

THE ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE AND THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

By VALYA.

THE Indian National Congress (a broad association of Indian Nationalists) ever since its first inception has been a class organisation of the Indian bourgeoisie leading enormous masses of the toiling population.

It is necessary to have complete clarity as to the class character of the National Congress, for almost right up to 1930 there has been a certain hesitation and confusion on this question among Indian Communists. It is precisely on this question that the Left National-reformists—Kandalkar, Roy (the renegade Communist), etc.—are attempting to sow confusion in the ranks of the working-class.

THE "NEHRU" CONSTITUTION.

In order to throw light on the policy of the Indian National Congress in relation to the Round Table Conference now taking place, we need take only one episode in the past history of the Congress viz.: the famous "Nehru" Constitution (that of the elder Nehru), worked out by a commission appointed at a conference of all Indian parties, beginning with the National Congress and extending to organisations outside it, the Liberal Federation, the All-Indian Muslim League, the reactionary organisation of the Hindu Maha Sabha, the Landholders' Associations in the various provinces, etc.

The proposed constitution was worked out by a commission which included the Congress leaders, Motilal Nehru and S. C. Bose (the "Left" Congressman), the Mohammedans Sir Ali Iman and Qureshi, the Liberals Sapru and Aney, and finally, Pradhama, the agent for British influence among the untouchables, and with the closest participation of Jawaharlal Nehru (the younger Nehru). This project was ratified at a conference of All-Indian Parties and issued as a brochure at the end of 1928.

The plan of a Constitution bears a clearly expressed landlord-bourgeois character. It not only preserves the landed property of the landowners, but also expresses itself in favour of the preservation of the despotic native princes and a whole number of other feudal relics. The All-Parties Conference put as the basis of its

constitution the demand for the granting to India of the rights practically of a semi-dominion in which the supreme power should be held by the British Crown acting through its agents (the Governor-General, etc.). In the opinion of the authors of this Constitution :—

"A Bill passed by both Houses of Parliament shall not become an Act until the Governor-General signifies his assent . . . and the Governor-General may signify such assent or withhold the same . . . The executive power of the Commonwealth is vested in the King and is exercisable by the Governor-General as the King's representative." (Report, page 108.)

The same position in the Constitution is adopted both as regards the centre and the provinces :—

"There shall be a Governor of every province who shall be appointed by the King. . . . When a Bill has been passed by the local legislators' Council, the Governor may declare that he assents to or withholds his assent from the Bill . . . If the Governor withholds his assent from any such Bill, the Bill shall not become an Act." (Page 111.)

According to this plan for a Constitution, the Army is to be controlled by a Commander-in-Chief appointed by the King over whom the legislature will actually have no control. Essentially the same complete control is exercised by the Governor-General in all remaining spheres of State and economic life in the country.

One of the central points of this "Nehru" Constitution is in regard to the question of federation and the native States. The authors of this report, leaders of the National Congress, Liberals and "Lefts" like Bose and the younger Nehru, put forward the idea of federation and preservation of the existing princedoms.

"If the Constitution of India is to be a federal one as we think it might well be, the position of the Indian States in relation to that federation appears to us to call for a definite determination." (Page 82.)

Concerning this "position," the leaders of the Congress proposed to negotiate at a special conference which should comprise representatives of the ruling princes, of the *British Government* and of the peoples of British India (page 72), being convinced that "at such a conference all difficulties could have been solved with mutual goodwill" (page 72). At the same time, Nehru, Bose, etc., promised that :—

"If the Indian States would be willing to join such a federation, after realising the full implications of the

federal idea, we shall heartily welcome their decision and do all that lies in our power to secure to them the full enjoyment of their rights and privileges." (Page 73).

This is only a small thing. The leaders of the Congress have also hastened to promise to the princes an additional guarantee, in the form of defence and mediation on the part of British imperialism.

