

US delegation and the 7th PAC

Extract from

Which Way for Africans in the United States? The Seventh Pan African Congress and Beyond

Fanon Wilkins

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This essay attempts to analyse the role and organisation of the North American delegation at the Seventh Pan African Congress held in Kampala, Uganda, from April 3-8, 1994 within the context of current political movements in the United States. . . .

Since the Congress in 1994, there has been very little written or discussed about particular delegations representing various countries and or regions throughout the Pan African world. Emphasis has been placed on the broad objectives of the Congress as reflected in the Kampala Declaration published by the Seventh PAC secretariat.¹ In order to better prepare for future congresses, develop qualitatively stronger resolutions that embody components for action with hopes of having greater success on the ground, and stay informed about the concrete realities experienced by Africans around the world, it is imperative that local struggles, contradictions and aspirations be articulated by representative organisations, coalitions and communities concerned about and committed to African emancipation and the advancement of humanity. The Pan African movement cannot afford to gloss over specific contradictions in an attempt to simplify the complex links that bind, in order to romanticise and create illusions of solidarity with forces deceptively antithetical to the aspirations of working peoples of the African world.

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The Call for a Seventh PAC

The Seventh Pan African Congress was originally scheduled to be convened in mid 1993. After a series of changes the Congress was later set for December of that year. This date was then pushed up to April of 1994, due to logistical constraints and the real possibility of having very few Caribbean participants due to the difficulty of funding and organising delegates in that region. In addition, remembering the Sixth Pan African Congress 20 years before and the barring of Caribbean progressives (by the neo-colonial/liberal African petty-bourgeois leadership who hijacked the Congress), the International Preparatory Committee (IPC) of the Seventh Pan African Congress wanted to insure that Pan Africanists from the Caribbean and South America played an integral role in the development of the Congress. More importantly, time was still needed with regard to the

organisation of the Congress as a whole and the coordination of other delegations as well.

Nonetheless, the general call was made by the IPC and newsletters were circulated internationally, boldly proclaiming: "Don't Agonise, Organise-Resist Recolonisation-Come One, Come All." The newsletters served the dual purpose of highlighting current crisis and contradictions in Africa, while at the same time informing potential delegates of the agenda set for the Congress.² Fundamental to the general call was the commitment made by the IPC to provide airfare and lodging for at least two participants (providing that at least one be a woman) from every country in Africa. Comparable tickets were also reserved for delegates (who could not afford to attend) travelling from the Caribbean, North and South America and Europe. From the beginning, the IPC made it clear that particular emphasis would be made to insure that women and "grassroots" activists play a critical role in the Congress and be fairly represented. To assist in mobilizing participants, IPC representatives were also encouraged to organise fund- raisers and pre-Congresses in their respective countries to democratically insure broad base representation from around the world. Against this backdrop the stage was set for talks "of a new agenda, new task and indeed of a renewed African revolution."

Convening in Kampala

The North American delegation represented a significant cross-section of journalists, teachers, students, community organisers, artists and factory workers, who were all activists in one sense or another. A small cohort had come from Canada, while the bulk of the delegation represented the United States. Delegates were members of organisations such as the National Organising Committee, the Patrice Lumumba Coalition, the December 12th Movement, the Nation Of Islam, the All African People's Revolutionary Party and the National Union for the

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Homeless. Once we arrived in Kampala, many were meeting each other for the first time. Unfortunately, the North American delegation did not meet in the USA as a collective prior to coming to the Congress hence, logistical and ideological concerns that took center stage during our "pre-Congress caucus," hindered our delegation's ability (as a collective) to make a valuable contribution with regard to renewing the Pan African movement in the United States and linking "our struggle" with forces seeking to roll back neo-colonial military dictatorships; demanding the centrality of the "women's question," creating alternatives to IMF/World Bank programmes such as Structural Adjustment; breaking down the artificial borders that physically divide Africa and democratise skills, knowledge and information so that they serve to transform the material reality of African peasants and workers.³ Despite the individual efforts made by certain members of the delegation, there were no significant links made by our group as a whole. Currently, we can see this fragmentation reflected in the fact that since the Seventh PAC our delegation has not met or sponsored a national congress to discuss any of the issues, concerns and resolutions put forth during the Congress. Moreover, dialogue between delegates living in Canada and the United States has

been relatively scant if any at all.

