

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE MOSCOW CONFERENCE

By Brian Bunting

Moscow was garlanded on the occasion of the 19th All-Union Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union which took place from June 28 to July 1. The conference was a festival and a celebration as well as a forum for serious debate on proposals to speed up the development of the country. Five thousand delegates had been elected by secret ballot on the basis of one delegate for every 3,780 members in all party branches, and all attended save for nine stricken by illness. The credentials committee reported that the Russian Federation elected 2,933 delegates, the Ukraine 891, Kazakhstan 225, Byelorussia 191, Uzbekistan 178, Georgia 106, Azerbaijan 104, Lithuania 56, Latvia 53, Moldavia 52, Armenia 51, Kirghizia 40, Tajikstan 33, Estonia 32 and Turkmenistan 31. Workers comprised 1,638 delegates, or almost one third of the total. There were 866 agriculturists, 354 heads of production associations, 108 collective farm chairmen and 74 state farm managers. Of the total of 436 delegates

described as intellectuals there were 175 science workers and members of higher educational institutes, 94 educationists, 41 health service workers and 69 workers in culture and the arts. There were 1,258 women, or more than 25 per cent of the total.

The delegates arrived in Moscow with mixed emotions — high expectation tinged with apprehension, rather like parents prior to the birth of a baby: what would be its sex, whose features would it bear, would everything go well for mother and child?

Together with hundreds of other journalists representing the press of fraternal parties, I was invited by the CPSU to “cover” the Moscow conference. It was a fascinating and, in some respects, disturbing experience, but one which in the end reinforced confidence in the Soviet Party and people.

One of the conference posters prominently displayed in the streets of Moscow read: “To socialism — a revolutionary character and a historical perspective”. It is perhaps a prosaic slogan which does not reflect the extraordinary and exciting atmosphere in which the conference was held, but it encapsulates the central themes which emerged. What is under way in the Soviet Union today is in every sense of the word a revolution. The character of this revolution needs to be studied not only by the people of the Soviet Union but also by the whole world, because in one way or another it will vitally affect the future of all humankind.

Everybody today knows the meaning of the words *perestroika* and *glasnost*, reconstruction and openness, which are the banners under which the Soviet revolution is being conducted. What these buzzwords reflect is the dissatisfaction of the Soviet people with so many aspects of their lives, their demand for fundamental change. They want an end of shortages and queues, of bureaucracy and censorship, of lies and evasions. While determined to avoid past mistakes, at the same time they want to preserve the real achievements of the revolution of 1917; they do not want to throw out the baby with the bathwater. What is going on, under the leadership of the Party, is a process of sifting the good from the bad, of consolidating the advances which have been made, and discarding everything that stands in the way of future progress. It is highly significant that in all the tumult of debate, nobody has called for the abandonment of the socialist perspective, nobody asks for the restoration of capitalism. They want a return to the spirit of Lenin; not to the Tsar.

The world is under the impression that the present Soviet revolution started with Gorbachev and is associated with his personality. Certainly his

leadership is important, but he is not a dictator. He was elected general secretary of the CPSU in March 1985, and set about the task of restructuring at his first Central Committee plenum in April 1985. But it should be remembered that he was placed in his position by the majority of the members of the Central Committee and given his revolutionary mandate by the leaders of the CPSU who had chafed throughout the tenure of office of his predecessor Chernenko.

The Pillars of Reform

The programme of *perestroika* and *glasnost* initiated at the April 1985 Central Committee plenum was confirmed by the 27th Congress of the CPSU held in Moscow from February 25 to March 6, 1986. The strategy of accelerating the Soviet Union's socio-economic development outlined by the 27th Congress was based on two pillars:

1. raising the rate of economic growth by means of an all-out intensification of production on the basis of scientific and technological progress, a structural reconstruction of the economy, effective forms of management and of organising and stimulating labour so as to increase the productivity of labour.