"... In case of any difference between the Commonwealth and any Indian State on any matter arising out of treaties, engagements, sanads or other similar documents, the Governor-General in Council may, with the consent of the State concerned, refer the said matter to the Supreme Court for its decision." (Page 74.)

which consists of :

"Lord President and as many other justices . . . shall be appointed by the Governor-General in Council . . . and shall not be removed from office except by the Governor-General in Council." (Page 112.)

Besides the preservation of the princedoms and the rejection of independence, the leaders of the Congress introduced into the Constitution a further series of propositions amounting to a demand for the rights of a pseudo-Dominion, a bitter jest at the expense of the movement for emancipation of the Indian people and aimed at still further underlining its position as a slave without rights of British imperialism.

One of the basic proposals of the Constitution reads as follows :—

"All titles to private and personal property, lawfully acquired and enjoyed at the establishment of the Commonwealth are hereby guaranteed." (Page 166.)

By this clause, Bose, Nehru and the other Congress members promised to preserve landlordism, guaranteed the payment by the peasantry of their indebtedness to the usurers, etc., etc., in short, they guarantee the maintenance of the existing agrarian relations and all the feudal survivals in the social structure of India. By a separate clause, Nehru, Bose and the other authors of the report guarantee the inviolability of British enterprises (page 12).

At the same time, the authors of the report, in order to throw dust in the eyes, adopt a decision, saying nothing concretely, to the effect that—

"Parliament shall make suitable laws for the maintenance of health and fitness for work of all citizens, securing of a living wage for every worker, the protection of motherhood, welfare of the children and the economic consequences of old age, infirmity and unemployment, and Parliament shall also make laws to ensure fair rents and fixity and permanence of tenure to agricultural tenants." (Pages 102-166.)

The authors of the report only restrain the grinding down and oppression of the masses of

workers and peasants by the promise of trifling reforms. The anti-popular and anti-proletarian character of this bourgeois-landlord-feudal constitution, which completely corresponds to the interests of British imperialism, stands out in every one of its words and clauses. Let us quote a few more examples :—

"The right of free expression of opinion as well as the right to assemble peacefully and without arms, and to form associations or unions is hereby guaranteed for purposes not opposed to public order or morality." (Page 102.)

This is precisely what the Bombay factory-owners declared who demanded the dissolution of the Red Textile Trade Union, the Girni Kamgar Union, and the arrest of its leaders. The Indian bourgeoisie and its legal advocates Nehru, Bose, etc., make precautionary reservations in case of a rising of the toiling masses.

"Every citizen shall have the right to a writ of Habeas Corpus. Such right may be suspended in case of war or rebellion by an Act of the Central Legislature or by the Governor-General in Council." (Page 102.)

The National Congress and the "defenders", of non-violence know what they are doing ; they are preparing for a bloody settlement with the workers and peasants' movement. The most radical proposal of the authors of this Constitution is that :—

"All citizens have an equal right of access to, and use of, public roads, public wells and all other places of public resort." (Page 103.)

The leaders of the Congress in adopting this Constitution proceeded out of their desire to achieve an agreement with British imperialism, to extract some sort of concessions and to corrupt, disorganise and disperse the revolutionary struggle of the toiling masses for independence, for the agrarian revolution for land, for the abolition of all feudal survivals, for the improvement of the position of the working-class and for the perspective of a Socialist development of India.

The Manoeuvres of the National Congress and the Revolutionary Upsurge.

Approximately from 1928, signs began to appear in India of the coming crisis and of the new upsurge of the movement for national emancipation. At about the same time, British imperialism, in accordance with its promises of 1920 to 1921, appointed the Statutory Commission (the Simon Commission), which did not

include in its composition any representatives of the Indian bourgeoisie, for the purpose of preparing a plan for the new reforms promised ten years previously.

