

ROME LETTER

ITALIAN COMMUNISTS' CONGRESS APPRAISED

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ROME

NOW THAT several weeks have elapsed since the Eighth Congress of the Italian Communist party, I think it is possible to appraise more soberly and accurately the real weight of this assembly on the Italian political scene and its significance for the whole progressive movement in this country.

It is quite obvious that the congress was followed with a great interest and expectancy not only by the party's rank and file but also by broader political circles in Italy and even abroad.

This was inevitable because the Italian Communist party is by far the biggest C.P. in Western Europe. It is also, in terms of membership, the biggest political party in Italy.

Founded in 1921 and soon forced underground by fascist reaction, the Italian Communist party paid the heaviest toll in the struggle against fascism and Nazism. It had emerged into free political life in 1945 as a strongly organized political force.

From that point on, Italian Communists gained increasingly greater influence. As the result of a massive anti-Communist campaign, the 1948 elections were disappointing to the C.P. and the entire Italian Left. But five years later the Christian Democrats failed when they tried to repeat the same play.

AT THE 8th Congress, which met Dec. 8-15, the leadership could present a more or less satisfactory balance sheet.

The congress was based on two documents: the party program and an analysis of the present situation in the country together with the Communist proposals to bring Italy out of its present blind alley, economically and otherwise.

Both documents have been discussed in the party. In fact the discussion began right after the Khrushchev report.

For the first few months the discussion was rather extensive, interesting and profound.

But at a certain point the tone of the discussion became less interesting, and criticism began to give way to conformism.

Political observers noted the debate had been "choked off." Maybe the expression is a bit too sweeping. But I think it is clear that not everything was done to encourage the discussion. Subsequent events in Poland and Hungary provided fuel for debate. But this time the debate

was mostly inside the party organization—and not in the columns of the party's daily paper.

The chief slogan under which the congress was convened was: "Rafforzare e rinnovare il partito" ("Strengthen and renew the party.") It is not quite true to say that nothing new emerged,

ALTHOUGH the criticism of the rank and file was somewhat feebly echoed, it was voiced for the first time by a significant but influential minority. It came from a young member of Parliament like Antonio Giolitti, from an old time m.p. and former Minister of Agriculture like Fausto Gullo, from the philosopher Banfi, from Fabrizio Onofri, a young writer and former member of the central committee who, months ago sharply criticized the course of the party from 1947 onward and was bluntly rebuked by Togliatti.

The main arguments of the "critics" were: inadequate ties between the party and Italian political reality; scanty party democracy; incorrect trade union policies (the left-wing CGIL lost heavily in recent factory elections); an uncritical attitude towards the Soviet Union.

Some, including Onofri, urged in pre-congress discussion that the party take a hand in the Socialist unification, having as its goal creation of a big workers' party including Communists, Socialists and Social Democrats.

MAJOR CONCLUSIONS which emerged from the congress: Italian Communists should take their own road to socialism; the principle of a guiding party and a guiding state for every Socialist party is out of date; the only guide for each Communist party is Marxism-Leninism.

The congress elected the new central committee by secret ballot. The list of candidates was, however 110 — the exact number to be elected. Togliatti got 1,021 votes; Gullo, one of the critics, 945. The congress approved without secret ballot the final declaration and the party constitution.

What is the future of the Italian Communist movement? No doubt this is a very difficult moment for Communists everywhere and, of course, also for the Italian Communists. And it is too early to say what effect the congress will have.

But every sincere democrat inside and outside the party will

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hope that the discussions will not be cut off.

The Italian Left is undergoing a severe test. The contribution the Communists make is first of all to guarantee that nothing like Stalinism can ever happen in Italy. But to prove this they must speed up the process of democratization inside the party. It is not fortuitous that the demand for more democracy is so widespread inside the party.