The Congress and After

Eric Aarons

THE UNUSUALLY WIDE and sustained interest in its 22nd Congress shows that the Communist Party of Australia still forms a reference point for the different parts of the Australian Left, however they assess its past, its present and its future prospects. Many claim that the Congress reveals the Party to be in a state of confusion. The planners of and participants in it would be the last to deny its limitations and the existence of unresolved and knotty problems of theory and organisation, let alone the great difficulties still in the way of advance and renewal. They would accept, indeed affirm, the description of the Congress as being a transitional one. Nevertheless, the main characteristic of the Congress was precisely that it did, within the above limits, decisively resolve on a distinctive course which has been endorsed with no little enthusiasm, and will be resolutely pushed ahead by a large proportion of the rank-and-file and by committees with a significantly lower average age.

It is the friendly, and not so friendly, critics who display far more confusion as to what the Congress actually accomplished, the real meaning of the strategy decided on, and the degree of commitment to change in the indicated direction of the members of the new National Committee. Some claim the decisions represent a softer line, others equally vehemently see it as a harder line, while yet others have come up with profundities such as "the child may live or the child may die".1 Probably the most generous non-Party comments were from outside Australia, a section of the British

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1 See for example the concluding paragraph of Rex Mortimer’s review of Davidson’s *The Communist Party of Australia, Nation*, March 21, 1970.

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Left publishing in pamphlet form the Congress documents as exemplifying the “exciting ideas currently circulating in the Australian Left”.

The main effort in the period immediately ahead will be to use the degree of clarity and unity of purpose achieved in the many practical tasks arising. Already, to a significant degree, this has been tested in the great Vietnam Moratorium movement, both as regards approach and practical participation. Thankfully, this movement proved to be far too big and genuine a mass movement for any trend to establish hegemony over it. Even the Government does not believe its own propaganda about communist manipulation, nor could this have been effected even if desired. In fact the communists on principle abstained from any attempt at this and advocated actions and forms of organisation which hampered the attempts of others to that end. In the practical field the number of CP members in the localities breaking out of their previous isolation greatly increased, while in the factories and work places they were very influential in the (far too few, be it frankly said, but still significant) actions of support and participation.

Measures of reorganisation and changes in Tribune are already “in the pipeline” and will be given some practical shape at the National Committee meeting to be held just before this issue of ALR appears, while others, including the census of members and associated measures will take somewhat longer. All this involves further theoretical and practical tackling of the problem “what sort of organisation is most appropriate in today’s conditions”, a problem which was not taken very far at the Congress itself, mainly because significant ideas on the subject had not crystallised by then, but also partly because, when something began to get going as the Congress itself proceeded, there was insufficient flexibility in thought and procedures to grasp and realise some of the possibilities which presented themselves.

Any “reorganisation” will be linked up with the “opposition” in the Party. What will they do now? Nobody knows precisely, and of course the “opposition” is by no means homogeneous. But some aspects of the line of main leading figures is clear. Generally speaking they will not co-operate in carrying out the decisions of Congress. Some are already acting to restrict the sale of Tribune, collection of money, absenting themselves from discussions about

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2 The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation reproduced the “Statement of Aim’s, Methods and Organisation” of the CPA, and “Modern Unionism and the Workers’ Movement.”

3 The same stand has been taken by the CPA for some time in regard to international organisations.
practical work in the industrial field, on the Moratorium, etc. This was quite predictable; but what will they actually do? Will they get out some sort of a paper (there have been rumors, and there has been an unnatural lull from the “Marxist Publication Centre” at Oyster Bay). Are they concentrating their forces for the next Congress in 1972 in the hope that the “new line” — with some help from them — will discredit itself? Perhaps; but it is hard to see that they could have any real expectations of succeeding in the future when they failed so signally on this occasion. Will they set up a new Party? De facto there is already another leading centre, but there are many difficulties in the way of formally completing the process. Some of these are practical, and these are formidable enough. But perhaps the greatest difficulty lies outside Australia, in that such a step might take more explaining away than is convenient in a still far from tranquil “international communist movement”.