The Indian bourgeoisie in reply entered on a united front, beginning with the Liberals and ending with the Left Wing of the Indian National Congress, and produced their basic document—the “Nehru” Constitution. In order to deceive the masses the younger Nehru, who had most actively participated in the drawing up of the constitution, refused to sign it on the pretext that it did not embody as its basis the principle of independence. At the same time, in his declaration, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote :—

“We, however, decided not to oppose or to put obstacles in the way of the labours of the conference . . . and we will not put forward amendments or vote. Thereby, at any rate, we shall not take on ourselves the responsibility for all the decisions in the second part of the Constitution.” (Page 161.)*

How insincere and false this position was, as well as all the subsequent activity of the younger Nehru and the Independence League created by him, is evident enough from the fact that Jawaharlal Nehru signed along with the Liberals and Gandhi the Delhi Manifesto, in which a request was made that India should be given the status of a Dominion subject to all kinds of limitations, and in return for which he promised complete solidarity, support, participation in the Round Table Conference, etc. The whole practice of recent years confirms the assertion that the policy of the Congress and *especially of its Left Wing* has been directed towards reaching a compromise with British imperialism and preserving the leadership of the National movement in its own hands, exploiting this movement for the object of exerting a moderate pressure from below on British capitalism, at the same time disorganising the revolutionary movement.

This has been confirmed by the programme of Gandhi—Gandhi’s eleven points—put forward by him after the session of the National Congress at Lahore in December, 1929 had adopted the independence resolution, and it has been confirmed by the negotiations in prison of the “arrested” leaders of the National Congress with the Liberals, by their sabotage of the peasant

movement and their disorganisation and disruption of the Labour movement.

The National Congress covers up its policy of betrayal of the emancipation movement by playing at “opposition,” a play which it is compelled to carry on in view of the fact that negotiations and bargaining with the British have not yet reached a conclusion and also, what is more important, in order to preserve its influence over the masses. At the present time, the economic crisis in India is growing more intense, the revolutionary emergence of the masses of workers and peasants is proceeding at a vehement pace, the revolutionary crisis is deepening. This faces the Indian bourgeoisie and the National Congress with the task of exploiting their influence over the masses for the purpose of forestalling a revolutionary rising against the British imperialists, the landlords, the princes, the usurers and the other exploiters.

From the very outset these tasks were very clearly in the minds of the Indian bourgeoisie. The “Bombay Chronicle,” an organ of the Indian National Congress, wrote in a leading article (January 18th and January 25th, 1930):—

“Everyone in Britain and in India will say without hesitation that only the Indian National Congress has made the Round Table Conference a possibility, and, if there is to be any kind of hope to be placed on it, it will only be as a result of the coming campaign of the Congress.”

Further, addressing itself to the Indian Liberals, the paper declared :—

“A united front between us is possible in the form of the co-ordination of our programmes . . . Congressmen have declared themselves at the moment for independence but this does not exclude the possibility of peace and an agreement with the British Government.”

And further,

“We are glad that there are Liberals who have not lost their heads and who understand that their highest duty is to exert *the maximum pressure on the Government with the aim of securing dominion status* . . . At present there is not much place for constitution making, because the Nehru constitution remains in force.”

The division of labour is shown up very clearly, nor can the role of the Liberals as plenipotentiary representatives of the National Congress be doubted. Turning to the second task of the National Congress, the warding off of revolution, the newspaper writes as follows :—

“To those who fear that Gandhi may become a cause of violence in the country, he himself gives the answer. If violence is floating in the atmosphere, it has been caused by the feeling of despair to which some have given way as a result of the oppression and torture of our country. While many are sitting with folded arms,

* This second part of the Constitution includes both the union with the native ruling princes and the preservation of feudal landlordism, etc.

Gandhi is exerting himself to neutralise or diminish this danger as far as it is possible to do so."

And in another place :

"If there is any group in India which, without sparing its efforts, is attempting to prevent violence and anarchy and to preserve an atmosphere of non-violence, it is the Congress."