2. a deepening of socialist democracy, overcoming inertness, stagnation and conservatism, the elimination of everything that was holding back social progress.

In his report to the 19th CPSU conference on June 28 this year Gorbachev claimed that, thanks to the implementation of the decisions of the 27th Congress, "the economy is gradually gaining pace". People's per capita real incomes had begun to grow again and had gone up by 4.6 per cent in the past two years of the current five-year plan. The output of consumer goods was rising. Construction of flats and cottages had increased by 6 per cent, of secondary schools by 22 per cent, of nurseries and kindergartens, clubhouses and cultural centres by 30 per cent and hospitals by as much as 100 per cent. Public health and education were being reorganised. The birth rate had gone up while the death rate had dropped. "This is related to no small extent to the war we have declared on hard drinking and alcoholism".

However, despite all the positive features, the economy was advancing too slowly, said Gorbachev, especially if judged by the people's standard of living and the food shortages — "probably the most painful and the most acute problem in the life of our society". Other delegates were not shy to draw attention to shortcomings in various aspects of Soviet life. In some areas workers complained that they could not get meat, that sugar was rationed,

housing inadequate, consumer goods “have vanished altogether,” pay levels pitiful. Because conditions in the countryside were so bad, it was difficult to retain the manpower necessary to increase agricultural production. Migration from rural areas continues. There was talk of “prospectless villages” which faced the threat of extinction because the young people flocked to the towns and there were fewer and fewer to replace the older generation. Delegate D.K. Motorny, member of the CPSU Central Committee, chairman of the Kirov farming co-operative in the Kherson region, called for capital investment in the countryside: it was necessary to provide heating, to build roads, to ensure that every house had running water and sewerage.

Delegate Vasily Starodutsev, chairman of the agribusiness amalgamation Novomoskovskoye in the Tula region, said those who had mismanaged the country during the years of stagnation, who had addressed the economic problems of the country at the expense of farming, should be punished. They had inflicted heavy material and moral losses on the country as “the people had ceased to believe in anything and had ceased to work.” Arkady Aidak, chairman of a collective farm near the Urals, criticised the administrative-command system of management which, he said, “resulted in the fact that we have been living for a long time mainly at the expense of peasants, their unpaid work”. Gorbachev himself, in his report, estimated that food consumption could be increased by between 20 and 30 per cent at the present level of productivity if the transportation, storage and processing of the harvest could be carried out effectively and promptly. But, he added, “whatever resources we put into agriculture, they will not yield the desired results if no concern is shown for the individual, for his conditions of work and life”.

Similar stories of waste, neglect, mismanagement, corruption and violations of human rights were reported by delegates from other areas of Soviet life, from some national republics, from industry, from the arts and professions. How had things got to this pass? Why was perestroika proceeding so slowly?

“Frankly speaking, comrades”, said Gorbachev in his report, “we have underestimated the extent and gravity of the deformations and the stagnation of the preceding period. There was a lot we simply did not know and did not see until now”.

Freedom of The Press

Utilising the opportunities of *glasnost* to the utmost, the delegates showed no reluctance to voice their complaints at the conference. But the outstanding

exponent of *glasnost* in the recent period has been the press, which week by week comes forward with details about present and, in particular, past abuses which leave the readers breathless. Time was when the Soviet press organs presented a uniform aspect — read one paper and you had read them all; they all carried the same message, the statements of the party leadership, the official communiques, repeated over and over. Today the Soviet press holds its readers fascinated as, despite all its handicaps and reservations, it diligently seeks for the truth. Indeed, the Soviet scene as a whole is the most stimulating in the world at the moment, as was testified by the hordes of foreign correspondents, TV crews and commentators who descended on Moscow to cover the conference. Many compared the atmosphere of excitement and anticipation to “Ten Days That Shook The World” in 1917.