But in any case all the options do not lie with rabid opponents of the Congress, and adherents of its decisions, and many others who may still have considerable reservations would firmly rebuff splitting moves which would expose the hypocrisies of the repeated protestations by the main opponents of the present policy of their “loyalty to the Party”. There is a growing understanding of and support for the position taken up by Congress that:

The Communist Party, in seeking to add to its members and influence, welcomes into its ranks all socialists who share its basic ideas, even though they may differ on some points, provided they are prepared to act in support of these basic ideas, and accept the rules and constitution of the Party. These conditions are necessary to enable the organisation to take concerted and effective action, and would be impossible if differences of view were regarded as more important than unity round basic ideas.

Although putting into effect Congress decisions and giving some reality to the desired “reorganisation” will be the focus of attention for some time to come, a parallel task is the giving of greater and wider theoretical and ideological substance to the new orientation. This is of course a much longer-range affair, depending more and more (for the Party and for everybody else on the Left) on conscientious and fearless re-working of the existing theoretical legacy and parallel integration of the mounting volume of new thought and scholarship now coming from Australian as well as overseas sources. In a period of upheaval and rapid change many on the Left seek to recapture or reinforce the “stability” of their old frameworks, perhaps revamped and made more sophisticated, 

4 Just after the foregoing was written a circular appeared under the names of A. Watt and E. Ross, announcing the launching of “Socialist Publications” and appealing for financial support to publish a newspaper, journal, pamphlets, etc.
but such temptations to adopt a New Orthodoxy will not produce solutions.

In general Congress, in its preparation and level of debate as well as in the subjects discussed, left a lot to be desired. But this recognition needs to be tempered by realisation—especially by those who did not participate in the process and, perhaps because of this, display little consciousness of such an elementary fact—that the CPA is a real organisation with a real history made up of real people; that it was this organisation and these people who had to adopt a new course, not some other or ideal organisation (where?) or people (where?) who could start from the beginning again armed with the sum total of extant political wisdom. Thus there was criticism of the fact that the meaning of being "anti-Soviet" received great attention in the course of preparation for Congress. But could it have been otherwise? And some observers who gave some recognition to the historical legacy even claimed that this was the main framework of Congress discussion, though no objective perusal of the sum of speeches could possibly support such a contention.

In this connection too, claims that an equivocating attitude was taken up towards the socialist countries, and the Soviet Union in particular, hardly bear examination. This was in fact one of the liveliest debates of the Congress, and while there were different ideas originally as to how to arrive at the best results, none of the critics has made any attempt to analyse the actual resolution that was carried. If they still nevertheless feel that the Congress decisions display a hankering for the former relations, they should at least note the fact that the parties and people most directly concerned have, correctly, no illusions whatever on that score.

There has also been a good deal of head-shaking and tut-tutting over the fact that the "new course" originated from the leadership rather than from a rank and file revolt against the leadership. These remonstrations sound faintly ridiculous in view of the fact that on previous occasions they have been uttered over the fact that the leadership did not initiate moves; and more so given the changes in the final document, from the original draft, on the question of the socialist countries. Actually, of course, the leadership acted on the basis of its own beliefs as they had evolved as a consequence of past experiences, painful and otherwise, and grappling with the new situation. But neither were the rank-and-file passive, or blind acceptors in the main of the leadership's views. On the contrary, the response both in voting and expression of opinion showed that the move was a mutual one. True, the "theoretical level" of the whole CPA membership — partly a self-inflicted

5 "Whither the Party", issued by Warren Osmond and Kelvin Rowley towards the end of the Congress.
wound, this — leaves a good deal to be desired. But an elitist estimate dismissing the genuine feeling and understanding contained in many rank and file contributions as "blind following" is quite far from the truth.