These quotations from the leading articles of the Bombay Congress organ exhibit the Congress leaders clearly declaring : " A division of labour is necessary—we will disorganise the revolutionary struggle, we will exert pressure on the British, while you, Liberals, go and negotiate at the conference and put the ' maximum pressure ' on the basis of the Nehru Constitution worked out in collaboration with us." This plan is being logically carried into effect.

In order to deceive the masses of the people, the Congress has recently been compelled to push forward new "left forces." Besides the younger Nehru and Bose, there have been brought into the light of day the "Groups of a Hundred" in Bombay, the Roy agents, etc.

They have raised the question of the necessity of an economic programme for the workers and peasants, of the convening of a Constituent Assembly under the protection of British soldiers, etc. The left National-reformists are attempting to take the initiative in the railway workers' movement into their hands, they have talked about a general strike on the railways in the hope that the workers would forget that it was they who disorganised and betrayed the strike on the Great Indian Peninsula Railway and who disrupted the Girni Kamgar Union. The left National-reformists are hoping that the peasants will not understand or will forget how the National Congress also disorganised their movement for the non-payment of taxes, rent and interest payments to the Government, usurers and landlords.

The Mediation of the Liberals at the Round Table Conference.

Only on the basis of the policy of the Indian National Congress is it possible to understand the present attitude of Congressmen to the Round Table Conference. The Congress, formally not participating in the Conference, actually takes part through the Liberals Sapru, etc. The Liberals collaborated in drawing up the Nehru Constitution, the Liberals Sapru and others, before their departure for London, had a

number of conferences with the arrested leaders of the Congress, organised with the consent of the British Government in the prison at Yeravda near Poona. In these negotiations there took part the two Nehrus, Sarojini Naidu, Gandhi, the Liberal Sapru and others. On the basis of these negotiations, the Liberals went to the Round Table Conference. This is fully understood by British imperialism. The "Times," in a leading article on September 6th wrote on the subject of the Conference :—

"All other sections of British-Indian opinion will be represented in London and it should be remembered that, in essentials, there is no difference in principle between the demands of the moderate parties and those of the Congress Party."

At almost the same time, the "Manchester Guardian," in a leading article wrote :—

"What is acceptable to the Liberal Sapru and his colleagues, the Indian National Congress perhaps will sniff at very suspiciously, but in all probability it will swallow it . . . The difference between the Moderates and the extremists is now very slight . . . *The Indian Liberals will only accept what will receive the support of a great part of the supporters of the Congress.*" ("Manchester Guardian Weekly," November 14th, 1930.)

These experienced organs of the British bourgeoisie excellently understand the situation. To complete the estimate, it is interesting to note the views of the "Economist" (January 4th, 1930), after the Lahore Session of the Indian National Congress :—

"The Viceroy obviously cherished the hope that his (Gandhi's) influence might be used for the peaceful development of India. The refusal of Gandhi to play this role will perhaps make the task longer and more difficult, but it serves as a compensation, which is not at all bad, that his presence among the irreconcilables will save India from more serious disorders which might take place if the opposition had been left in other hands."

The role of the Indian National Congress is clear to the British bourgeoisie. The chief and basic enemy for British imperialism, for the Indian bourgeoisie and for the National Congress alike remains the revolutionary workers and peasants of India. This is what the workers and peasants of India need to understand.

The composition of the Round Table Conference is familiar—it is made up in the way that was proposed by the National Congress in its plan for a constitution ; from representatives of the Indian ruling princes, from the British Government and from the Liberals, acting as political representatives of the National Congress. It should be remembered that Sir Tej

Sapru, the Liberal leader at the Conference, signed the plan for a Constitution along with Nehru. At the Conference, as could be expected, the central question was the proposal for a federation and, no doubt, bargaining behind the scenes on the subject of economic concessions. British imperialism is attempting at the present moment to establish such a form of administration in India as will, while presenting certain privileges to the exploiting classes and offering them the rights of a junior partner in the general imperialist system of exploitation of India, at the same time strengthen the ruling position of Britain in the country. This is obvious from the whole course of the discussion; it is confirmed by the organs of the British bourgeoisie itself. Thus, the "Manchester Guardian" (November 28th, 1930), says:—

"The representation of princes in the All-India Federation will liquidate this conflict (between Britain and India) not because the Indian princes will send to the All-India Federal Parliament representatives who will enjoy more confidence in our country than the representatives of British India, but because they will introduce into the Parliament an element of racial, religious and political equilibrium . . . And if such a degree of equilibrium is assured, then it will put an end to our past doubts and will give us the possibility to put before India without serious hesitation that for which she has so long striven, responsible Government in the centre and in the provinces."

