

Women Unite: Stand Up And Fight!

The 9th, Congress of the Women's Progressive Organisation which met at Grove, East Bank, Demerara from November 5 to 6, 1983 dealt with a wide range of women's problems, setting them in the context of international and regional developments and in the particular and extremely difficult conditions of Guyana. Congress was held under the theme: "Women Unite, Organise and Fight!"

There were two main documents of the 9th., Congress, the full and detailed report of the Central Committee and the Action Guide. The Action Guide, a new type of document, set out the historical role of women as a social force and dealt fully with the conditions of Guyanese women, the tasks and targets of the WPO, its work in the community, in mass organisations and in trade unions. Vital resolutions were adopted, there were amendments made to the organisation's Constitution, messages were read from a large number of overseas women's organisations and elections were held.

The 9th., Congress was declared open by the General Secretary of the People's Progressive Party, Cheddi Jagan who praised the advances made by Guyanese women and pointed to their loyalty and devotion to the cause to which they are dedicated. He warned that US imperialism was on the offensive and discussed the situation in Central America and the Caribbean.

Dr. Jagan dealt with the Grenada situation. He charged that the US government excused its invasion of Grenada in order to bring about "law and order," but pointed to Chile after US connivance led to the murder of Salvador Allende and the installation of the Pinochet military regime. There is no democracy in Chile; instead the people live under a ruthless dictatorship, their living standards have deteriorated drastically and now the people are fighting back.

He called for one minute's silence in respect for those who were killed in Grenada — Maurice Bishop, Jacqueline Creft and others. In closing his address, Dr. Jagan observed that imperialism, despite its belligerent posture, is in deep crisis. World capitalism is sick and falling. "Time," he said, "is on the side of Marxism-Leninism. The future belongs to socialism."

The main document of the 9th., Congress of the WPO, the Central Committee Report, dealt with the international and local situations and the role and future tasks of the organisation in the coming period.

The report outlined the important role played by the Soviet Union and the Socialist Community in upholding world peace and leading the struggle against imperialism and for social progress. "We reiterate also our especially deep respect for the communist women of all countries and revolutionary progressive, peace and democratic women and their organisations which are making dynamic contributions inside and outside their respective countries", said the Report which also hailed the work of the Women's International Democratic Federation.

On the local scene the Report examined the super-exploitation of women under the present severe conditions where, under PNC rule, the country is experiencing its worse ever political, social and economic crisis. The Report also attacked the PNC for seeking IMF assistance which is aggravating the situation. Under the present circumstances, said the Report, US imperialism is watching. "While imperialism bolsters the regime it nevertheless recognises that it is maintaining an unpopular regime which faces the growing possibility of being removed by mass action. It is therefore seeking to build other forces which could be used to prevent the PPP from playing a decisive role in the formation of a new government." The report further went on to state:

"It is not enough to talk only of bread and attack the PNC but to let the people know what they will be fighting for and what are they going to replace the PNC regime with—another government similar to the PNC or a revolutionary democratic government; those who consider trying to appease imperialism are in fact selling out the Guyanese people. Our task must be to protect what unity has already been achieved. Only an anti-imperialist democratic government with a socialist-oriented programme can solve the crisis the country is in and bring improvements in conditions of life for our people."

The Report detailed the work done by the organisation over the past years. In concluding it stated: "This 9th Congress will be a hallmark in the life of the WPO in which we have grown numerically and organisationally into the most militant body championing not only the rights of our women and children but also the rights of

all our people. When we leave the walls of this Congress let us give our best; we know what we must do and let nothing stop us until victory is won."

The second document, the Action Guide, which dealt with several aspects of the history, development and conditions of women examined, firstly, the theme of Women as a Social Force stating categorically that the history of the people of Guyana has been one of bondage, enslavement, domination and oppression. This land has been a creation of colonialism and imperialism, designed for the extraction of profit. And within this fabric our people were brought here, most involuntarily. Under these circumstances the colonised women suffered a triple burden, a triple oppression. While racism affected all the colonised people, men and women alike, undeniably women in this type of society were oppressed and super-exploited as workers, as non-white workers and as non-white women workers.