Given the contradictions emanating from the preceding Sixth Pan African Congress convened in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1974, the acute economic, political and social crisis in Africa, the globalization of capital and the renewed and reconfigured forms of racist oppression sweeping the Americas and Europe, it was a "minor miracle" that the Seventh PAC actually occurred. Most of us were simply happy to be there. Returning home to "Mother Africa" was an experience in itself; however beyond the euphoria "of our pilgrimage back," there was serious work that needed to be done.

Prior to the actual Congress, each delegation caucused in an effort to elect representatives from their respective groups and prepare a coherent statement reflecting the conditions and aspirations of the constituencies (assuming they had one) for which they represented.

We elected William Watkins, Professor of Education at the University of Utah, as the general representative for the group and Leona Smith, President of the National Union of the Homeless, to sit on the Congress Presidium.⁴

During the election process, several voices spoke out with concern that the actual meeting was being controlled by National Organising Committee member Abdul Alkalimat. However, one voice resonated louder than others. Kwame Toure (aka Stokely Carmichael), Central Committee representative for the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party (AAPRP), directed his question to Alkalimat and asked very plainly "since when did you become a Pan Africanist - who made you the leader of this delegation." Interestingly enough, Toure should have known more about this than others because he along with Alkalimat were

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members of the IPC. In addition, Toure had attended the international meeting on global change in Tripoli, Libya, in 1990, where the original resolution was passed for the convening of a Seventh Pan African Congress.⁵

Unlike Alkalimat, Toure and the All African People's Revolutionary Party had chosen at the last minute to endorse the Congress after it was assured that the meeting would take place. During the initial planning of the Congress, Toure (and some members of the AAPRP) had chosen to not be involved due to ideological differences with the members of the London based African Research Information Bureau (ARIB), the principal organisers of the Congress. It became clear that Toure's objection to Alkalimat was much larger than the concern raised. Responding to the exchanges between Toure and Alkalimat, several young people from Canada and the United States objected to what evolved into a "personal squabble" involving two long time activists in the African liberation movement. Toure himself stated that his ideological differences went back twenty years with Abdul Alkalimat.

Nonetheless, Abdul Alkalimat, long time activist/scholar in the African Liberation movement in the US, had been identified by the IPC to organise delegates from the US. It was reasoned that Alkalimat's work with the African Liberation Support Committee, international linkages with the Black left and connections with grassroots movements in the United States placed him in a

strategic position to organise the United States side of the North American delegation. Accepting the task, he unilaterally selected delegates from the four directional regions of the US based on the broad criteria set forth by the IPC which emphasised grassroots participation and the equal representation of women. Thus, a significant number of delegates from the United States were hand picked by Alkalimat based on their grassroots orientation and Pan African sentiments. Alkalimat had a tough task, and it was for this reason that others should have been involved in the organising process in the United States. When Kwame Toure raised his criticisms, much of what he had to say resonated with other members of the delegation. The Patrice Lumumba Coalition and the December 12th Movement were Pan African organisations that had worked tirelessly organising mainly in New York and Los Angeles for Pan African causes; however, none of their members had been contacted by Alkalimat or the IPC to do work in preparation for the Congress. Alkalimat was the point man in the United States, yet outside of those whom he had been in direct contact, few knew of his involvement with the Congress until they arrived in Kampala on April 3. In actual fact, many of the delegates who arrived from New York City had mainly come by way of the Ugandan Ambassador to the United Nations and not the IPC. The lack of communication and preparation prior to the Congress forced the North American delegation to be preoccupied with issues such as "who is a Pan Africanist." This issue was tied to the other question which was being raised at

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the conference as to "Who is an African?" Had a pre-Congress or preliminary national meeting been held in the United States, questions of this sort could have been resolved (or at least systematically examined in a democratic manner) prior to our meeting in Kampala. More importantly, the seminal question posed by Walter Rodney in his essay "Towards The Sixth Pan-African Congress: Aspects Of The International Class Struggle In Africa," with regard to "which class" should lead the Pan Africanist movement would have illuminated a great deal, particularly with respect to the trajectory of the movement within the context of the globalisation of capital and the ever widening economic gap between the North and the South. Moreover, honing in on the centrality of *class* would have clarified why the IPC placed a premium on the participation of grassroots activists and women given the "pitfalls of national consciousness" and the growth of national bourgeoisies, both on the continent and throughout the diaspora.