There is an important difference. In 1917 the outcome of the struggle was in doubt until the guns of the Aurora thundered. Today in the Soviet Union it is the Party itself which is carrying out the cleansing revolutionary process. Most striking, both at the conference and in the press, is the sense of responsibility of the participants. Here it is not money that talks, but the anxiety to find the surest road to socialism. Despite disagreements about strategy and tactics, the extent of the underlying ideological unity is impressive and during the time of the conference itself brought consensus on many controversial issues.

Some delegates voiced anxiety about the freedom of debate and the freedom of the press. Vladimir Karpov, CC member and first secretary of the board of the USSR Writers’ Union, complained that some people view *glasnost* as permission to write anything they please. The organs of press, he said, split into camps and waged internecine struggle which did huge damage. Another Soviet author, Yuri Bondarev, said that some Soviet press organs were using *perestroika* to destabilise reality, revising faith and morality. There were publications whose authors doubted everything: morality, courage, love, art, talent, family and great revolutionary ideas. Nihilist criticism was becoming a commanding force in the press. As a result young people had largely lost confidence in the truth, history, nearly the entire past and in the senior generation. He added:

“The immorality of the press cannot teach morality. Not all newspaper and magazine editors have as yet fully realised, or want to realise, that *glasnost* and morality are a lofty civic discipline rather than arbitrariness according to the philosophy of Ivan Karamazov” (a character in Dostoevsky’s novel).

Asked by foreign journalists at a press conference to comment on these views, delegate Vladimir Lakshin, first deputy chief editor of the magazine

Znamya (Banner), said that the critical spirit in the Soviet press was one of the principal gains of the policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika* and it would be totally unfair to condemn it. Many authors in the past had been protected from criticism by their regalias, titles and collected works, he said. Now they were flying into a rage because they were criticised.

“In what concerns democracy and *glasnost* in the USSR, the situation is stable, as could be judged by the course of the 19th Party conference. This is not just a ‘thaw’, this is already spring, I think, and even may be the beginning of summer”.

Mikhail Ulyanov, chairman of the board of the Union of Theatre Workers of the Russian Federation, wanted the freedom of the press to be protected by legal guarantees, and suggested that editors of the central, republican, district and regional newspapers should be elected at congresses and plenums, and not merely appointed. Intervening in the debate, Mikhail Gorbachev said:

“If we abandon *glasnost*, criticism, self-criticism and democracy, it will be the end of *perestroika*. In the not too distant past some people had a monopoly over mass media organs, and we know what was the result of it. Now we see that another group of people stealthily tries to use the press as a nationwide rostrum on the same monopoly basis.

“We should not replace one monopoly with another and one half-truth with another. We need the whole truth as much as we need life. We must know it and rebuild it on socialist principles.”

Re-examining The Past

The whole truth about the history of the Soviet Union may never be known because the archives are incomplete and many of the witnesses are dead. A special commission has been set up by the Central Committee to re-examine past court verdicts and another to draft a treatise on the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Already many condemned in the thirties as “enemies of the people” have been rehabilitated — Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev and literally thousands of others. The conference decided that a memorial should be built in Moscow to the “victims of repressions”, to quote Gorbachev’s own words in his closing address.

There is still passionate argument among Soviet citizens about the role of Stalin in history, an argument that will not be settled until all the facts are known. The only pronouncement on Stalin which can be regarded as official is contained in Gorbachev’s address last year on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution. He went into the Stalin phenomenon in some detail, but the judgment of the Central Committee can be gauged from the following paragraph in his speech:

“There is now much discussion about the role of Stalin in our history. His was an extremely contradictory personality. To remain faithful to historical truth we have to see both Stalin’s incontestable contribution to the struggle for socialism, to the defence of its gains, and the gross political errors and abuses committed by him and those around him, for which our people paid a heavy price and which had grave consequences for the life of our society

“The guilt of Stalin and his immediate entourage before the party and the people for the wholesale repressive measures and acts of lawlessness is enormous and unforgivable.”