It cannot be denied that women contributed in an important way to the slave rebellions and many forms of protest and sabotage; strikes, marches and demonstrations against colonialism, maintaining that fine tradition today. As 52 per cent of the Guyanese population, women cannot be omitted from the political struggle. Our women have recognised that their emancipation is inextricably a part of the revolutionary struggle for socialism.

Dealing with the conditions of Guyanese women the Action Guide stated: "Women form that section of the population that is most bombarded with the most backward ideas emanating from cultural backwardness, traditions etc. On account of their place in society women are compelled to assume a political role. At this stage of our struggle our women are not only in the struggle against undemocratic minority authoritarian rule but also in the forefront for world peace."

As the political and economic crisis worsens, the conditions of life for all Guyanese people have plummeted alarmingly. Women are inescapably facing the brunt of this crisis. They are forced into jobs where they are super-exploited, and underpaid. Pregnant women, infants and children become unnecessary victims at the mercy of a callous system. Women have been vocally and militantly expressing their anger.

In its 30 years of existence the WPO has militantly fought for the rights of our people, in particular the rights

of women. The WPO was born in one of the most exciting and demanding periods of Guyana's history — the epoch of the burgeoning anti-colonial struggle. Between 1957-1964 the WPO evolved into a mass women's organisation. The post-1969 period witnessed a concentration of the WPO on strengthening its internal structure and mass base. Great attention is now paid to developing cadres ideologically. The WPO will intensify its work in general among women in the sugar industry, garment industry, the public sector, the private sector, mass organisations and in the community. Greater emphasis will be placed in strengthening international links with fraternal organisations especially the WIDF with which the WPO had established links in 1953.

In concluding the document, an appeal was made to all women: —“The call to action is on our lips and in our hearts, the responsibility on our shoulders. As women militants and as fighters we must answer it bravely.”

Women were also asked to continue to uphold the WPO's fine internationalist tradition laid down in the early years of the organisation's foundation.

In her address to the 9th., Congress, WPO President Janet Jagan, a founder member, paid tribute to the organisation on its 30th., anniversary. She reminded delegates of the long and hard struggle for women's rights, for the betterment of conditions of working women and for the WPO's consistent internationalist position, expressed in real and practical terms. “The WPO”, she declared “has never wavered from the battle to raise the status of women and to fight for general improvement in the living standards and welfare of all working people, for an end to tyranny, for democracy, peace and liberty.”

Messages greeting the 9th., Congress were received from over 26 women's organisations overseas while greetings were read by representatives of the Soviet Women's Committee, the Cuban Federation of Women and the February 18th., Movement of Trinidad and Tobago. A representative of the Association of Concerned Guyanese in Canada also attended the Congress.

Resolutions were passed dealing with the international situation, the political situation in Guyana, the socio-economic conditions in the country and on women and children.

The resolution on the international situation made reference to the United Nations Charter which pledged all nations “to live together in peace with one another as good neighbours,” but deplored the fact that the reality has been distant from this worthy concept. The following points were made in the resolution:—

That the 9th., Congress,

- Vigorously denounces plans for the deployment of new medium-range missiles to Western Europe and stoutly opposes the U.S. militaristic policy now endangering the peace and security of the world;
- Heartily hails the peace initiatives of the Soviet Union and other countries of the socialist community which are aimed not only at containing the arms race but at avoiding nuclear confrontation;
- Solemnly joins the United Nations, the Peoples of the Caribbean and the rest of humanity in angrily condemning and isolating the Reagan, Seaga, Adams, Charles, Cato and Compton administrations for the illegal and bloody invasion and occupation of Grenada in mourning the tragic loss of Comrade Maurice Bishop and his New Jewel Movement colleagues; and saluting the heroic resistance fighters, people and women of Grenada;
- Strongly deplores the armed provocations against and imperialist plans for an invasion of Nicaragua; and extends firm solidarity with the liberation forces in El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as the peoples of Cuba and Suriname;
- Condemns the continuous US-backed Israeli aggression against Arab states, and supports the right of the Arab people of Palestine to establish a state of their own; calls for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Lebanon and a halt to threats against Libya;
- Supports the brave struggle of the people of Afghanistan against US-inspired military incursions, as well as the people of heroic Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea against outside interference, and salutes their proposal to turn South East Asia into a zone of peace;
- Calls for the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea and backs the re-unification of the country by peaceful means;