"The Times" (November 6th) adds to this that it will give the possibility of correcting the error that was committed during the period of application of the Montagu—Chelmsford reforms, which directed the attention of Indian politicians to the question of power in the centre "instead of concentrating attention on administration in the provinces . . . which in fact represent countries equal in size to those of Europe."

The aim of the British imperialists is clear. It is, with the collaboration of the ruling princes, feudal landlords and capitalists, to alter the constitution in such a way as to guarantee their rule "for ever," to *decentralise* the State administration as far as the participation in it of the population is concerned, and on the basis of the new relations and equilibrium of forces to grant a ludicrous, mutilated "responsible government" which would give the leaders of the Congress the possibility of posing before the country with their "victory."

In essence this does not differ in any way from the plan of the Nehru Constitution.

The extent and character of the economic concessions is not yet clear. The notorious "eleven points" of Gandhi in all probability will be the basis for business negotiations on the part of the Congressmen. It will not be superfluous to repeat these points:—

- (1) Complete prohibition of alcoholic liquors.
- (2) Decrease of the State-fixed exchange value of the rupee from 1s. 6d. to 1s. 4d. (in the interests of decreasing wages and increasing the competitive strength of Indian industry).
- (3) Decrease of land taxation by 50 per cent.
- (4) Abolition of the salt tax.
- (5) Decrease of military expenditure by 50 per cent.
- (6) Decrease of salaries of higher officials by one-half.
- (7) A protective tariff against imported textile goods.
- (8) Concentration of coastal trade in Indian hands.
- (9) Liberation of all political prisoners except those condemned for acts of violence.
- (10) Abolition of the political police (C.I.D.) or popular control over them.
- (11) Right of bearing arms in the interests of self-defence.

The various demands in regard to military expenditure, control over the C.I.D., and decrease of land taxation, etc., need not be taken at all seriously. The remaining demands, which have been repeatedly put forward by the Indian Chambers of Commerce, represent the minimum programme of economic demands of the Indian bourgeoisie. On this they will insist.

The Round Table Conference has begun its business operations. The basic questions are clear, they have been worked over long ago. The Nehru Constitution represents one of the stages in this preparatory work for the Conference.

Playing at Opposition.

In India, the National Congress plays the role of "opposition" and carries on a campaign against the plans put forward at the Conference. This role the Congress will continue to play during the period of the negotiations with British imperialism, and the forthcoming session of the National Congress will take place under this watchword of "opposition."

In the country, there is taking place a strong forward move on the part of the wide masses, which on the basis of their experience of struggle are beginning to acquaint themselves with and to test the programmes of the different parties.

The Indian National Congress, exploiting the tremendous hatred of the proletarian masses towards British imperialism, endeavours with all its power to hinder the growth of class-consciousness of the working-class and to subordinate it ideologically and organisationally to the National Congress.

The National Congress comes out before the masses as fighting for freedom, preaching the united national front and accusing the Communists of being "splitters" and "agents" of British imperialists. Taking into account the emergence and growth of class-consciousness among the toiling masses, the Congress pushed forward its own "left" groups with the object of disrupting and disorganising the proletarian ranks. The arsenal of demagogic weapons of these "left" groups includes such slogans as:—"Constitutional Assembly," "Conquering the leadership of the Congress from within," "A programme of economic demands for the workers and peasants," "Aid for the unemployed," "A united front with the National Congress," "The workers and peasants are the arms and legs of the Congress."