The eminent Guyanese Pan Africanist Eusi Kwayana has defined Pan Africanism as "a body of thought and action shared but not uniform or dogmatic; flowing from individual groups, masses of people and occasionally from governments tending to the restoration of freedom and dignity for Africans at home and abroad. It has grown to be the principle means by which Africans seek unity and express a common purpose and determine to achieve their goals. It is dynamic and not stagnant. It has the ability of transforming itself and accumulating new Pan Africanist ideological perspective in the light of experience."⁶ What is important about Kwayana's definition is that it highlights the dynamism of Pan Africanism and underscores the importance of examining the process by which

we define and redefine Pan Africanism for the 21st century.

There had not been a Pan African Congress in 20 years. Many in our delegation were preoccupied with trying to resurrect old Pan Africanist sentiments that had run their historical course. To tell Leona Smith, a former homeless person, who was representing a constituency of people who are marginal in their own communities that her work was not Pan African was inexcusable. Ms. Smith came to the Seventh Pan African Congress with a sense of purpose, commitment and conviction about the conditions of poor people in the United States. However, as a delegation we learned very little from her because the space was not created for healthy dialogue and discussion. No one ever asked what role can homeless people play in the Pan African movement? Surely there must be one. If there is not then we need to give it all up now. It was also important that African youths be exposed to the organisation of the oppressed in the USA. Daily bombarded by the cultural symbols of affluence in both the print and electronic media, these youths needed concrete contacts with those who reflected a different reality from that presented by CNN or *Ebony* magazine.

A real opportunity was missed at the meeting because of the strong personal positions taken, so that the whole time, the question of the leadership of the

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delegation was an issue. It was therefore not possible for a serious discussion to take place on the relationship between the USA and the crisis in Rwanda or Somalia. In fact, the links that the Nation of Islam had forged with particular governments in Africa were never discussed in the open. The absence of this discussion was to become even more important back in the USA when the Nation of Islam claimed the political and ideological leadership of the black liberation movement.

Pan Africanism is a process. It is not a closed book of labels and high flown ideals that have no visible connection with what's taking place on the ground. Social historians of Africa and the diaspora tell us that Pan Africanism is taking place right in front of our eyes, however many of us do not see it because we don't know where to look. Nonetheless it is there, among the people, living, perculating, waiting to explode.

Pan Africanism in the United States

The Seventh Pan African Congress was simultaneously an attempt to organisationally jump start a new Pan African movement and redefine the direction of Pan Africanism in the 21st century. This was exciting for many of us in the North American delegation. Given the crisis in African leadership in the United States and the broader domestic issues impacting Africans and other people of color, the Seventh PAC was a breath of fresh air. Many of us came out of a sense of urgency in an effort to "reconnect" with progressive movements engaged in revolutionary (a word that many of us fail to invoke these days) activity around the world.⁷ Indeed, we recognised that as a result of the cold war, the right wing dominance of Reagan and Thatcher during the 1980' s, the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the consolidation of neocolonialism

in Africa, that organisationally Pan Africanism as a movement had waned. We had no illusions about this. However, if we were to advance the political struggle and move beyond the bourgeois orientation of much of "Black leadership" in the United States, then we had to be about the awesome responsibility of aligning progressive grassroots (in the broad sense of the word) movements and organisations with others around the diaspora and the continent. After all, who had been responsible for our achievements thus far?

Notes

1. Kampala Declaration: Seventh Pan African Congress General Declaration by the Delegates and Participants at the Pan African Congress, April 3-8, 1994.
2. A number of delegations convened local pre-Congresses prior to The Pan African Congress. In Zimbabwe a Southern Africa Regional Conference was held February 25-26,1994. Resolutions are in the author's possession.

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3. Seventh Pan African Congress News: Information Bulletin Of The Secretariat For The Seventh Pan African Congress, May 1993.
4. William Watkins, Abdul Alkalimat and Marian Kramer (1994) "The Seventh Pan African Congress: Notes From North American Delegates" in *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora*, eds. Sidney Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley, p. 355.
5. See Seventh PAC News, May 1993, p.9.
6. Eusi Kwayana Lecture Syracuse University, Spring 1993.
7. *Imagining Home*, pp. 351-360.