- Vehemently condemns the undeclared war of racist-fascist South Africa against Angola and aggression against neighbouring states in Southern Africa; and urges the early decolonisation of Namibia under the patriotic vanguard of the Namibian people, SWAPO.
- Supports the sovereignty of Argentina over the Falkland (Malvinas) islands and urges an end to British colonial occupation and militarisation of those islands;
- And affirms solidarity with the working people, the anti-war and anti-imperialist movements in the capitalist countries in their struggle for peace and a secure future.

The resolution on the political situation dealt with the crisis now facing Guyana and pledged fullest support to the People's Progressive Party in its efforts to bring about unity of the political parties, trade unions and mass organisations by the formation of a National Patriotic Front. It promised that the WPO would continue to carry out ideological and mass struggles on a principled basis as well as to reach out to every social class and bring them closer to the struggle. The women, in their resolution, pledged to work harder to develop themselves into more dedicated and disciplined fighters, giving leadership, loyalty and organisational strength to increase resistance and bring about the changes necessary for Guyana and its people to go forward once again.

In the resolution on socio-economic conditions, the deteriorating social conditions, the decline in the education system, the acute shortages, the rising unemployment, the low level of wages, the endemic malnutrition and the mounting crime wave were examined. These, attendant to the capitalist-oriented economy strongly tied to the world capitalist system and heavily influenced by imperialist dominated institutions have led to this crisis. A meaningful solution to the crisis, said the resolution, is therefore dependent upon a political solution which aims at the restoration of democracy and the pursuit of an anti-imperialist socialist-oriented programme. The 9th., Congress called for the prudent expenditure of available national financial resources and specifically demanded:

- a massive cut in the military-administrative bureaucracy in order to expand the productive sector;
- drastic reduction of the super salaries and big bene-

fits of the bureaucrats;

- cut down numerous areas of extravagance and waste.

The appropriate resolution further remarked that this Congress further calls on the PNC government to:

- Ensure adequate supplies of all essential foodstuffs, and the immediate importation of flour, split peas, cheese and milk;
- Ensure the maintenance and proper functioning of all essential services especially electricity and water supplies and public transportation;
- Ensure adequate provisions for health and education;
- Increase the national minimum wage to a level which will enable workers to cope with the rising cost of living;
- Raise all old age pensions to a minimum of \$100 per month;
- Provide one free meal per day for school children.

The resolution dealing specifically with women referred to the high unemployment and low wages experienced by women and called for the creation of more jobs, for the fulfilment of the Constitutional promise of the **right to work** and for greater job opportunities for women. It called for an end to discriminatory practices in employment, and urged that the principle of equal pay for equal work in all categories of employment be implemented.

Further, the resolution advocated improved educational opportunities for women, and urged that requirements of National Service as a prerequisite for higher and technical education be removed. It urged minimum wage laws to protect women workers and better protective laws for working women during pregnancy. A call was also made for improvements in medical care and for the introduction of pre-kindergarten schools for children of working women.

The resolution on children, noting that they were the nation's most "precious asset", demanded a whole programme to bring about the improvement in the lives of all Guyanese children. This should include free (or subsidised) milk to all children up to adolescence; for free school meals for those whose parents face financial hardships; for a genuinely free educational system; for greatly improved medical and dental services to all children; for the guarantee of jobs for school leavers; and for a "life free from fear and discrimination in Guyana."