Next year will see the publication in the Soviet Union of a biography of Stalin written by Professor Dmitri Volkogonov, Director of the Institute of Military History. In an article in the newspaper *Literaturnaya Gazeta* last June, Professor Volkogonov described Stalin as politically incompetent, immoral, hypocritical, disloyal, ill-advised and mentally ill. Professor Volkogonov later said he was not a Stalinist or anti-Stalinist, but simply a person who considers that “the dent in the shield of our history ought to be described. I, like many, was once enchanted by Stalin . . . I remember how at this death we, the young lieutenants, were very sincerely dismayed and cried”.

Professor Volkogonov was a delegate to the 19th CPSU conference. Asked by foreign journalists at a press conference about the present generation’s attitude to Stalin, he said that after the first publication of extracts from his book he had received about 3,000 letters, from which it was clear that society was split in its attitude to Stalin, but it was not split in its choice in favour of socialism.

“It may be that it is the first time now that people began pondering their past, present and future and in my view trial by truth cannot harm this positive process”.

Volkogonov was not the only delegate to be questioned by journalists about Stalin. The same question put to the writer Vladimir Lakshin, deputy editor of *Znamya*, elicited the answer:

“The majority of intellectuals give Stalin a fair place in history, taking into account his negative features and crimes”.

Otto Lacis, Deputy Editor of the theoretical journal *Kommunist*:

“My generation was not aware of many of the facts about Stalin. We did not know the reality of that time. It was not a consequence of terror or repression — we did not even know about the repression. Many of us thought Stalin was a genius. Today many who lived through those times do not want to reassess the situation.

“You must remember that what was said by Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 was not published. Nevertheless the Soviet people have a certain consciousness — they will not agree to the renewal of the Stalin cult. And there will be no personality cult in future”.

V. Bikennin, editor of *Kommunist*:

“Many of Lenin’s ideas were dropped by Stalin and human beings were left behind. The idea of the revolution was not to produce more coal or steel than

Britain or the United States but to create a better life for all human beings. Seated behind our green baize desks we have forgotten how to talk to the people”.

Bikennin said Stalin’s ideas were eclectic and did not amount to an independent ideological entity. “The word Stalinism is not printed in *Kommunist*.”

Controversy has raged over the article written by Nina Andreeva of Leningrad and published in the journal *Sovietskaya Rossia* some months ago calling for respect for the achievements of the past and defending the role of Stalin. When the article was first published it was greeted with widespread astonishment and a silence which some interpreted as official consent until three weeks later it was fiercely denounced by *Pravda* as contrary to *perestroika*. Nina Andreeva was thought by many to be a pseudonym behind which lurked a cabal of “conservatives”, but she exists and wrote a long reply which *Pravda* did not print. Questioned about this, the editor of *Pravda*, V. Afanasiev, told a press conference that he had not published Andreeva’s 26-page letter because he felt it important to emphasise that “*perestroika* is necessary — we have no other way”. However, it was indicated that if Nina Andreeva were to send her article to *Moscow News* or *Ogonyok*, the standard bearers of *glasnost*, it might well see the light of day.

A Rallying Point

There is no doubt that the Soviet revolution of *perestroika* and *glasnost* has generated enormous controversy both inside and outside the Soviet Union. There were those who regarded the system of decentralisation, economic self-management and cost accounting as a deviation from the socialist path, a capitulation to capitalism. There were those so accustomed to the traditional commandist methods of administration that they could not adapt to the new methods being advocated by the Party. There was open resistance from some amongst the managerial cadres, inertia and the lack of initiative from others. Some lost their bearings and panicked, longed to get back to the state of “law and order” to which they were accustomed. Arguments raged over the interpretation of the past.

It was to rally the forces behind *perestroika* and *glasnost* that the 19th Party conference was called. To wait for the next Congress due in 1991 would be too long, to allow muddle and uncertainty to continue. The full force of the party had to be mobilised to develop and deepen *perestroika*, to make it irreversible; centres of resistance and inertia inside the Party itself had to be eliminated.

