

THE CONFERENCE OF THE ALL-AFRICAN CONVENTION

The Conference of the All-African Convention held in Edendale, Natal, from the 14th. - 16th. December, 1958, is of more than usual importance. In one sense it reflected in miniature the stresses and strains in the political set-up in South Africa to-day. In another sense it revealed the growth of political consciousness among the peasantry and their determination to face up to the tasks that confront them as well as the national liberatory movement as a whole. The holding of Conference ^{itself} is something of an achievement ⁱⁿ these days, for the ~~xxx~~ herrenvolk has virtually declared an unofficial ban on meetings. Last year they prevented Conference by the simple expedient of getting the local authorities to close every single hall against the Convention. This year it was impossible to find any place in the Cape Province, where it has of late held its conferences ever since it was forced out of the Free State. But the distances did not deter the people, particularly the peasants, from attending the Conference in Natal, and it was the biggest in many years. ~~Actually only half of those peasants who were coming, arrived at Conference, and these did so under great difficulty. The railways had refused to provide buses and the Transportation Board at the last moment refused to grant permits for private~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ There were representatives from peasant organisations over a wide area. They came from the Glen Grey, the border districts, the Ciskei, the Transkei proper the district of Umtata, Mount Frere, Pondoland and as far afield as Matatiele, as well as from Zululand. Actually only half of those peasants who were coming, arrived at Conference, and these did so under great ^{difficulty.} ~~difficulty.~~ The railways had refused to provide buses and the Transportation Board at the last moment refused to grant permits for private buses. Unwillingly many delegates had to remain behind, since it was impossible to accommodate in private vans, procured at the last ~~xxxxxxx~~ moment, all these peasants who had arranged to attend.

The fact that so many peasant delegates were keen to attend Conference was no flash in the pan. Earlier in the year, at a meeting of the extended Executive of Convention, over seventy peasant representatives from all over the Cape Province had attended. And they themselves had expressed the urgent need for drawing the various organisations together into the Convention, where they could speak with one voice. It is known that since that meeting the authorities have been intimidating the people, banishing some of their leaders associated

with/...

with the Convention. But far from serving as a deterrent, these measures would seem to have prompted them all the more to identify themselves ~~all the more~~ with the Convention, and to attend its Conference. Those areas where banishments took place, such as Zululand and Tembuland, were strongly represented.

What was significant about Conference itself was the part played by the peasants. From the outset they made it clear that they regarded themselves as very much at home in the All-African Convention. In the discussions they demonstrated again and again that they have grasped the full meaning of the Ten-Point Programme of the national liberatory movement and the absolute necessity of fighting for the rights embodied in it. They have come to this position, not through the nebulous paths of argumentation beloved of parlour pseudo-intellectuals, but by the slow and bitter experience of their daily lives, their rightlessness and landlessness. The grimness of their existence in the country has burned into their consciousness the dynamics of the demands for rights, as embodied in the Ten-Point Programme. With simple but profoundly moving eloquence one peasant after another got up to give his testimony on the things that are happening to-day in the Reserves, experiences which, as they said, forced on them the necessity to come together, not only in their own organisations but into the parent body, the All-African Convention. Let us hear them speak for themselves.

"Where I come from," said one peasant, "we live in a state of misery—no land, no livestock, nowhere to live." And another: "Where I live it is as if ~~xxxx~~ we are refugees. In stock and land we are destitute. Every day new acts of oppression cause much weeping. Men have no rest. Neither man nor animal is happy in our time....All these things have compelled us to identify ourselves with this conference." And yet another said: "This organisation is the only organisation for our people." And another: ~~xxxxxxxx~~ "Because we are deprived of land I came here. The demand for land and liberty are the same." And another: "It is our grievances that brought us here. It is land hunger that brought us here. I want to say we identify ourselves fully with the movement." Another peasant concluded his speech thus: "For people to get land they must have access to ~~where~~ where laws are made. We must be where the stream springs. We must be at the counsels of state so that we get clean water." And another: "I am grieved because of the misery of our people. We in the rural districts are in a bad way because we discover suddenly that what we thought was our own home is not our home... Therefore we had to find a way to relieve ourselves of oppression...We look to you to show the road." And another, pleading for unity: ~~I wish I could find a way~~

