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C3: Role and Place of the Youth in Society, the ANC and the Struggle

The Role and Place of the Youth in Society, the ANC and in the Struggle

The youth does not occupy a special perch outside of its social environment. It is very much part of society. It mirrors the ramifications of the society within which it lives; it shares class and group loyalties; it engages in struggles for the realisation and defence of concrete social ideals and interests. Just as in class societies we have divisions into the haves and have-nots - owners of small enterprises and small plots of land, intellectuals and so on - we do have similar social gradations among the youth: working youth, students, peasants, petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals, exploiters.

The rung occupied by each section of the youth on the social ladder reflects their relation to the means of production; it could be a result of their social origins, actual and adopted material and political status in the process of social interaction - or due to a combination of these and many other factors. Generally, the political outlook of each category of youth mirrors its social position; working youth or youth with a working class background identify with their class. Yet a political outlook contrary to objective interests could be acquired - for example in the case of intellectuals from a well-to-do background who abandon their class and adopt positions of the working people.

Thus the youth does not form a class on its own; it is a heterogeneous group within society, reflecting more or less the material and spiritual divisions in that society. However, within this milieu, it is identifiable as youth not merely for

its age group and numerical predominance, but also for certain social characteristics which are peculiar to it. What are these qualities?

1. The young and rising generation constitutes a representative of the future in the broadest sense; the future of any society depends on the practical and spiritual moulding of the youth. Classes and strata act not only for their own good but also for the good of their rising generation. The youth grows and is moulded within a specific social environment - be it in the comfort and sleek surroundings of the capitalist home, school and boardrooms, the squalid conditions of the working class ghetto, the backward and wretched environment of the rural poor, or the confines of a petty-bourgeois upbringing.

2. The stage of youth is one of assimilating knowledge of all kinds. Avidly searching for a rational understanding of the surrounding world, the youth therefore displays curiosity, rebelliousness, impassioned and uncontrollable enthusiasm; it quickly forms judgments as it abandons others. Such a stage is crucial in the moulding of a stable social being; thus all classes and strata wage relentless battles for the hearts and minds of the youth.

3. The youth is as enthusiastic in its search for knowledge as it is militant in the fight for the realisation of the ideals it holds dear. Having evolved an understanding of the "right and the wrong", it displays great zeal and verve in fighting for what it conceives as just. Within the different class formations it acts as a powerful driving force, a dynamo of

the class, national and international battles. It is to be found in the front trenches of practical and theoretical struggles displaying both initiative and self-sacrifice.

4. Due to their inexperience and illusions bred of their psychological make-up, young people can be easily swayed into positions that are counter to their interests. Thus a young worker could seek false comfort by abstaining from class battles or even by joining the exploiters' state machinery. Not seldom, young people are enticed en masse to adopt social and cultural value systems alien to their interests.

All societies in general, and classes in particular, pay special attention to the youth. For any people or class to shirk this responsibility is to do great harm to itself. This applies particularly to peoples struggling to break the shackles of oppression and exploitation. No revolution can be victorious without the effective education, organisation and mobilisation of the youth into political action. It is none other than the youth (especially the working youth) who form the core of the "political" and "military" armies of the revolution. Their youthful energy enables them to perform great feats in the theatre of battle; their vigour enables them to be the most active transmitters of ideas and skills; their zeal spreads into their surroundings like wild-fire.

The youth acts as such not as a separate contingent vis-a-vis the motive force of the revolution, but as an integral part thereof. The struggles of the youth would not count for much if they were not linked to those of the working people. At the same time, the youth lends the revolutionary struggles this youthful vigour only if and when it enjoys the guidance and experienced tutelage of the older generation. This calls for a wise approach in dealing with the youth; a balanced and timeous combination of severity and patience, seriousness and good humour.

The fact that the youth has to act as an integral part of the revolutionary classes and strata does not preclude its organisation and action as youth per se. In fact, its dynamising role is greatly facilitated by its organisation and mobilisation around issues that affect it as youth. It is through such organisations that the revolutionary forces are able to impart skills and experience in a

manner fitting the peculiar station of the youth, and to galvanise it into a broad movement attracting all potential participants.