The main emphasis of the conference was placed on reform of the political system because, as Gorbachev stated in his opening address, it was the

deformations in the political system that opened the way to the command methods of administration, the violations of socialist democracy and the cult phenomena which paralysed the socio-economic development of the country. "We are not starting from scratch", said Gorbachev. The demand for political reform was first voiced at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and certain initiatives had been undertaken, but the measures proposed at the time had been frustrated by the bureaucracy which grew to fantastic proportions in the years of stagnation which followed. The number of people elected to various governmental and non-governmental bodies reached one third of the country's adult population. At the same time, these bureaucrats were far removed from real participation in the handling of state and civic affairs. More and more alienated from the people, they imposed decisions but bore no economic responsibility for the implications of their actions. Detailed centralised planning and control literally straitjacketed society and became a serious brake on the initiative of the people.

Since the start of the *perestroika* process, it could be seen that where decentralisation and economic self-management had been introduced, production and labour productivity had increased and the all-round quality of life had been immeasurably enhanced. Leaders of the Byelo-Russian delegation to the 19th Conference told a press conference:

"Our economy is working well. We have plenty of meat, butter, eggs and poultry. There was for a while a problem with sugar but the situation is now normal. He who works better is supplied better".

Not all the republics could tell the same story.

The measures decided upon by the 19th conference are aimed at returning power to the people. The Soviets of People's Deputies at central and regional level are to be restored to a position of full authority and independence. A single, five-year term of office is to be established for all Soviets, and the period of service of deputies is to be limited to two consecutive terms. The principle of election by secret ballot is to be extended as widely as possible.

There is to be greater separation of the functions of State and Party, though at the same time conference decided, after a vigorous discussion, that the role of the Soviets and other representative bodies would be enhanced if the first secretaries of the respective Party committees were nominated to chair these committees. Not appointed, but nominated. They would still have to face election.

There is also to be a change at the top echelon of government. Fifteen hundred delegates will in future be elected, as they are now to the Supreme

Soviet, from the territorial and national districts, but to their number will be added approximately 750 deputies elected at the congresses or plenary sessions of the governing bodies of party, trade union, co-operative, youth, women's, veterans', academic and artistic organisations. All these deputies, elected for a five-year term, will comprise the new representative supreme government body — the Congress of the USSR People's Deputies. From its members the Congress of People's Deputies will elect a relatively small bicameral USSR Supreme Soviet which will function as a standing legislative, administrative and monitoring body. It will also elect by secret ballot the President of the Supreme Soviet — a post which is generally accepted will be filled by the Party's General Secretary. The president will exercise overall guidance in the drafting of legislation and of major socio-economic programmes, decide on key issues of foreign policy, defence and national security and discharge other functions traditionally associated with the presidency.

The conference also adopted resolutions for the overhaul and reform of the legal system, the judiciary and the militia "to consolidate the guarantees of the political, economic and social rights and freedoms of the Soviet people".

The conference recommended that the reorganisation of the Party apparatus should be completed by the end of this year, that the new Congress of People's Deputies should be installed by April 1989 and the election of the Soviets in the regions and republics be completed by the autumn of 1989.

These measures will bring about sweeping changes in Soviet society. There will be a parliament in permanent session where, if the 19th Conference is anything to judge by, open debate and questioning will be the order of the day. The revival of the Soviets, elections by secret ballot for most offices in State and Party — all these measures are designed to strengthen the links between the Party and the people and to prevent the re-emergence of any form of leadership cult or bureaucratic despotism. But, Gorbachev warned,

"It would be naive to assume that a thoroughly renewed society will emerge overnight, of its own accord, through moral purification, substantiated criticism, and a break with the worthless past. No, the dialectic of consciousness and practice is immeasurably more complicated".

