A BELGIAN VIEW OF CONGO

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[*An anti-imperialist voice from Belgium comes as a refreshing breeze of sanity after the hurricanes of propaganda from Belgian news monopolies (sedulously picked up and repeated by the B.B.C. and others). We are pleased therefore to print this article written especially for us by the Editor of* Le Drapeau Rouge *(Red Flag), organ of the Belgian Communist Party which is active in the struggle for complete withdrawal of troops and a new treaty of friendship to be negotiated with the Congo Republic.—Ed.*, L.M.]

ON JUNE 30, 1960, the Republic of Congo was solemnly proclaimed at Leopoldville in the presence on the one hand of the new President, M. Kasavubu, and on the other of the Belgian Head of State, King Baudouin. At that point, it might have appeared that the Congolese people had become master of their fate in circumstances almost unprecedented in the history of colonialism: without having had to face a very long struggle to vindicate their rights; and even with the full agreement, support and co-operation of the former masters of the country.

This peaceful achievement of independence was the more astonishing because only two years earlier the creation of an independent State would have seemed to the Congolese people themselves only a remote prospect. Their spokesmen had long been extremely moderate: when in 1956 they asserted the need to prepare for independence they were only proposing to achieve it by stages within thirty years! Indeed, Congo was then still a very 'silent empire'. The Belgian colonialists had been governing it for seventy-five years as though firmly entrenched to all eternity. They occupied every leading post and exercised absolute power: the signature of an European official was enough to deport Africans on mere suspicion of disturbing the established order, with no right of appeal, and sometimes for life.

However, in January, 1959, following violent demonstrations in Leopoldville which cost three hundred African lives, the Belgian authorities entirely modified their attitude. The most representative leaders of Belgium—King Baudouin and Prime Minister Eyskens—suddenly adopted the very principle which they had flatly rejected only some weeks earlier: the independence of Congo.

Why did Belgian capitalists so readily resign themselves to abandoning one of the richest colonies in Africa?

It would seem that their most influential representatives had recognised the bankruptcy of the old-style colonialism today; they had realised that it is becoming more and more difficult to resist by brute force the liberation movement of the colonial peoples. The break-up of the colonial empires of Britain, France and Holland gave them food for thought. As one of their leading official spokesmen, Theo Lefèvre, President of the Christian-Social Party (Catholic), said recently: 'How could a little country like Belgium succeed where great Powers like France and Great Britain have failed?'

In granting independence to the Congo the Belgian bourgeoisie had nevertheless no intention of renouncing the enormous benefits they derived from their colony. The leaders of the great capitalist trusts reckoned that a 'realistic' policy would enable them to keep all their privileges in a nominally independent Congo which would nevertheless remain completely under their economic control, their political influence, and their actual domination. The Congolese people, they claimed, could not do without Belgian 'guardianship'. They had neither experienced administrators, technicians, nor capital.

And the truth is that in seventy-five years of colonial rule, Belgium had done nothing to enable the Congolese people to run their own affairs. Congo has hundreds of priests, and even four African bishops, but in the administration, from top to bottom, there are 4,600 Belgian officials and only three Congolese officials. In the whole of Congo there was not one African Army officer, nor engineer, not a single lawyer, agricultural scientist, nor doctor.

Belgian capitalist circles had imagined that it would be easy to erect a political facade for their use in independent Congo, where key posts could be entrusted to amenable Congolese always willing to obey Belgian 'advisers'. The colonial authorities had done all they could to mould the Congolese into 'good Negroes'. For many years they had forbidden all political activity in Congo, throwing the Kasavubus and the Lumumbas into jail, and by every means building up non-nationalist 'political parties' led by subservient men, like Tshombe's Conakat in Katanga, and the *Parti National du Progres* (National Progressive Party) or P.N.P., which the Congolese were quick to dub the *'Parti des Nègres payés'* ('Party of Negro Paid Men').

Whilst accepting the principle of Congolese independence, the Belgian authorities moreover took care not to fix a date for it. Serious difficulties then rapidly arose when the Congolese leaders insisted on specifying a definite date. On that occasion they had the advantage of unanimous and effective support of the whole Belgian working class; and the Belgian government, after resisting for a year, was obliged to accept June 30, 1960, as the date.

In Congo itself despite all the manoeuvres of the colonial administration, the General Election, the first in the history of the Congo, was held in May last to establish a Parliament and then a government. It resulted in a complete triumph for the national parties, except in Katanga, where the Belgian mining interests are too strong. The winners in the elections were the Congolese National Movement (M.N.C.) led by Patrice Lumumba; the losers were the P.N.P. created almost from top to bottom by the Belgian administration.

On June 30, therefore, it was two former Congolese political prisoners, two 'extremists', who were to meet King Baudouin at Leopoldville: Kasavubu, the President of the Republic, and Lumumba, the Premier. It was a severe setback to those Belgian political leaders who had thought that by means of a little hypocrisy the old regime could in practice be maintained in a nominally independent Congo.

The most reactionary circles, the 'ultras', who had protested all along against the colonial policy of the Eyskens Government, which they regarded as too liberal and described as 'the policy of abandonment', were not slow to rub it in. When some days later Congolese army units refused to recognise the authority of Belgian officers remaining in command, the diehard reactionaries unleashed a violent campaign aimed at imposing military and political intervention in Congo. For them, it was essential to drive out Lumumba and reconquer Congo 'by tanks and jets'. Under their pressure, exploiting jingo sentiments evoked by tales of thousands of Belgians who had fled in panic from Congo, the Eyskens Government sent thousands of paratroops into Congo, whilst they supported secretly the separatist movement organised in Katanga at the instigation of the European colonialists and the *Union Minière.*

Events have shown that the Belgian capitalists have achieved no greater success by this attempt to revert to a 'policy of force'.