Within a revolutionary movement, the youth not only displays the qualities mentioned above; most often it is in the majority. "Is it not natural that the youth should predominate in our Party, the revolutionary Party?" Engels once retorted. "We are the party of the future, and the future belongs to the youth. We are a party of innovators, and it is always the youth that most eagerly follows innovators. We are a party that is waging a self-sacrificing struggle against old rottenness, and youth is always the first to undertake a self-sacrificing struggle".

Indeed, this also places great challenges on any revolutionary movement. It has to adopt a scientific system of educating its youth members - to develop in them the ability to combine knowledge and practice, verve and cool-headedness, innovation and experience. The young members have to be taught not only to be good revolutionaries but also to reproduce themselves, to understand the people and relate to them in a patient and respectful manner while at the same time raising the political consciousness of the masses. The youth should be made to feel that they are an organic part of the revolutionary movement, to see themselves developing in a purposeful manner, to be trained in all skills taking into account the reality that young people are the future leaders of any movement or society. In brief, young people can play a meaningful role in a revolutionary movement only if there is a systematic cadre policy to ensure their development.

These are some of the universal manifestations of the place and role of youth in society. These have been and continue to be borne out by the practical experience of struggles all over the world; by the heroic youth who fought for the victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution and in its defence and construction of socialism, in the anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggles in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia, in the popular struggles of the Angolan and Mozambican peoples, in Cuba and Nicaragua, in Namibia and Palestine. What are our concrete tasks in this regard?

For us to effectively harness the potential of our youth, it is necessary to recognise that the youth

will not automatically come to the side of the revolutionary forces. For them to do so there has to be persistent, painstaking daily work by our movement. To mould and socialise the younger generation, that is, the creation of their personality and introducing it into social practice is a two-way process - on the one hand young people assimilate prior social experience, and on the other young people gradually apply in a creative way and further the experience they have acquired. Thus the youth are the object of social influence, and the subject of historical process. They assimilate the experience of previous generations, not as passive receivers; they creatively modify it, enrich and extend the legacy they have inherited in accordance with the requirements of their time, and the specific features of a given social moment.

It is with this understanding that we have to approach the mobilisation of our youth into the struggle. To effectively do so it is necessary to re-emphasise the impact that the current social, political and economic conditions have on their participation. We shall therefore examine the role and potential of the mainstreams of the different categories of the youth.

The Working Youth

The working youth forms the most consistent and reliable section of the revolutionary youth movement "and when they join the struggle of the working class, they fight for their own cause, and grow and become stronger in the struggle". The links they have with the most advanced and revolutionary class, their common class interests and objectives with the proletariat as a whole, accords the working youth a leading position in the revolutionary youth movement.

In the process of building the Youth Congresses and youth movement inside the country, we have to take cognisance of this fact. We have to consciously guide the process to result in them becoming the backbone of the emerging youth movement.

Given the militant struggles of the whole working class in which the youth become steeled revolutionaries, their participation in the youth movement will inject into it this acquired tradition. This will give full political expression to their youthful zeal and create avenues for them to creatively contribute to the struggles, demanding the participation of the youth as youth. The colonial

exploitative system of apartheid unleashes its vicious character particularly in relation to the working youth. They have to bear a significant share of the burden of the crisis shifted onto the working people by the capitalist system. They will therefore easily appreciate the necessity for organising and mobilising the unemployed youth into organised political activity.

In this context also falls the responsibility of mobilising the rural working youth - those who are on contract to the cities and those working on agricultural farms. The former, though unstable due to constant mobility, ultimately bring with them the experience of working class organisation and struggles into the rural areas. Their mobilisation, particularly bearing in mind their long-term potential as organisers among the rural youth, is of fundamental importance.

Lenin offers a concrete guide on how to harness their potential: "Young workers need the experience of veteran fighters against oppression and exploitation, of those who have organised many strikes ... who are wise in revolutionary traditions and have a broad political outlook". Indeed the sincere delusions of young revolutionaries will be overcome if they are given help by old-guard fighters in good time.

We always need to examine the revolutionary potential of the working youth on the basis of a comprehensive and profound study of their socio-economic, legal and political status. Consideration should be given to the fact that their involvement in large-scale capitalist production is a historically proven phenomenon. It brings them face to face with their oppressor and this teaches them excellent lessons in class education.

