

"THE DECISIONS OF A CONGRESS WHICH DOES NOT COUNT ON THE PARTICIPATION OF EVERYONE, WHICH DOES NOT ROUSE AND ENTHUSE THE PEOPLE, HOWEVER FINE AND REVOLUTIONARY THEY MAY BE ON PAPER, CAN HAVE NO PRACTICAL RELEVANCE.."

# MPLA THE STORY OF THE FIRST CONGRESS



For reasons linked to the concrete conditions of the liberation struggle, the MPLA could not hold a Congress every four years as laid down in its Statutes. However, throughout the 20 years of its existence, the MPLA held meetings, assemblies of militants, and conferences of cadres which, in practice, fulfilled the role of congresses in that they clarified the political line of the Movement in each phase of the struggle.

As soon as the last South Africans had been driven out of the country, however, the holding of a fully representative congress became urgent. The MPLA Central Committee Meeting in October 1976 decided to convoke the congress in the following year. An Organising Commission

was to be set up to plan a timetable for the preparation of the congress, rules for the election of delegates, and the agenda.

The preparatory work was considered as crucial as the congress itself. The second war of liberation had wrought great and sudden changes inside MPLA. Within a matter of months, the guerrilla army had found itself waging a direct and 'traditional' war; thousands of new militants were drawn into the struggle, while on the other hand, many old and seasoned cadres were killed in action or massacred by retreating UNITA and FNLA forces. Many cadres from the south had been forced to flee to Luanda and had remained cut off from their own area for several months.

All this meant considerable disruption inside the organisation. In the all-out effort to defend the new State, little attention could be spared for careful membership procedures, strengthening the structures of the Movement or political education of the militants. In addition, political work among the people had been quite impossible in some areas, and patchy in others.

In view of this situation, the Central Committee made the following recommendations to ensure that the congress would be truly representative:

1. that in the period leading up to the Congress, a broad nationwide campaign be launched with the creation of Action Groups and Committees at every level in order to achieve effective representation;
2. that a count immediately be made of all MPLA members who should be provided with membership cards, and that all those who do not fulfill the established selection criteria should be removed from membership;
3. that in the period leading up to the Congress there should be a huge campaign of explanation and mobilisation around the Congress, explaining to all militants the objectives we are trying to achieve;
4. that a campaign should begin at once to spread Marxist-Leninist theory to all MPLA militants, through MPLA's organs of information, through attendance at the Party School which is to be set up, and through the organisation of seminars."

Thus, the restructuring of the Movement at the base was to be an essential feature of the preparatory campaign, but it also had a broader aim: the political mobilisation of the whole country. The Programme of the First Congress summed up the approach in this way:

"All we do in connection with the Congress should be designed

to enable everyone to participate in this great assembly. The MPLA does not see the Congress as a formal and bureaucratic meeting. The decisions of a Congress which does not count on the participation of everyone, which does not rouse and enthuse the people, however fine and revolutionary they may be on paper, can have no practical relevance and are likely to end up as dead documents. For us, militants of MPLA, the Congress is the sum total of all those events - political, cultural, organisational, economic and sporting - in which we all take part and which make us feel and understand the importance and significance of the Congress for the reconstruction of the country and carrying forward the revolution."

## Setback

The National Preparatory Commission was duly established and began work at once. It was not long, however, before a setback occurred: the attempted coup launched in Luanda by the Nito Alves faction (see People's Power 7 & 8). Factional activity had permeated sections of the Movement and the mass organisations, particularly in Malanje, Benguela, Huila and Mocamedes Provinces. The purging of factionalists clearly complicated the work of re-organising the Movement. Despite this, the Preparatory Commission, meeting for the third time shortly after the coup attempt, launched the Congress campaign with the slogan 'Produce more and better in support of the MPLA First Congress'. It also decided to start a radio programme called MPLA First Congress and to issue a regular bulletin about the preparatory campaign.

By this time, Provincial Preparatory Commissions were active all over the country, promoting activities in support of the Congress. Days of voluntary work were organised: in Moxico province, the youth were mobilised to build hostels for the refugees fleeing from Zaire; in various provinces voluntary brigades were raised to bring in the coffee harvest, and in villages up and down the country, the people were mobilised by MPLA Action Groups to build schools and buildings for local committees.