No More Purges

Arguing against those who called for a purge of the party membership and drastic punishment for all those held responsible not only for the shortcomings of the past but also for the sabotage of the *perestroika* drive today, Gorbachev said:

“Now, what if the Central Committee resumes the old practice and starts firing bureaucrats? It won’t work. Enough is enough. Nothing can be done from above. Now, we must encourage the whole nation to progress. We have our economic reform for that. Then, there’s the reform of our whole political system, moral improvement and, last but not least, our mass media. If our society gets going, our whole country will be too hot for bureaucrats. That’s what they are afraid of. But if they have to do only with other bosses, they’ll come out unscathed. They’ll offer arguments by the dozen, and drown us in torrents of words — the way they did ten and twenty years ago — and we’ll give the matter up.

“It isn’t all that important to be a nice chap for all to like you. What matters is the political line you pursue in the interests of the whole nation and the socialist cause. The entire population must be involved in all the processes. It’s strong enough to put things right”.

But while stressing that he aimed at “a socialist plurality of opinion”, Gorbachev denied that this would lead to a weakening of the leading role of the Communist Party. “We do not abandon the role of the ruling party in the country. On the contrary, we want to reaffirm it”, he said. He was not for pluralism of parties, but for pluralism within the Communist Party. “The tasks of *perestroika* cannot be accomplished without the guiding activity of the Party”.

In a number of his recent speeches Gorbachev has stressed that policies both internally and internationally can only succeed if they are based on freedom of choice. The people must be involved in the framing and administration of policies. Nothing must be imposed from above.

International Policy

The implications of the “new thinking” emanating from the CPSU deserve the closest scrutiny from the international community. Here are some extracts from Gorbachev’s opening address to the 19th Conference on the theme of “Democratising International Relations”:

“We have to acknowledge that command methods of administration did not spare the field of foreign relations either. It sometimes happened that even decisions of vital importance were taken by a narrow circle of people without collective, comprehensive examination or analysis, on occasion without properly consulting friends either. This led to an inadequate reaction to international events and to the policies of other states, if not to mistaken decisions...” (Was the decision to intervene in Afghanistan one of them? In a briefing to the representatives of the foreign party press in Moscow after the 19th Conference, Anatoli Dobrynin, head of the International Department of the CPSU, said the decision was taken at an “incomplete meeting of the Political Bureau”.)

Gorbachev's address continued: "As we analyse the contemporary world, we realise more clearly that international relations, without losing their class character, are increasingly coming to be precisely relations between nations. We notice the enhanced role in world affairs of peoples, nations, and emerging new national entities. And this implies that there is no ignoring the diversity of interests in international affairs. Consideration for these interests is an important element of the new political thinking...."

"We have sought a deeper understanding of the interrelationship between working-class interests and those of humanity as a whole, an idea built into Marxism from the outset. This led to the conclusion that common human values have a priority in our age, this being the core of the new political thinking. The new political thinking has enabled us to appreciate more fully how vitally important to contemporary international relations are the moral values that have over the centuries been evolved by nations, and generalised and spelled out by humanity's great minds...."

"We have begun to base our contacts in relations between states on dialogue...."

"A key factor in the new thinking is the concept of freedom of choice. We are convinced that this is a universal principle for international relations at a time when the very survival of civilisation has become the principal problem of the world...."

"The imposition of a social system, way of life, or policies from outside by any means, let alone military, are dangerous trappings of past epochs. Sovereignty and independence, equal rights and non-interference are becoming universally recognised rules of international relations.... To oppose freedom of choice is to come out against the objective tide of history itself. That is why power politics in all their forms and manifestations are historically obsolescent".

At the same time, Gorbachev denied that he had any illusions. "Have the imperialist sources of aggression and war vanished? No we do not forget about the threat to peace issuing from imperialist militarism and consider that there are no guarantees as yet that the positive processes that have begun are irreversible. The new political thinking, in fact, enables us to see and find new opportunities for opposing policies of strength on a broader political basis than in the past."