The Student Youth

Historically this section of youth has been the organised and dynamic social force. The student youth have and continue to contribute and participate in the revolutionary struggle of our people. The socio-historical experience of students in our country falls within the characterisation of this category by Lenin as being "the most responsive section of the intelligentsia ... most accurately reflects and express the development of class interests and political groupings in society as a whole". They would not be what they are if their political grouping did not correspond

to the political grouping of society as a whole. It is inevitable that the same group existing among students are the same as in society.

Because of their social nature students are helpless without the support of the working class. Our own experience shows that they turn to the working masses if they have to achieve results. This is because it is only in alliance with and led by the working class that students can display their revolutionary initiative to the full. Actions by students have to be co-ordinated with political action by the working class - the November Vaal stay-at-home and Eastern Cape struggles bear testimony to this truth.

It is also correct to recognise the necessity for students to organise themselves as students and to define their sector of struggle against the common enemy: to develop democratic organisations rooted amongst the students, whose interests and aspirations they represent and fight for as an integral part of the democratic movement of our people. Their heterogenous social character becomes a concrete basis from which we work out our approach to them. We also need to emphasise their common ground, which gives them a political platform for joint, co-ordinated struggles, e.g. the Education Charter.

The current profile of the student movement and the profound understanding of their role and position in the struggle accords to the demands of our situation. Their organisational base and influence needs to be strengthened across the whole spectrum of the student community given the special colonial character of our society. Racial polarisation should not be a fetter to the task of mobilising our whole student community, but should be a challenge. Moving from the reality that the regime is failing and cannot fulfil the aspirations of all the people irrespective of nationality, we need to boldly move into all communities and organise them.

Engels anticipated that, under specific conditions, even the bourgeoisie would produce "young men ... who ... would be very useful in the movement". Indeed, our situation accords to this profound anticipation. In any case students are a transient social group.

The Role of the Youth Section

As an integral part of the vanguard movement, the youth section is charged

with the specialised task of fulfilling the strategic objectives of the movement with the greater involvement of the youth. It has the responsibility of organising, mobilising and guiding all our youth into participation in the revolutionary struggle of our people. It does not act as a separate organism but as a reliable reserve and shock force of the movement. Since the growth of the movement lies in the recruitment of new forces, mostly young, the youth section should act as a nursery for the revolutionary upbringing of those who come into the movement. It should provide the material requirements for the fulfilment of a cadre policy designed to meet all the demands of our struggle.

It is necessary to stress that the youth section cannot be regarded as a mass youth league, but a guiding nucleus. This is because of the objective conditions imposed by operating within the confines of exile. This understanding is fundamental since it defines the characteristics of the auxiliary role that it assumes within the ANC. Given the necessary guidance and deriving its inspiration from the experiences of other peoples, the youth section can fulfil its important role as an organised special task force within the African National Congress.

Conclusion

The youth in our country, like young people everywhere in capitalist countries, are searching for genuine ideals and values which they can live by, and for revolutionary ways to win them. Thus the Freedom Charter has become deeply rooted in the hearts of our youth as a beacon which meets their genuine aspirations. Their involvement in mass democratic political actions and quest for revolutionary theory and grasp for the primacy of organisation, are features characteristic of the process of involving our youth in struggle. These are due to the objective conditions under which they mobilise, organise and fight.

The subjective factor is equally significant: the correct ideological and political orientation of the youth, the ability of the movement (and in particular the youth section) to impart to the protests by the youth a conscious and organised nature. Our ability to educate them in a genuine revolutionary spirit is a key factor.

The future of any movement or nation is dependent also on the integration of the youth in the political and other social activities. The grooming of those who have to ensure that the genuine aspirations of the people are fully realised demands a conscious effort on the part of the revolutionary movement. The inexperience of the young provides the opportunity for a systematic process of political upbringing. This involves bold decisions in giving heavy responsibilities to the youth. We correctly say the future is in their hands.

In the words of Comrade President O.R. Tambo: "A country, a movement, a people, that does not value its youth, does not deserve its future." Indeed the movement needs to deepen its value for the youth and harness its potential.

