

Women top of the agenda...

In the summer of 1989, the RCL held its Fourth Congress. The main questions for discussion were relating to work in this country, in particular the question of women's liberation and the struggle for socialism. We also resolved some long-standing questions about the relation between class and national struggle within England and the need to build a multi-national communist party based in both the working class and the national minority people.

The Congress also discussed the question of recent events in the People's Republic of China. A resolution was passed condemning the actions of the army and government in suppressing with armed violence, the student movement for democracy and against corruption.

The RCL is already committed to giving priority to study and struggle over some international questions in the next period. In particular, we need to look at recent events in China in the context of the changes in economic and political lines over the last ten years, and the effects of the 'open door' policy within China.

We also need to study the situation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. As 'Class Struggle' goes to press, we are seeing a 'Solidarity' government about to take power in Poland. Events in Poland are just one aspect of important changes that are taking place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which it is urgent that we look at in some detail.

The Congress did not cover the international situation in detail. But it is vital that in looking at our specific tasks in this country, we have an internationalist perspective. This cannot simply be a token gesture of international solidarity but should inform all our work, here at the centre of British imperialism, where the whole of society has been profoundly affected, both on the economic, political and ideological level, by its history of exploitation of peoples and nations around the world.

The twentieth century has seen the tide of history turned back after four hundred years of colonial expansion, robbery and exploitation. In spite of all the setbacks, zigzags and problems faced by particular movements at particular times, this is still the main trend in the world. Recent years, have seen new phases in different liberation struggles around the world: Eritrea and



Tigray; Palestine; Azania; the Philippines and Afghanistan. Closer to home, the national liberation struggle of the Irish people has grown in strength and in political support.

It is still the peoples of the Third World who are at the sharp end of the world-wide struggle against imperialism. But we also, even though we are a small and inexperienced organisation, are part of this trend. Even though many others are questioning the relevance of Marxism-Leninism in the world of today, we affirm that its basic principles still hold true and that we must persist in applying them to our specific revolutionary tasks in this country today. Certainly, we need to take a long view. There are no magic answers or quick solutions.

Over the last five years since our previous Congress, the RCL

has not made much progress. Over this time, we have been divided on major issues of line and to a large extent, have not worked together in a communist way, with a good style of work.

Having resolved these major differences over line and renewed our commitment to work together to develop more detailed policies, summing up practical experience as well as studying theoretically, we think that the Fourth Congress can be a turning point for us.

The next few issues of 'Class Struggle', will carry more detailed information about decisions made at the Congress. In this issue, we concentrate on the major issue where progress has been made in the last few years.

TOP OF THE AGENDA: WOMEN

For too long, the Marxist-Leninist movement in Britain has patronised women, relegating their struggle to a secondary position. The history of the RCL has, until recently, reflected that orientation. But the recent Congress marked a turning point in the League's whole understanding of women's oppression and their path to liberation. Discussion and decisions on the women's question were top of the agenda.

The Manifesto of the RCL (1977) gave little space to women and put forward an economist line, seeing women only as workers, and putting forward the demand for equal pay.

Previous to the Manifesto, women members were involved in women's groups, particularly in the Women and Socialism trend in the women's movement. But this was stopped at the time when the RCL decided to put all its resources into industrial work.

It is only over the last few years that study and discussion has been pushed forward by women, which has resulted in a draft line on women's oppression, currently under discussion in the League.

We recognise that there is still a long way to go before we have a clear idea of the relationships between the revolutionary struggles of women, the working class and the national minority people. In particular, how alliances can be forged between them to defeat imperialism and establish a society where there is a basis to go on to abolish all forms of exploitation and oppression.

The Congress concentrated on certain questions where we now think we took a wrong stand in the past. But within the League, there is an ongoing

process of discussion and struggle over the draft line as a whole.

There was also discussion of the wider context of the struggle for women's liberation, both in this country and worldwide. It was generally accepted that the struggle for women's liberation had to be put on an equal footing with other struggles; that women's oppression existed before imperialism, but that it continues and is adapted in new conditions and new forms under imperialism; and that both in theory and practice, the revolutionary movement needed to address the question of women's liberation.

World-wide, it was noted that national liberation struggles nearing victory, especially that in Eritrea and Tigray, were experiencing leadership by women. Women are a leading force who see national liberation as a massive, but first, step in the long struggle for true communism and that women had to a certain extent wrested power and equality during the struggle so far.

Throughout the Congress, it was emphasised that an internationalist view was vital, and that the experience and objective situation of national minority women in this country was important and often very different from white women. However, at our stage of development, we have to learn how to mobilise the majority of women in this country.

Some self-critical points that were overwhelmingly agreed are set out below. They in no way represent a line as such, but points of self-criticism of previous positions and a start in adopting an all-round line on women in the near future.

1. All women are oppressed under imperialism, in different ways. Working class women suffer class exploitation and oppression; women of oppressed nations suffer national oppression. Women suffer gender oppression at the hands of men. It is no accident that the wealth of the ruling class is predominantly owned and controlled by the male members thereof.

Women are oppressed by means of their role in the family, domestic labour, childcare; discrimination in employment; violence including rape; ideological and social attitudes. Women of different classes are affected in different degrees.

The RCL was wrong in the past to see the oppression of working class women as the only women's oppression of any significance.

2. The women's movement is generally progressive. It is a spontaneous movement (i.e. not Marxist-Leninist) and the class background of many women who have been active within it does not make it reactionary.

We were wrong to dismiss the movement in the past. We should generally support it.

It was wrong to characterise the movement as bourgeois, both because it is not bourgeois and because the class background of activists is not the deciding factor in relation to the struggle against the oppression of women. It was wrong to criticise the movement for being feminist because feminism is a progressive ideology which we must unite with, not disparage.

3. In Britain, the main aspect of the nuclear family for women is that it is oppressive. It is a structure which meets the needs of imperialism and is built on the isolation, oppression and exploitation of women, and on violence towards them.

The specific form taken by the family at any time or place is linked to the mode of production. It is a creation of a particular economic and social system and will reflect its culture.

In Britain, the nuclear family developed as the economic unit under capitalism, based on the unpaid labour of women in reproducing and maintaining the labour force. Even in those families where women take part in paid work, the ideology of 'A woman's place is in the home' is still strong.

5. It is important that white women struggling for their liberation do so in solidarity with national minority and Third World women. We must support the struggles of women in the Third World and the struggles of national minority women in Britain.

6. We support the right of women to organise separately.

Experience in other countries and historically in this country, show the necessity for women to form separate mass organisations to fight their specific oppression.

We need to use the Marxist method of dialectical materialism as a basic tool in theoretical analysis on the question of women's oppression, as on other subjects. We need to apply Marxism to conditions today and to look at the original analysis of capitalism critically from the point of view of its analysis of women's position.

In future issues of 'Class Struggle', we hope to cover these points in detail, relating them to concrete conditions facing us.

We welcome discussion, criticism or comment from our readers.



RCL CONGRESS