World Communist Movement

What are the implications of this "new thinking" in relation to what are loosely described as "regional conflicts"? We see that Soviet troops are being

withdrawn from Afghanistan, that talks are under way for settlements in Kampuchea, Angola and Nicaragua. What about the situation in the Middle East? And in our own South Africa? These questions were hardly debated at the 19th CPSU Conference in Moscow. The attention of the delegates was overwhelmingly focussed on their own past, present and future, and the likelihood is that it will continue to be so focussed until the present pre-crisis situation has been resolved.

Gorbachev stressed that the internationalist outlook of the CPSU remained unaltered. The CPSU, he said, regarded itself as an inalienable part of the world Communist movement which was at present conducting a difficult quest for the way forward to a new stage in its historical development.

“We will — on the basis of absolutely equal rights and respect — take an active part in this quest. There is a growing international potential in our new relations with numerous civic forces representing world science and culture, with political parties of a different ideological orientation, above all with Socialists, Social Democrats, Labour Party members, and other circles and movements of what is known as the Left. Our solidarity with the working people of the whole world, with the fighters against colonialism, racism and reaction is unflinching”.

There was also considerable discussion at the Conference of the national question — inevitable in view of developments in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorny Karabakh, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Estonia and elsewhere. Representatives of Party delegations from all the trouble spots held press conferences during the course of the Conference and faced searching examination from the foreign pressmen who had assembled to cover the conference. It is hoped to deal with these issues in a later issue of *The African Communist*.

A resolution on the national question passed by the Conference noted the past violations of Leninist principles on nationality policy, the breaches of the rule of law during the period of the personality cult and by the ideology and psychology of stagnation which had led to the present undesirable manifestations. The Conference called for the creation of standing committees on ethnic relations under the USSR Supreme Soviet, the Supreme Soviets of the union and autonomous republics and wherever necessary under local Soviets. It also declared that the establishment of a special state body for nationalities and national relations should be considered. The whole question of national relations is to be the subject of a special plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU in the near future. In his opening address, Gorbachev had declared:

“We see socialism as a system of the true equality of all nations and nationalities, a system in which they are assured social and spiritual advancement and mutual

enrichment, in which there is no room for strife between nations, for nationalist and chauvinist prejudices, and in which internationalism and the fraternity of nations rule supreme.”

What Did the Conference Achieve?

The Conference cannot be seen in isolation, but must be viewed in the context of the whole drive for *perestroika* which is being conducted by the Party. Soviet society is being overhauled, and in the process every aspect of Soviet life is being examined under the microscope. In terms of the policy of *glasnost*, nothing is sacrosanct, everything is open to scrutiny. Bureaucrats may still practise secrecy, but the media are questioning everything, and abuses past and present are being investigated with an assiduity which some “conservatives” feel borders on hysteria and constitutes a threat to security. But the Party is sticking to its guns. Gorbachev in his report stressed again and again that respect for the truth must govern all Party members in their adoption and implementation of policies, and one of the final resolutions adopted by the Conference endorsed Lenin’s notion that “the masses should know everything, that they should have an opportunity to judge about everything, and to be aware of what they are accepting”. The resolution condemned what it described as “communist arrogance” on the part of those striving to hold back information and called for the right of citizens to information to be enshrined in the constitution. *Glasnost* was essential if the national and international policies of the CPSU were to be carried out effectively, said the resolution.

If friends of the Soviet Union abroad are puzzled by some of the reports coming out of the Soviet Union today, so are many of the Soviet people themselves. For one thing, many Soviet people are learning things about the Soviet past (and present for that matter) which they never knew before. They are learning about shortcomings and crimes which were previously concealed, and they are often horrified. Their opinions about themselves and their past and future are being revised; they are shedding illusions and coming to terms with reality. Some of the revelations were made at the 19th Conference itself, in the spirit of criticism and self-criticism which has always been a Party principle, formerly practised behind closed doors but now conducted in the open.

