

COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN

SUSSEX DISTRICT COMMITTEE

OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING PROCEDURE AT NATIONAL CONGRESS

At the November meeting of the Sussex District Committee the following resolution was adopted concerning procedure at the National Congress: "We are very disturbed by the reports we have received from our delegates to the Elections Preparation Committee and the Resolutions Committee of the National Congress. We urge that an enquiry be made into the working of these committees". The District Committee now submits the following in amplification of this resolution.

We should like to make it clear at once that our criticisms of Congress procedure on this occasion do not imply that we support resolutions submitted to Congress in opposition to the policy of the retiring Executive Committee. This is not the issue with which we are concerned, but the manner in which controversy, both on policy and the composition of the new Executive Committee was handled. The principle of democratic centralism is not at issue here either, but the successful carrying out of that principle, which enables our Party to move as one on all the issues of the political struggle, makes it in our view all the more necessary that at the Congress there should be the utmost freedom of debate and the following of individual conscience and opinion by all delegates without exception.

We would like in illustration of this last point to refer to the procedure on the two main Congress committees. In the Party we do not allow branches to mandate their delegates to vote in a certain way; it follows from this that nobody else can mandate the delegates either. Yet delegates appointed by their districts to sit on these Congress committees do at present find themselves mandated by majority decisions. We appreciate that for the smooth working of Congress, the committees must take up a general attitude to the various proposals put forward. The ruling, however, that their decisions should be binding on every member of the committee makes it impossible for a free discussion to take place between the committee and the delegates who are interviewed. Instead, there is a dialogue between the chairman and the delegate.

The unfortunate effect of this procedure was noticeable on both committees. The Elections Preparation Committee met for nearly five days. A list recommended by the Executive Committee was put before them on the first day. Apart from one alteration due to a retirement, the list remained unaltered. Delegates interviewed found themselves in an almost exclusive dialogue with the chairman; in one case there was not even a dialogue, the committee listened and then excused itself from discussion due to lack of time.

We do appreciate of course that the time factor is a very difficult one, with such a short Congress and long agenda. In this connection, we should like to say something about the role of the retiring E.C. The necessity for the guidance and advice of the retiring E.C. is not disputed. It ought to be clear to all, however, (and we are not convinced that it is at present) that the retiring E.C. lays down its authority where Congress takes over and that in Congress its word is not law. The practical problem of making the agenda manageable did, in our view, lead to the Resolutions Committee, in practice, acting as if it were law; thus, the pre-Congress meeting of the Resolutions Committee largely consisted of the chairman reading out the amendment or resolution numbers and rapidly reciting "accepted, not accepted, not necessary", etc. While the comrades wrote this down, sometimes getting a bit behind in the process. Any questioning or opposition seemed to be regarded as time-wasting and irrelevant. No doubt this was unintentional, but we feel it must be said that such a way of dealing with the matter is bureaucratic and not political.