The real substance of the Congress decisions however — the outlining of a strategy for the achievement of socialism in modern Australia — has received disappointingly scant attention. There has been little analysis of the validity or otherwise of the concepts advanced, and many critics whether friendly or hostile, or of the "loving-hating" variety, have taken the way of concentrating on such aspects as "Will they do what they say?" "Can they do what they say?" "What will the opposition do?" "What will the Russians do?" "The students won't flock into the Party anyway, so it's a dead duck", etc. It is not that these are not valid questions to pose, or that they are resented. But the issues of strategy themselves are the most important for serious-minded revolutionaries, and won't go away even in the event that some happy pestilence (as some would see it) or sheer inability of communists to "measure up" were to obliterate the CPA today or in ten years time. It is therefore worthwhile to examine some of these issues of strategy and such comments as there have been on them (not necessarily in order of importance).

Few seem to realise the actual significance of the debate over "the leading role of the Party". In most socialist-based countries this "principle", whatever its historical origins, has been a major ideological underpinning for the exercise of a monopoly of power and restrictions on democracy — witnessed in especially sharp form in regard to Czechoslovakia. In countries like Australia it has been a major source of support for a self-imposed ghetto in which to one degree or another most communists placed themselves. They felt internally justified or comforted on the basis that even if the Party's views were not accepted now, this was more the misfortune or foolishness of those who rejected them, and that they would be vindicated in the end because people would eventually be forced by circumstances to conclude the communists had been always right, and come to them for leadership. This has been decisively rejected ideologically and (gradually) is being replaced in practice with the idea of "mixing it" with others on equal terms on the basis of individually and collectively making whatever contribution can be made in revolutionary activism and on the theoretical front, coupled with a real open-mindedness to the ideas of others, of being ready to debate and change their own ideas if rational argument and/or experience point in that direction. Thus the CPA, in its thinking and practice is looking at itself as it is in reality in the community and within the Left, and is not adopting a posture of asserting a
claim to be something it is not. There is no problem here except a psychological one, and any increase in following and influence will come naturally, on the basis of performance.

It is wryly amusing to see others now wrestling with this tattered "leading role" banner. In addition to the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) which has been in this field for some time, we have the "group of revolutionary Marxists, supporters of the Fourth International" who have recently issued No. 1 of Socialist Review. This contains an article by Ernest Mandel on the Lenin Centenary, which concludes: "The future belongs to Leninism. That's why it belongs to the Fourth International". That sort of declamation the CPA has had enough of. We'll make them a present if they wish of all the old banners on which we have inscribed similar empty declarations. It is an interesting sidelight, too, that all the Australian contributors in Socialist Review write under pseudonyms — the better, one supposes, to exercise their "leading role".

In related vein is the comment of another FI tendency "The Revolutionary Marxist Tendency" in opposition to the stand of Denis Frenery in joining the CPA after the Congress. They say:

We consider that a cadre force of even as few as 500 revolutionary Marxists, uncompromising towards Stalinism and reformism and fully committed to revolutionary strategies, tactics and methods of organisation, would be inestimably more valuable to the Australian workers than the present CPA.

Perhaps it would; but such pronouncements, while not perhaps intrinsically absurd, become so when those so declaring have not "as few as 500", but fewer than a score, and no apparent plan or strategy to build a party at all, nor even a formula so that one might choose the "right" 500.

The struggle for the "hegemony" of the ideas in which one believes is of course more or less inevitable and necessary, but the spirit in which that struggle is waged is of particular importance today, in view of the continuing fragmentation of the Left. The Congress documents say:

The complexity of modern society, the great variety of social forces entering on social action, the multiplicity of issues moving them, the considerable degree of spontaneity displayed, and the reactions against negative experiences of the past, such as over-centralisation and theoretical conformity, have made it clear that organisation for social change must be such as suits today's conditions.