All this is healthy, but is often misunderstood. We are not used to this Communist pluralism of opinion. When Yeltsin and Ligachev slug it out on the conference floor, who speaks for the Party? And it is not only at conferences that division of opinion is expressed. When a Goncharov or a

Starushenko discourses on Southern Africa, is he voicing his own opinion or the views of the Central Committee? Until recently it was the custom not to deviate from the Party line and if the issue was uncertain comrades preferred to remain silent rather than cause problems. The 19th CPSU Conference resolution on *glasnost*, however, affirmed the right of every Soviet citizen to “open and free discussion of any socially significant issue”, without which it would be impossible to “secure the dynamic and committed support of the working people for the *perestroika* policy of the CPSU”.

The monolithic unity which may have been essential to see the CPSU through the dangers of the civil war, collectivisation and industrialisation, the Second World War and the post-war reconstruction is no longer necessary, thanks to the overall development of Soviet land and people. Now socialist plurality of opinions and democratisation are considered essential for the further development of Soviet society. But does that mean that the CPSU is belittling the great achievements of the past? By no means. In his speech on November 2 last year celebrating the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution, Mikhail Gorbachev said:

“History has known no other period like it (the last 70 years) for the scale of the achievements that our country has accomplished since the victory of the October Revolution. The jubilee is a moment of pride. Pride in what has been achieved.”

Perhaps not so much was heard on this theme during the 19th CPSU Conference, but then this was not the occasion. Nevertheless, many delegates, in calling for criticism of the Party to be balanced, by implication revealed their desire that the positive achievements of the past should be properly acknowledged. From this point of view, the 19th CPSU Conference, far from registering the strife and division among Party members which many of the Western media had been forecasting, provided a striking demonstration of Party unity, a unity made more secure by the open expression of differing viewpoints in public debate, and the adoption of resolutions by open vote in which minority viewpoints, having been ventilated, were decisively rejected. The authority of the Party was reinforced, not weakened by its adoption of democratic procedures. As Gorbachev told his Polish comrades, summing up the achievements of the Conference in a speech to the Polish Parliament in Warsaw on July 11:

“We have discarded without regret the routine of the past when ‘absolute truths’ were proclaimed from speakers’ rostrums and all that remained for delegates to do was to applaud and vote ‘yes’. Today times are different”.

The principle of democratic centralism was specifically reaffirmed — the fullest possible discussion beforehand, and once a vote is taken, the obligation on the minority to carry out the majority decision. In opening up

the Party, Gorbachev aims to strengthen its leading role, not undermine it. In his main speech to the 19th Conference, he said under the heading: "Democratisation of the Leading Role and Internal Activity of the CPSU":

"I wish to tell the delegates at this conference and the people at large the main thing: the tasks of *perestroika* cannot be accomplished without the guiding activity of the Party, without giving effect to its political course. Without all this *perestroika* will be doomed politically, ideologically and organisationally. At this turning point the CPSU should fully perform its functions and accomplish its tasks as the leading force in society".

We in the South African liberation movement can learn a great deal from the experience of the CPSU: the lessons of struggle, of triumph over adversity, of achievement, of the cult of the individual, of democratisation. The revolution of *perestroika* and *glasnost* has something to teach us too. We have no need to fear it or its outcome. Far from disintegrating, as the Western press try to make out, the Soviet Party remains strong, in full control of developments. And the 19th CPSU Conference has made it stronger and more confident about its objectives and the means of achieving them. The measure of its confidence is reflected in its decision to place its trust, not in weapons or restrictive devices, but in the people, in the Soviet Union and abroad, whose mobilisation will determine the outcome, not only of *perestroika*, but also of the issues of war and peace which confront humanity today.

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that circumstances are changed precisely by men and that the educator must himself be educated.

Marx: *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845.