"I wish I could bind you together as if all were born of the same woman... There is only one thing we want, rights in the land of our birth... The cows have been milked dry and now only blood comes out." And another: "I want to emphasise it is land hunger we suffer from. Our cry is for land. We can get nothing unless we ourselves are in Parliament. Those are two things we must fight for, land and the franchise. Then we shall have all. I want to stress that only." And yet another spoke for all with the words: "Human rights are the life and soul of a people."

We have not heard the claim for human rights more eloquently expressed. These peasants indeed showed their grasp of the essence of the Ten-Point Programme by making the demand for rights the very centre of the struggle. Gone are the days when the peasantry could be bribed away from the ~~struggle~~ movement by the promise of land. They themselves realise that any form of land tenure is precarious if it is not accompanied by the attainment of full political rights. 'Land and liberty' has become their slogan.

That is why the peasants shook their heads in amazement - though with patience - at the arrogant and ignorant fulminations of ~~some of~~ a few of the youth, who still think in terms of the land question in complete isolation from the sum total of the Ten-Point Programme, that is, the state of being fully enfranchised. These youngsters betrayed such crass ignorance of the abc's of the politics of the national liberatory struggle that one had to ask oneself if they really had begun to understand the state of their own oppression. And with it all, ~~these~~ ^{these} adolescents, so pitifully bold in their word thuggery, displayed a disgraceful contempt for the peasants and their struggles. ^{Vanity was the spur that} ~~pricked the sides of their intent, and it o'erleapt itself.~~ But even the peasants' proverbial patience reached its limit when it became clear that those wordy youngsters were performing at the crack of the whip of some older political diletantes, ~~opportunistas~~, who not only showed a lack of respect for the Convention as an organisation of the people but also ^{an utter} contempt for the organisations they are supposed to represent. They spoke and acted as if organisations were things to be manipulated. One would have thought that they represented only themselves, and they seemed strangely uncomfortable at finding themselves surrounded by the peasants. Their argumentations, no matter how solemnly propounded, betrayed a fundamental lack of seriousness in their whole approach to the liberatory struggle. There was a hollowness about their declamations, typical of those who are removed from the dust and heat of it, and to whom it comes only in distant echoes.

The overall impression of this important Conference, then, is that the peasantry have adopted the Ten-Point Programme as their own. They see it as their weapon of struggle because they have related it dynamically to their basic needs and political demands. They made it abundantly clear that they will defend it to the end; for they feel that by so doing they are defending their very lives. The All-African ~~Convention~~ Convention, with which they proudly identify themselves, is the organisation whose programme is the embodiment of their aspirations. The leadership ~~and~~ of the Convention can justly feel that the ~~steady~~ ^{steady} and arduous work in the country, spread over many years, is at last bearing fruit. The composition of Conference was itself significant of its development. It ~~was~~ ^{is} no longer a head without a body. It is true, that representation from the workers' organisations leaves a great deal to be desired. But the Conferences of the All-African Convention are no longer simply a coming together of intellectuals. The co-operation between the intellectuals from town and ~~country~~ country and the peasantry; the active participation of the people in the discussions and the number of the people's languages that have to be used - all these ~~things~~ show a healthy state of growth in the Convention. It is the kind of development that is absolutely essential for the struggle in the coming period. It is the immediate task of the Convention to speed-up this development, to unite workers' organisations, peasants' organisations, intellectuals, etc., and to lead these into the larger unity of all the oppressed peoples of South Africa. Then only will that instrument be forged that will carve the path to liberation.

Jan. 1959