Australian communists advance the idea of a "coalition of the left" for revolutionary social change." This recognises that there are now and are likely to be in the future a number of trends agreeing on a general perspective of socialist transformation of existing society, but differing in important respects

\[6 International, No. 12, p. 24.\]
in ideology, program and organisation. And
Communists seek to contribute their utmost to such a leadership by their
activity, the force of their ideas, and their organisation.

Many are at pains to claim that the CPA has been of negligible
account in the political and ideological field for at least 15 years
(since 1956, say). If they take their own assertions seriously they
should see that other Left groups cannot at the same time blame the
CP for having been in a position to stop them from showing “how
it is done”. Whether they are political parties or semi-parties such
as the M-L’s or FI groups, those gathering around journals such as
Outlook or Arena, or more recent organisations of the type of
the Revolutionary Socialist Alliance, Resistance, The Queensland
RSA, various student bodies, etc., the same sorts of questions must
be faced. But there seems to be a marked reluctance to do so. This
is said not as a debating point, but in earnest, because it is hard
to see how the development of revolution can be approached
seriously unless all ask themselves and frankly discuss why they
have not succeeded, even if the CPA has failed.

The CPA has been accused of pre-occupation with “organisation
building”, but its main purpose in preparation for the Congress (in
fact since the previous Congress) has been to elaborate a strategy
both to guide its own work and also to serve the movement as a
whole even if only by providing a battleground on which rival strate­
gies could contend to the benefit of all. It seems rather elementary
that one socialist strategy can be adequately assessed only by refer­
cence to an alternative strategy (supplemented, of course, by criticism
or contrary analysis of individual aspects).

But what is the strategy of the projected FI “party” for example?
One searches in vain for anything coherent, and the only thing that
stands out is the continued consideration of “entrism”, but exactly
what this involves remains unexplained, while its failure to produce
significant results over a period of thirty years is not analysed. The
fact that there has been some success in achieving high positions in
the Labor Party only pin-points the question: what is the strategy;
what has been achieved by it; what is the perspective for future
success; and where are the experiences illustrating its reality?

Then take the M-L’s. What precisely is their revolutionary
strategy? They don’t proclaim one in any integrated way. They
seem to be making something of a new turn now in practice, and
possibly have a strategy that they prefer not to disclose, for
some reason or other. In this connection too, while Arena,
for example, could validly claim it is not the sort of institution that
needs or should have a strategy, its pages have recorded, not for
the first time, some vague sympathetic noises towards the M-L’s.
Says Doug White of their past dogmatic and unanalytic attitudes
“those who formed the CPA (M/L) have done a lot of re-thinking since”7. One awaits the inner evolution of this intriguing reference.

But there are a number of the new Left apparently embracing the idea of a “Leninist Party”, and criticising the CPA for not coming up to scratch by this criterion8. But the main criticisms actually raised are not on the main concepts concerning strategy, but on other questions, including and in particular organisational ones. But who ever heard of a leninist party without a strategy? Or without that strategy, based as it must be on social conditions, being the key factor in determining what sort of organisation need be built?

In earlier exchanges some of those now calling for a “Leninist Party” implied that a strategy was not necessary, and even that lack of one was a virtue. This may be a legitimate point of view, but it has to be argued. And even if some case is made out for this point of view, it is hard to embrace it in the concept Leninism, however defined.

To take another question; it is easy to chide the CPA with not attracting large numbers of new young forces, particularly students; but if the same criterion is applied to other definable political trends have they been more than marginally more successful? As indicated earlier, one outstanding characteristic of the new Left in Australia, America, Britain and elsewhere has been the fact that, beneath the umbrella term there exists extensive fragmentation, and there is no sign yet of any reverse trend. This is worrying for the revolutionary movement as a whole (or should be), because as the US in particular shows, the great potential of revolt and the growing difficulties of the ruling class are to a marked degree negatived by this fragmentation of the revolutionary forces. Naturally, the CPA feels keenly its inability to “do better” in this field. But some advance is being made, we are not Robinson Crusoe in experiencing such difficulties, and we feel that conceptions of how things might develop regarding the political affiliations of the students (especially) concerning both ourselves and others should not be too rigid or fixed in past patterns. Perhaps other forms may emerge in practice, given genuine application of some of the approaches previously outlined.

