

The arrogance of ability

A report on the twelfth International Student Conference

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In both ISC and IUS the developed countries dominate, imperilling their movements' relevance for the third world if the power structure does not change

THE 12TH INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CONFERENCE (ISC) met in Nairobi, Kenya, from 9 to 27 August and brought together representatives of National Unions of Students in over sixty countries. It was significant, apart from anything else, in being the first major conference to be staged in an independent African state by either of the two international students' organizations — the other being the Communist-dominated International Union of Students, IUS) — although the 7th ISC had met in pre-independence Nigeria.

To say that the IUS is "Communist-dominated" is immediately to suggest that the ISC might be Western-dominated: and it is a charge that seems to me to be equally valid. Since 1950, when the ISC split from the IUS on grounds of excessive Soviet influence, the two organisations have, in general, pursued their respective partisan lines with a single-minded stolidity unworthy of the students they allegedly represent.

During the last few years — and especially at the 11th ISC and the 8th IUS Congress (both held in 1964), the two bodies have given every appearance of being frozen immovably in the postures of a Cold War that is fast receding on the international scene itself. The major achievement of the 12th ISC was that it both recognised this situation and began to move beyond it.

Relations between the delegates to the Conference and the group of Observers from the IUS were more friendly and constructive than anyone would have dreamed possible at the bleak Conferences of 1964, in cold Christchurch and even colder Sofia. Time and time again in Nairobi speakers urged an end to Cold War claptrap and time and again the Conference demonstrated its warm approval of these sentiments. The Resolution on Universal Student Co-operation (i.e. ISC-IUS relations) that was eventually passed was felt by many to be the first sincere statement on this subject that an ISC has ever made — and it was welcomed as "constructive and much better than we had hoped for" by the IUS Observers.

This new and more genuine movement towards rapprochement within the international student community was reflected most clearly in the prevailing climate of

the Conference's political discussions. Inevitably, of course, there were divergences of opinion, but for the most part these were less frequent, less serious and less divisive than have been the divergence at any similar students' conference in the last fifteen years. The change was perhaps most striking in the outspoken positions adopted by Unions such as those of Canada and Australia, which had previously been notable for varying degrees of conservatism. (These and similar "defections" had the side-effect of leaving the National Union of Students of England, Wales and Northern Ireland stranded as the sole remaining anachronistic adherent to the apolitical concept of "students as such". Ludicrous or painful — depending on one's viewpoint.)

On many major questions the Conference was unanimous in supporting progressive and radical resolutions. Particularly pleasing was the united acclaim with which the Conference: demanded the immediate use of force in order to free Zimbabwe; reviled the World Court decision on South West Africa, and urged the revoking forthwith of South Africa's mandate; and gave vehement support to the revolutionary struggle in Angola and Mozambique. Other issues which produced similar unanimity of outlook were South Africa; the Dominican Republic; Aden; Haiti; Morocco; and Iran.

In fact, apart from the Arab-Israeli question (which, for most delegates, constituted a special and non-ideological problem of arduous complexity rather than heated involvement), the only major political *debate* of the Conference centred on the Vietnam War — and even here the division of opinion ultimately came down to two points only. These were: (a) whether strictures on "foreign involvement" in South Vietnam should be applied to North Vietnam as well as the USA and her allies, and (b) whether withdrawal of foreign troops should come before or after the commencement of negotiations for a settlement. On the other major issues in Vietnam (immediate cessation of hostilities; US culpability; urgent need for the free election of one government for the whole of reunified Vietnam; etc) there was general agreement.

IT MIGHT BE CONCLUDED, on the basis of the broadly radical political consensus thus

achieved, that the 12th ISC was a successful and satisfactory gathering. But, from the point of view of the developing countries, and especially of Africa and her students, it was very far indeed from being satisfactory. "Politics is about power" — and so is student politics; and, in terms of the ISC power-structure as it now exists after the 12th Conference, the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America have as little control, as little effective power, as ever — in other words: precious little.

As an organisation the ISC remains securely dominated by what has come to be known as the "leading group" — i.e. the wealthy, highly-organised students' unions of Western Europe, North America, and the "old" British Commonwealth. The resilience of this group is remarkable — and is closely paralleled by the very similar resilience of the Soviet and Eastern European students' unions in their dominance of the IUS power-structure.

In practice the controlling of the ISC by students from the developed countries is kept as inconspicuous as possible, for obvious reasons. Whenever they can be managed more or less token concessions are gladly made — for example the appointment of a Nigerian as Chairman of the Nairobi Conference. But the crunch comes with the elections. Each ISC elects the following: seven full-time administrative officers; eleven students' unions to be members of the Supervision Committee (the ISC's highest authority between Conferences); and five student leaders to make up the ISC's political wing, the Research and Information Commission (RIC). All of these hold office for the two-year period between one Conference and the next.

