiate with imperialism for the best possible terms of selfgovernment within the British empire. In comparison to this essential reformist nature of the swarajist program, the demand contained in the above quotation from the speech of the president of this year's congress is indeed extreme. When the nationalist movement demands a control of the military forces a compromise with imperialism becomes impossible. It is doubtful whether the president was fully aware of the gravity of his pronouncement. He might have said those words in order to pacify the rank and file which are becoming very dissatisfied with the policy of compromise; but the fact remains that the National Congress has officially committed itself to such an extreme position.

Apart from this, this year's national congress has practically taken no decisions. This undecisive character of it is all the more remarkable because never in its history has the national movement required more urgently and clearly a determined lead. The big bourgeoisie has definitely

gone over to the side of imperialism. The policy of parliamentary opposition advocated by the Swaraj Party has gone bankrupt. The interests of the masses demand a decisive struggle against imperialism. The British rulers are laying clever plans to intensify the exploitation of the Indian masses in conjunction with the native bourgeoisie. Under these circumstances the nationalist movement is faced with two clear alternatives, namely: capitulation to imperialism, or a bold revolutionary fight. The national congress was expected to choose one or the other of these two alternatives. What it did, however, was to adopt the policy of "wait and see". But even this should be considered a victory for the revolutionary forces. The leaders had the intention of forcing upon the Congress their program of compromise with imperialism. Obviously, they have not succeeded in this. Although they have not come out squarely in favour of a revolutionary fight, they have not been able to carry through their program of capitulation. Of course the present bourgeois leaders will never go with the revolutionary forces. As soon as they see that their following is getting out of their control, they will go over to the camp of counterrevolution where they really belong.

The undecided and ambiguous position taken by this year's congress has been determined by the results of the last election which took place immediately before the congress met. The Swaraj Party was split into not less than four factions by the controversy over the election program. The general demand was for abandoning the tactics of parliamentary obstruction and assuming the responsibility of office. The official swarajist leadership, however, could not agree to this demand. To do so would be tantamount to committing political suicide. The tactics of parliamentary obstruction was the one feature which distinguished the Swaraj Party from the other bourgeois parties. There is no difference in essentially political demands, the common demand being: selfgovernment within the British empire to be attained by stages.

Consequently, the official Swaraj Party contested the elections with the program of nonacceptance of office. This program does not mean anything unless by not accepting office the swarajists can render the formation of a ministry impossible. This implies that the swarajists must have a majority in the legislative bodies in order to carry on their program. The swarajists lost the elections—only in one province they won the majority, and that also of one, of the elected members. This means even in that province a ministry can be formed with the help of the government and nominated members. In other provinces as well as in the central legislative the positions is much worse. The swarajists hoped to win the elections but they could not even maintain the position they had in the last parliament. In a number of provincial legislative councils their number has dwindled to half. In the national legislative assembly they have lost considerable ground.

Under these circumstances, the policy of parliamentary obstruction has become entirely untenable. Everywhere the rightwing bourgeois parties and the dissident swarajists are ready to form ministries which could not be opposed successfully. In consequence the swarajists will be practically eliminated from the political picture. In view of this situation the swarajist leaders are naturally eager to change their policy. As a matter of fact, already before the election they had declared that it would be necessary to change the policy if the country so demanded. By "the country" they meant: if the electorate did not approve of the swarajist policy of obstruction. Therefore if the Swaraj Party had a free hand to conduct the nationalist politics at the bidding of the fortunate few enfranchised by the grace of British imperialism, they would have the National Congress declare that the interests of the nation demanded acceptance of office. This they could not do and herein lies the significance of this year's national congress.

The revolutionary potentiality of the nationalist move-

ment becomes still more noticeable when it is remembered that the president of the Congress had himself declared on the eve of the congress that nonacceptance of office could not be a policy applicable under all circumstances. He even secured the assistance of Gandhi for his program of capitulation. For some time, Gandhi had preached the theory that to accept office was the logical conclusion of the swarajist policy of entering the legislative council. He argued that the swarajists could not honestly refuse to participate in the responsibility of administration once they entered the legislative bodies. Obviously, the mood of the congress was threatening. If the leaders had come out with their program of capitulation as they desired, they would have been faced with a rebellious following dangerously beyond their control. It would certainly have been more beneficial for the nationalist movement had the situation been brought to such a climax. In that case, the petty-bourgeois revolutionary forces that constitute the rank and file of the Congress would have been completely liberated from the ideological influence of the bourgeois leaders. The Congress would have become a real fighting organisation. But, as it is, the situation still remains rather unclear.

As in the previous sessions, this year also there was a resolution before the congress to change what is called "the creed". The demand was that the congress should declare complete independence as its goal instead of self-government within the empire. All the leaders spoke against this resolution—Gandhi being one of them. The defeat of the resolution indicates that the revolutionary wing is still not strong enough to assume the leadership of the movement. But the events in the following weeks, which have been predetermined by the election results, will clarify the situation. The policy of nonacceptance of office and parliamentary obstruction, half-heartedly sanctioned by the congress, cannot be maintained. The Swaraj Party must make its position clear. There is little doubt which way the leaders will move; except in one

province, the swarajists will not be asked to form a ministry. In the single province where they had the majority a tacit agreement has already been reached by which the swarajists will support the ministry formed by the nonswarajist nationalists. This method will be adopted everywhere. If not formally, the swarajists will cooperate with the British administration in reality. Attempts will be made to cover this policy of capitulation by radical phraseology, but this will not succeed. The revolutionary following will see through this strategy before long, and what should have been the outcome of this year's congress will be accomplished if not before the next year's congress, certainly then.

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