Less important perhaps, but still significant, is the fact that it often remains more “convenient” to be a non-CP revolutionary and say so. And it should be clear from past experience that political,

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7 From Doug White's review of Alastair Davidson's Communist Party of Australia, Arena No. 21, p.76. It would be interesting to know whether this rethinking involves the three fundamentals of the M-L's position: (i) “Marxism is a set of propositions, you either accept them or you don't”; (ii) the first and fundamental task of communists is to support and accept the leadership of the Communist Party of China; (iii) acceptance of “the leader” principle locally. Or is it only tactical? See ALR No. 5, 1969, p. 25.

8 Osmond & Rowley, “Whither the Party.”
economic and academic discrimination still finds a way even in such cases, and that anti-communist ideology affects adversely the Left as a whole, not only the Communist Party.

The attitude of the CPA to the Labor Party is another question on which the whole possible spectrum of positions is adopted by one or another trend in the Left, without any detailed attempt at either an over-all estimate of the Labor Party, or still less any effort to fit such an analysis into an over-all strategy for socialism. It is hard to call “a plague on the ALP” either an estimate or a strategy.\(^9\) Ironically it is in effect a partial return to the discredited “social-fascist” condemnation (and a call on the CPA to abandon its now supposedly “soft” line to the ALP in favor of this).

Then there is the opposite reaction, of a section of the ALP Left and others that the Congress decisions represent a return to a “hard” line by the CPA. Seemingly they do not see that a greater emphasis on developing and expounding an independent position — certainly involving more consistent criticism and contest of ideas — does not of itself imply a turning away from co-operation where this is possible, or any playing down of the mass influence of the ALP and therefore the vital importance of the ALP to the mass movement and its development (or retardation). Anyone inclined to adopt such a view has only to review the course and success of the Vietnam Moratorium to find antidotes to this.

The CP attitude to the Labor Party is a complex one — inevitably, one would argue, because of the complexity of the reality with which it deals — and the considerations involved are set out at some length in the Congress document. In view of this it is depressing, though not unexpected, to find that one FI “theoretician”, amid a whole number of quotes from the document, omits the following key section dealing with the question as to how the Labor Party could become a very important part of a future “coalition of the Left”.\(^10\)

Such changes in the Labor Party cannot be expected to occur simply or easily. They would require much experience by Labor Party members and supporter in political upheavals. They would require increased understanding by committed socialists within the Labor Party organisation and sustained efforts by them to expose the contradictions of capitalist society. They would entail the rejection of rightwing views and the reform of the party organisation to allow the active participation of members, trade union affiliates and supporters in formulating and deciding policies.

A Labor Party developing in this way could become a very important part of a future “coalition of the left” for radical social change and socialism.

\(^9\) See for example Doug Kirsner’s speech to the Congress, *Tribune*, April 8, 1970. The Queensland RSA regards both Labor Party and trade unions as “enemies”.

We do not suggest that here is the whole answer, but it is less than objective to claim that the attempt is not being made especially when the Congress decisions also stress that such changes in the ALP would need to be paralleled with a determined and sustained (as it will need to be) effort to change the situation in the trade union movement and the industrial working class.