The expenses of the Congress were to be met by a special fund: thousands of workers gave one day's salary to the fund; peasants made contributions in kind. As the Congress drew near, the daily paper Jornal de Angola carried reports each day of the gifts pouring in: sweet potatoes, manioc, bananas, coconuts, cane sugar, maize, calves, chickens etc. . . . a 150-litre and a 75-litre water carrier from workers at Angolan Aluminium Manufactures. . . . six lorry loads of cattle from peasants in Malanje. . .

## A flowering of culture

The campaign brought a great upsurge in cultural activity. The National Cultural Council organised National Competitions of craftwork,

traditional dancing, music and singing. Groups of dancers and musicians from various parts of the country met for the first time to choose the best among them. The aim was the strengthening of national unity, the promotion of national cultural values and the raising of standards for the future.

Each day the newspaper announced that registration of participants in these cultural contests had begun in another place, calling on people to go along and giving details of when and where to register. (During the week of Congress itself, the final rounds of the competitions were held and exhibitions of entries in the craft and art sections were on display in Luanda).

Meanwhile, the National Commission for 'Festas' (celebrations) organised big events in several parts of the country. Groups were specially invited from several countries, including Cuba, Guine, Cape Verde etc, to tour the country, as well as Angolan groups.

Sport was also something in which everyone could participate and tournaments were organised in basketball, football - and the favourite Angolan sport in town: hockey on roller-skates. Perhaps the biggest event was the Interprovincial Football Tournament to salute the First Congress. The semi-finals in Luanda drew crowds of thousands, and the final match between Luanda and Benguela took place at a huge sports festival the day after the Congress ended. The Congress delegates were guests of honour at the match, and President Neto presented the cups - one each for the victorious Luanda team and the Benguela team.



Under the banner of the Congress Campaign a great variety of initiative flourished. One example of this was the 'cleaning up' of the provincial capitals - in Uige, this was organised by OMA (Organisation of Angolan Women), and, on the eve of Congress, hundreds took part in the task of 'dressing up Luanda'.

The culmination of the campaign started with the Day of the Young Pioneers, 1 December: eight thousand children marched in Luanda and similar marches took place in every major town (membership of OPA is open to all children and has increased dramatically over the past year, with 16,000 members in Luanda province alone). This was the first of hundreds of demonstrations of support during the Congress week, building up to a massive rally in Luanda on the last day, coinciding with the 21st Anniversary of the founding of MPLA.

### At the end of the day . . .

Through this many-sided campaign, every Angolan, in one way or another, will at the very least have been aware that the Congress was happening, and that to support the Congress was to reaffirm support for MPLA and for its constitution into a Party of the working class. In a country the size of Angola, with a largely illiterate and widely dispersed population, that in itself is an achievement.

Through the meetings and discussion of the Congress documents and theses, many will - perhaps for the first time - have grasped the implications of the 'socialist option', and for them, MPLA's familiar slogans and watchwords will have taken on new meaning.

As well as the general meetings, seminars were also held for detailed study of the theses by those immediately concerned. The thesis on the role of the FAPLA was discussed in all army units; education workers studied the thesis on Education in Angola, and information workers discussed the one on the mass media.

As for the Movement itself, MPLA Action Groups held meetings to discuss the theses at workplaces and in rural districts; delegates were sent to provincial level Assemblies of Militants where the Congress delegates were elected. 87 delegates were elected from the 16 Provincial Assemblies, 95 from the FAPLA and 68 from among MPLA members in the mass organisations (OMA, UNTA etc), making a total of 250 elected delegates. Of these, 41% had participated directly in the armed struggle on the Northern and Eastern fronts - some for 20 years, 20% were involved in the clandestine struggle in Luanda and other towns in MPLA cells; 30% had been imprisoned by the colonialists for their commitment to MPLA, some for 10-12 years.

The process of electing delegates and holding discussion meetings involved a big organisational effort at every level, pulling the Movement back into shape at the base and laying the groundwork for a qualitative leap forward: the foundation of MPLA-Workers' Party!