As a result of the elections at the 12th ISC, power for the next two years has been lodged very firmly in the hands of the Western Europeans and the "white" Commonwealth with a few inclusions from amongst the developing members of the Commonwealth and the more conservative nations of Latin America. The new Supervision Committee is made up of: Canada, Malaysia, Britain, Ghana, Costa Rica, Australia, Kenya, Sweden, El Salvador, Switzerland and Angola — i.e. 55% Commonwealth, a fact which prompted some of the less "reliable" delegations to give a

derisively spontaneous rendition of "God Save the Queen" when the election results were announced! Similarly the twelve individuals elected either as full-time officers or members of RIC included six from the Commonwealth and four from the USA or Western Europe.

NOW, I AM NOT SUGGESTING that this dominance of the ISC by developed Western nations is the result of a deliberately-pursued policy of neo-colonialism. In large measure I believe it to be inevitable — for the present. But this is no reason for accepting the situation on anything other than a temporary basis; or for being happy with it.

Basically the problem is one of resources. For a students' union to reach the level of viability where it is producing experienced, well-trained, student leaders who are capable of going on to take positions in an organisation like ISC or IUS, it must have considerably more money than any students' union in a developing country can possibly have. It must be able to employ its top officers on a full-time basis; it must be able to send them overseas to seminars and conferences; and it must be at the centre of a real and comprehensive programme of activities in the country in question, such that large numbers of students are being given the opportunity to test their potentialities. For developing countries this is the stuff of dreams.

Because of this situation the developed nations, in the ISC and the IUS alike, suffer from an overwhelming *arrogance of ability*. They assume because they are in the fortuitous position of turning out nearly all of the capable student leaders that therefore they have the right to dominate indefinitely; and they seem to believe that by adopting radical political positions they will be able to preserve inviolate the *status quo* within the power-structures of the two organisations. The sooner they realise that this is not so, the sooner will the ISC and the IUS come to represent in themselves the lofty sentiments which they so regularly endorse.

Until the situation changes, however, both the ISC and the IUS will continue to be of minimal relevance to the third world, except in the crudest sense as sources of patronising "aid". Perhaps what is needed is some reciprocal aid — in the form of mass-distribution to student leaders in the developed countries (both Western and Communist) of the works of Frantz Fanon.

BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY TO "THE USE OF A FEW STROKES" (p. 212). *L'Anthropologie* (1899); Dugast, I and Jefferys, M. D. W. *L'Ecriture Bamum* (Paris, 1950); *Evangelische Heidenbote* (1907); Forbes, Lt. F. E. *Despatch communicating the discovery of a native written character* (London); Gelb, I. J., *A Study of Writing* (Chicago, 1952); Johnston, H. H., *Liberia* (London, 1906); *Journal of the African Society* (1909, 1920); *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society* (1909); Klingenberg, *Africa* (1933); Köelle, S. W., *Narrative of an expedition into the Vei country* (London, 1849), *Outlines of a grammar of the Vei language* (London, 1854).

Books & the Arts

"The use of a few strokes"

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what is known of the forms of writing in the old Africa is merely a pointer to the possibilities of what may have been

IT WAS ON 18th January, 1849 that Lieutenant F. E. Forbes excitedly wrote to his commanding Officer:

Sir, — It has fallen to my lot to make a discovery of such importance to the civilisation of Africa, that I am anxious my own profession should bear the honour that it may deserve.

The discovery consists of a written language of the Phonetic order.

He was later to add in a lecture that he gave to the Royal Geographical Society:

It will be observed that the language is of the Phonetic order; that the characters are not symbolical and, according to my teacher, it was invented ten or twenty years ago . . . by eight men.

But it was Köelle, a German missionary stationed in Sierra Leone, who went more thoroughly into the matter. He first spent five months in Liberia and recorded conversations that he had with the supposed inventor of written Vai — Doalu Bukele. Köelle says that Bukele died of sleeping sickness at forty, that he was assisted in his invention by five other people and that Bukele saw it all in a dream in which a white man explained the advantages of writing to him. Köelle added that they wrote "with pens of reed" and they made their ink from a special type of leaf. There were 215 different syllables, the writing was from left to right and it was dependent on neither Arabic nor Latin. In another book written

five years later he added that the script was "independent, original, syllabic and phonetic." Here he pointed out that there were original signs which originated in picture writing such as signs for "to die" and "to kill" which were represented by a withered tree and branches; in addition there were signs, probably due to the addition of diacritical marks. For instance the sign for "mother" was the familiar encircled dot which Köelle felt indicated the child in the womb.

The actual age of the writing is not subject to a great deal of dispute. Delafosse argues quite plausibly that the script was most likely with the Vai before the Islamic invasion; if not they would most certainly have used the Arabic script. He feels that the probable date could be as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century, and there is some support for this. For though Migeod feels that the Vai only settled in Liberia in 1700, there is ample evidence to support Kup that there was a movement of the Vai from Sierra Leone after the defeat of the troops of the Songhai empire in 1590 by the Sultan of Morocco. It is not surprising therefore that P. E. Hair, in an article "An early seventeenth-century vocabulary of Vai", added that "a vocabulary of Vai had been collected and printed two centuries earlier under another name." It is more than possible that these attempts on the part of Europeans to reduce Vai to a written form might have stimulated indigenous interest to attempt the same. This was