Here again, speaking of the industrial working class one is struck by the variety of opinions among the Left, raising larger questions of strategy which it is seldom attempted to argue out. One view holds that theoretical considerations deriving from the progress of the scientific and technological revolution mean that the new strata will be the main actor in the future revolutionary drama. Assuming this could be established, what one fails to find is any treatment of how the industrial working class, nevertheless, is to be viewed. They won’t “die out”, even over many decades. Is the revolution to be made against them, or with their neutrality, or what? Strategy cannot ignore these questions, and strategy must be given effect in activity.\(^\text{11}\) In the United States a section of workers have now been mobilised to act against the anti-war movement; here a section of workers acted for it. Is the one, or the other, pre-determined? Then one finds all sections of the FI verbalising at length about the CP’s present failing among the workers, and while talking about the decisiveness of the working class unable in practice to develop significant actions or connections, and explaining their (but not our) shortcomings by reference to “objective difficulties”.

It is interesting to compare reactions about the CPA and the working class with that of the ruling class itself. The May issue of The Employers’ Review said:

Despite the fact that it is presently unpopular in some quarters to talk of the influence of communism within the Australian Trade Union Movement, and considered by some to be inappropriate for the present industrial situation to be traced back to the influence of communists within trade unions, there is, nevertheless, a need for thinking Australians to undertake a re-appraisal of the situation.

For instance, what was said and decided at the 22nd National Congress of the Communist Party of Australia over the recent Easter week-end, has a great deal of pertinence to every worker and employer in Australia — indeed to every member of our community.

Before considering an examination of events at the four-day long meeting, a myth must be disposed of. That is the constantly repeated “they have only four or five thousand members (some writers put the figure lower) — what harm can they do?” — what harm indeed!

It is clear to observers in industrial relations that a small group of determined flexible communists can cause havoc in industry.

One communist, working in a sensible manner, can completely alter the mood and aims of a work-force of about fifty within a month.

\(^{11}\) Rex Mortimer in “Student Action — Out of Nihilism”, A/LR No. 24 recognises the problem but offers no solution in meaningful terms.
There are many more sympathisers with the aims and methods of the C.P.A. than there are members, and generally the C.P.A. prefers this position. Additionally, the position taken up by an estimated 200,000 ex-C.P.A. members in Australia is of importance. Only a small fraction of this number turn against the party. Some want merely to be left alone; but the majority have imbibed the theories of communism and still have some belief in them. Most of these ex-communists are just as ready for militant action as are C.P.A. members.

It may be expected of course that these statements contain an element of use of calculated anti-communist ideology. But for all that they show a more objective approach than by many on the Left.

Another oft-repeated criticism of the CPA's strategy is that it is an eclectic one, designed moreover in an opportunist way to merely "gain support" by adopting others' demands.\textsuperscript{12} The inconsistencies in this assertion are manifold. To mention only three: (1) the really eclectic position is one which has only individual points of reference and no developed over-all strategy — a position which has more in common with the positions of its critics in the left rather than of the CP; (2) to demonstrate the eclectic position of a strategy such as the CP's would require demonstration that the demands and principles it raises are internally inconsistent — something no-one has even attempted to do; and (3) if the CP really were adopting this or that view or demand just to win favor it would be necessary to explain why issue is taken, as in this review, with the views of others, including friends.

There is no doubt that as the CPA began to listen to its critics and fearlessly sum up its experience it began to learn, and one would hope that this will continue. And there is certainly no shortage of critics or things to criticise or experiences to be delved into. But a great deal of the post-Congress criticism displays a degree of superficiality, and in not a few cases is, we suspect, dictated by preconceived attitudes, sometimes mixed with barely concealed personal biases and pronunciamentos. Such attitudes could very well do more harm to those who adopt them than to the CP, for everything is being tested by what actually happens— and what has happened in the last three years makes a good deal of nonsense of many previous speculations and pronouncements about the evolvement of the CPA. The future is complex and opaque, but it looks like being full of activity, change and excitement — a far more favorable and interesting prospect than for many a long year for revolutionaries. All attempts to unravel the complexities of society will be tested, not just those of the CPA. How we all measure up will determine the force of our contribution.

\textsuperscript{12} See for example Doug Kirsner, \textit{ALR} No. 23, and earlier Ann Curthoys, \textit{ALR} No. 4, 1969.