

THE CONGRESS OF THE PEOPLE

By Adv. J. SLOVO

ALMOST a year has passed since the Queenstown Conference of the African National Congress made its historic call for the convening of a Congress of the People. That year has seen a steady growth of the C.O.P. Movement.

The rousing and enthusiastic conferences which have been held in most Provinces clearly indicate the response this campaign has evoked, particularly amongst the most oppressed sections of our population. Reports from all parts of the country show that the inspired and poetic call has captured the imagination of the people everywhere.

This is understandable. There is a simple and immediate solution to our "complex and insoluble" race problem: allow each South African to say for himself what he desires of life. What could be more logical and unanswerable than this proposition? But this would shake the very foundations of South Africa's colour bar society.

And so there are those who would not only deny the right of the majority of our people to participate in self-government, but in addition fear with a desperate fear the mere assembly of people to discuss and proclaim their aspirations.

Why is this so? Why do they exhibit such abject terror merely because people wish to draw up a charter of their demands? It is because they have learned from history that the hold of the oppressor remains strong only as long as disunity exists, as long as struggles are isolated and strength unrealised. They know only too well that once the mass of oppressed people backed by their organised strength say: "Give us what is ours!", then the days of the oppressor are numbered. For from agreement and unity in purpose grows action.

It is therefore no accident that in the past year the whole South African police state apparatus has been called into play to prevent the C.O.P. from becoming a reality. "Let the people speak!" says the Call. "Treason and Sedition!" says Minister Swart.

The 20th century has seen the most unprecedented upsurge for freedom throughout the world; and yet in South Africa the move to enable our people for the first time in their history to take part in the drafting of a South African Declaration of Human Rights is dubbed treason.

Ruling by force and violence themselves, the S.A. government fears this democratic upsurge.

The government campaign against the C.O.P. has not been confined to hair-raising stories of the reservoir-poisoning variety. Almost every recognised leader of the campaign has been removed by ministerial decree under the infamous Suppression of "Communism" Act. Even the mass of discriminatory and Nazi-like laws which are in force in this country have been found wanting by our chief of police. His men have been encouraged to resort to extra-legal methods to stifle the campaign and to intimidate those taking part. Like the Nazis in Germany, the authorities here find it difficult to stem the peoples' movement without using techniques of the police-state type.

History teaches us that in the long run a peoples' struggle cannot be stopped in its advance towards liberation. Thus a thousand Swarts brandishing their cat-o'-nine tails, a thousand Radmeyers threatening and blustering, will make little permanent impact on the surge forward of the peoples' struggle.

However, the measures which have been taken by the authorities against the C.O.P., particularly the removal of experienced leaders, has hampered its progress.

The answer is clear. New leaders *must* be found and developed. Leaders are not born; they develop and grow in the struggle. One of the most urgent tasks facing the National Action Council is the selection and training of the thousands of persons who have shown their readiness for sacrifice by becoming "freedom volunteers," thus indicating their eligibility for the honoured role of leadership.

In the past the peoples' movement did not make sufficient use of the many people who responded to the call. While bearing this in mind, the National Action Council has not developed the machinery for training such persons with the speed that the situation demands.

It must never be forgotten that the lasting value of a campaign cannot be measured in terms of an isolated dramatic incident, or even of a spectacular climax, but in terms of whether the campaign has advanced organisational strength and brought new cadres into being.

Another important matter is the intensification of the drive to set up Congress of the People committees in every locality. One of the basic aims of the campaign is to raise organisational and freedom consciousness amongst the mass of the people.

A Charter of Freedom, however finely phrased and formulated, will, in itself, not transform the political scene. But if a Charter arises from an all-embracing discussion amongst our people at every level; if it grows in an organised manner, not only from the towns and cities but also from those parts of the country in which there are at present no existing politically organised units, then it will in fact become a living document which will be the rallying point for all civilised beings in this land.

Some people have suggested that it is both unnecessary and impossible to organise the C.O.P. campaign on such a basis. They say that the people know what their demands are, and the leaders know too. Why, then, waste so much time and effort on the cumbersome technique of formulating the Charter from the bottom up? For this very good reason:—

There is a world of difference between a mere awareness of oppression and an organised expression of opposition to it, not only amongst the leaders, but also amongst the people. We know only too well that every non-European in South Africa each day experiences an incident which makes him fully aware of the savage rule under which he lives. But we also know that until the isolated grievance and the spontaneous outburst is canalised into an organised realisation of the possibilities of sweeping away the unjust system, the powers that be will continue to have things their own way.

Looking at it this way, the four Congresses have persistently stressed the importance of the creation of local organised units as an essential requisite to the success of the campaign. It must be recognised, however, that too little has been done here. While the appeal for volunteers has found ready response, there have not been sufficient steps taken to create the machinery in various localities for the establishment of the volunteers into shock brigade units.

Let us be alert against the attitude that there is no urgency. This stems from the belief that the C.O.P. is a general propaganda and organisational campaign which must take second place to the other more immediate and urgent tasks of fighting the government on specific legislation, such as the Western Areas Removal Scheme, the Trade Union legislation, and so on. Those encouraging such an approach have failed to appreciate the nature and scope of the C.O.P. movement.

The idea of the C.O.P. arose at a time when no concerted drive was being made by the liberation movement as a whole to stem the advance of reaction in South Africa. The Defiance Campaign, which served this purpose in a different historical period, has come to an end. Its lasting contribution to the struggle for democracy can be attributed to the fact that it managed to create a drive throughout the country around a common plan. It managed to link up all the current grievances and all isolated struggles into one national movement which aimed at sweeping away some of the more basic discriminatory legislation.

The Defiance Campaign would not have been as successful as it was were it not for the fact that on the local level, the organisers succeeded in linking up the general aims with more specific and immediate local grievances.

During the lull after the Defiance Campaign it became clear that some other method had to be evolved to band together the sporadic and isolated struggles which were being carried on. The people

had once again to be given the perspective that there is a common aim and an organised link between them. The C.O.P. gives them this perspective.

The C.O.P. cannot be organised around abstract declarations about the basic rights of human beings without a link being established between these declarations and the current grievances of the people.

The C.O.P. does not stand in contradiction to the current "resist apartheid" campaign. It is an essential part of it. There might be some justification for the impression that there is some distinction between the C.O.P. campaign and the current more particularised struggles of the people, because of the fact that in many areas, C.O.P. organisers have not properly blended the two. This is an error which must be corrected, for if not the C.O.P. campaign and the peoples' struggles will both suffer immeasurably.

Finally, any campaign, however attractive its aims, will lose impetus if allowed to drag on interminably. A slow tempo with unduly prolonged intervals between various stages will create the impression that the leadership has lost its initiative.

For various reasons, particularly the uneven growth of the C.O.P. movement in different Provinces, the campaign has not yet managed to emerge from its first stage: the popularising of the C.O.P. idea.

Organisational units on the Provincial level have now been set up throughout South Africa. This has set the stage for a rapid advance towards the attainment of the last two stages: the collection of demands and the holding of the Congress.

The activity of the most advanced and conscious elements in the national liberation movement will determine whether the campaign grinds itself to a halt, or raises itself to new heights.