

Report on South Africa

The International Bolshevik Tendency sent a representative to a conference held in Cape Town from 4 to 9 December 1997. Hosted by the South African Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA) and the Italian Socialismo Rivoluzionario (SR) the conference was held under the title “Stop Capitalist Barbarism, Prepare the Socialist Alternative,” and aimed to facilitate “networking” among leftist groups and tendencies internationally.

The document produced by the conference organisers which formed the basis for discussion was broadly anti-capitalist. In our letter of 14 November 1997, accepting the invitation to participate we said “we believe we share a commitment to key elements of the political framework within which the conference has been organised.” We also stated:

“Of course we bring to the conference not only our anti-sectarian support for all actions against world capitalism, all workers in class struggle, and all movement against oppression, but also our own characteristic views: our appetite for programmatic debate, our anti-nationalist promotion of the equal rights of all nations to self-determination, our defence of the remaining workers states, our warning against any form of participation in popular fronts, our intransigent opposition to the labour bureaucracy.”

Much of the conference was taken up with discussion and workshops on tactics in different struggles including in trade unions, among women and peasants, and against racism and environmental degradation. The organisers were eager to establish a continuing network, and the issue that many conference participants found most engaging was the question of the degree of political agreement necessary for participation, and the nature and role of the co-ordinating committee. The Mauritian organisation Lalit (meaning “Struggle”) wanted minimal political preconditions and organisational structures, whereas SR wanted a slightly tighter organisation consistent with an apparent appetite for an eventual federated international. WOSA took an intermediate position. The outcome was the establishment of a network which is explicitly not a new international, without a centralised structure, for the purpose of furthering discussion and co-operation in practical action.

Readers may have noticed reference to this conference and our participation in the 16 January issue of the U.S. Spartacist League’s *Workers Vanguard* (“Death of Communism’ Confab in South Africa”). This account, characterized by the SL’s usual penchant for inventing “facts” to fit its polemical requirements, concludes that: “The message was obvious: the IBT is willing to unite with anybody, no matter what their politics.”

In fact we did not manage to politically “unite” with any other tendency at the conference. We only played a very modest role in the proceedings, although our advocacy of the Transitional Program had an impact on some militants. The other participants in the conference hold many views we do not share, but we welcomed the opportunity to make initial contact with a variety of left groups and individuals, including among the far left of South Africa’s black nationalist movement. Near the conclusion of the conference, on 8 December 1997, our representative made the following statement:

“The International Bolshevik Tendency does not intend to become a member of any formal international structure coming out of this conference, but we look forward to continuing networking with all the participants of this conference (as with other tendencies) with a view to political clarification and co-ordinated action.

“There are some difficulties with the draft resolutions but the conference has done considerable work on the current slide of world capitalism into barbarism, and on tactical approaches to resisting that slide.

“However, taken as a whole, the draft resolutions are of such broad scope that they APPEAR to be a total view of capitalism and to outline an adequate strategy for socialism. In fact these resolutions express a PARTIAL view of capitalism and do NOT outline a strategy for socialism.

“Important omissions in such resolutions are inevitable, given the process, and it would be difficult to draft adequate resolutions within this framework. However, in the context of material with such broad aspirations, some omissions stand out.

“1. The omission of a discussion of the principles on which to approach the national question. At this late point in the history of the bourgeois epoch conflicting national aspirations constantly threaten to undermine the international unity of the working class.

“2. The omission of a discussion of the process of the destruction of the deformed workers states, of the damage that has done to the working class internationally, and the importance of defending the remaining deformed workers states against imperialist intervention and domestic counter-revolution.

“3. The omission of a discussion of the popular front (an alliance between workers organisations and bourgeois parties) as the major strategic obstacle to proletarian revolutions concretely in the history of Twentieth Century class struggle.

“4. The omission of a programme of transitional demands which meet the needs of the working class but at the same time challenge the capitalist order and progressively mobilises for socialist revolution.

“5. The omission of a discussion of the necessity to move towards the development of an international democratic centralist party (with all proper caution about the process through which this must be built).

“Despite these omissions we see the conference having made a significant contribution, and we look forward to continuing co-operation with the comrades.”

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