The "left" Congressmen, including at the present time a whole series of groups which in essence do not differ from one another—Nehru, Bose, Kandalkar, Roy, etc.—are attempting to develop a wide activity among the toiling masses. As examples, may be mentioned the campaign for a "Labour Week" carried out in Bombay and the decision adopted by the All-India Trade Union Congress under the leadership of Bose for the declaration of a General Strike on the railways.

In the leading proletarian centres, especially in Bombay, the "left" Congressmen have laid chief emphasis on the struggle against the Communists. They attempt to isolate the Communists, to split the Labour Movement, to maintain the proletariat in the position of the "legs" of the Indian bourgeoisie. At the present time, the struggle between the Communist programme and the Congress platform has been carried into the wide masses of the Bombay proletariat and is exciting discussion on all sides. The Bombay workers are discussing whether or not the National Congress is a bourgeois organisation, whether it carries on a real struggle for independence, whether the theory of non-violence is correct and whether

the proletariat ought to remain the "legs" of the National Congress or whether it is its duty to head the revolutionary struggle of the masses of the people.

The experience of mass struggle and the agitation of the Communists is assisting the workers to analyse the situation and in the long run will help them to arrive at a correct solution. The process of differentiation and the gradual realisation of the historical tasks of the proletariat is indubitably taking place among the foremost strata, and thereby extending the basis for the establishment of a mass Communist Party, in the organisation of which the revolutionary Communist elements in the country have been so backward. It cannot be doubted that inability to lead the struggle, to find the correct concrete slogans, to combine the struggle for partial and general demands, lack of experience, insufficient exploitation of legal possibilities, the extraordinary weakness of the proletarian groups—all this has retarded and is hindering the struggle for the conquest of the majority of the working-class for the Communist position.

Alongside of this move forward of the ranks of the working-class and *the growing advance of the agrarian movement*, a process of differentiation is taking place among the urban petty-bourgeoisie and especially among the youth. The most characteristic sign of this differentiation and of disillusionment with the programme of the National Congress is seen in the terrorist movement. The terrorist movement was never so widely spread and never bore such a relatively mass character as at the present time. Hardly a day goes by without the press giving information about some terrorist attempt or preparations for an attempt, about the finding of bombs, etc., in the most diverse parts of the country.

This situation the National Congress and especially its "left" leaders are taking into account. Hence the support by the younger Nehru of the propaganda for a Constitutional Assembly and an economic programme for the workers and peasants. Hence the support given by Bose, in words, for the demand for a general strike on the railways.

Consequently, it can be expected that not only will the National Congress session be held under the watchword of opposition, but that there will occur even the embodiment at the Congress itself of the "opposition" in the

official programme and decisions that are taken. There can be expected, if not at the session itself then after it, the emergence of oppositional groups, possibly parties like the previous Independence League.

The Indian bourgeoisie and its organ, the Indian National Congress, has proved in the past its capacity to manoeuvre. There is to be expected a new manoeuvre directed against the working-class, against its struggle for hegemony in the national movement, against the development of the agrarian-emancipatory revolution.

The National Congress is manoeuvring, it is playing at opposition in the country, through the agency of the Liberals it is participating in the Round Table Conference. While adopting a decision (through the mouth of Bose) to support

the general strike of the railway workers, it breaks the Red trade union, the Girni Kamgar textile union, and betrays the struggle on the G.I.P. Railway. While talking of sympathy for the peasants, it (in the person of the Bengal Congress leaders) mediates with the British Governor for the dispatch of troops to suppress agrarian disturbances in Bengal.

The revolutionary movement has to overcome the resistance and disorganising activity of the National Congress. In spite of all the cunning devices of the Congress, the Labour Movement is passing to a higher stage, the further development of the Labour Movement and of the peasant movement in India is inevitable. Now, as previously, the chief decisive factor consists in the creation of a mass Communist Party. This is the task of tasks.