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THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL EDUCATION
AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS
P.O. BOX 31791
LUSAKA

L.C. Mabasa on the Great French Revolution of 1789.

France and progressive people everywhere will celebrate the 200th Anniversary of this great historical event on 14th of July 1989.

The Department of Political Education has seen fit to join in the celebration by circulating this scholarly paper, written by Comrade L.C. Mabasa, a Senior Research Officer in the Department. He has shown the importance of the Revolution of 1789 to the South African struggle against the racist regime in Pretoria. It occupies the same kind of position in structural terms as the French monarchy and feudal aristocracy 200 years ago.

Let us join in the celebration by redoubling our effort to demolish apartheid and overthrow the racist tyranny.

Down With Racist Apartheid!
Long Live The South African Revolution!
All Power To The People!

DPE, Lusaka.
31st May 1989

REG SEPTEMBER
Secretary

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN SOUTH AFRICA

Historical materialism teaches that the further an event moves into the past the more significant it becomes in the eyes not only of its contemporaries, but even more in the eyes of posterity. This is all the more evident vis-a-vis the so-called epochal events. Among these we should definitely include the Great French Bourgeois Revolution. This revolution has earned itself an honourable place in the annals of universal history, in the same manner as has the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917 in Russia. But, whereas the French Revolution replaced one exploitative socio-economic order (feudalism) with another equally, if not more unjust and exploitative system (capitalism), the October Revolution signalled the beginning of the end of the unchallenged rule of capital over labour, facilitating a global transition from capitalism to socialism. However, in order to fully appreciate the historical and universal significance of the French Revolution, we should approach it in the context of its own historical parameters, as one - albeit the most radical - in a series of bourgeois revolutions spanning a period of about three centuries.

The era of bourgeois revolutions was opened by the Dutch at the end of the 16th century. The Dutch Revolution took place in the framework of the war for independence. The founding of the Dutch India Company in 1602 and the opening of the Amsterdam Stock Exchange in 1613 - the first of its kind in history - coupled with the dominance of Dutch maritime commerce and colonial exploitation of other peoples (including our people) facilitated the rise of the Dutch bourgeoisie as the most powerful in the world. Dutch hegemony, however, was not to last forever. The fall of the Batavian Republic and the British annexation of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795 sealed the decline of the Netherlands as a world power and the rise of British imperialism.

England experienced two bourgeois revolutions in the 17th century - the first between 1642-1649 and the second in 1688-1689. The English revolutions ended in the "great compromise", whereby power was shared between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. This compromise persists to this day in the form of the British Constitutional Monarchy - though one may add more in form than in essence.

The American War of Independence also belongs to this era of bourgeois revolutions. With the underlying principle of Liberty, the American Revolution declared the rights of man (not just Americans), thus incorporating universalism. However, the continued enslavement of Blacks, amongst other things, underpinned the discrepancy between solemn declarations, and their practical implementation, a feature that was to characterise American bourgeois democracy in the decades to follow.

There is one common feature which is characteristic of these revolutions. As Albert Soboul puts it, "The revolutions of Holland, England and America have the value of examples of bourgeois revolutions, but leading to a conservative compromise, which under the cover of "Bourgeois Liberty", safeguarded the dominance of wealth". (Soboul A. Understanding the French Revolution. International Publishers, N.Y. 1988, p.285).

The French Revolution, however, was to make a clean break with this tradition both in its profundity and its scope. As Hobsbawm observes, "The French Revolution may not have been an isolated phenomenon, but it was far more fundamental than any of the other contemporary ones and its consequences were therefore far more profound. In the first place, it occurred in the most populous state of Europe (leaving Russia apart).... In the second place it was, alone of all the revolutions which preceded it and followed it, a mass social revolution, and immeasurably more radical than any comparable upheaval.... In the third place, alone of all the contemporary revolutions, the French was ecumenical. Its armies set to revolutionise the world, its ideas actually did so". (Hobsbawm E.J. The Age of Revolution 1789-1889, p.74). Its reverberations were felt as far afield as Turkey, Bengal and other far-off lands.

Our task is to examine the significance of the French Revolution for us in South Africa who are still waging a National liberation struggle against racist-colonial tyranny, for the triumph of the ideals of equality, democracy and freedom in a unitary non-racial South Africa. In so doing, we shall endeavour, without going into details, to acquaint ourselves with some of the key issues without which it would be difficult to put the importance of the French Revolution into proper perspective. These include the socio-economic and other preconditions of the revolution, its motive forces, stages and main outcome.

Revolutions, as we know, are the outcome of irreconcilable contradictions between the productive forces on the one hand and the relations of production on the other. Late eighteenth century France was a country ridden with socio-economic, political and other contradictions. The basic contradiction of the French society of the day was one between an outmoded feudal and aristocratic superstructure and the new bourgeoning capitalist productive forces, whose continued growth was hindered by archaic relations of production, characteristic of the Old Regime. The nobility and the clergy - the two most privileged classes of France - were not producers of great wealth, though they amassed colossal amounts of it. This was made possible by the superexploitation of the peasants - who constituted over 80% of the population - and the other labouring classes. The parasitic life-style of the nobility and the clergy sapped the resources of the state. The situation was compounded by the involvement of France in the American War of Independence on the side of the American colonies, which worsened the financial crisis that France was experiencing. By the end of 1788 the budget deficit had reached 20% of the total sum of revenues. In an attempt to cover up this huge budget deficit taxes were increased and the price of bread - the staple food of the poor masses - was hiked. This triggered mass discontent, and, in some areas, like Paris for instance, there were numerous bread riots.

The socio-economic crisis was accompanied by an equally serious political crisis. The bourgeoisie, the peasantry and the toiling masses all wanted a say in the running of the country. Political power rested in the monarch. Parliament had not met since 1614. In an attempt to stem the tide of revolution the King decided in 1789 to convene the States-General (Parliament). This became the turning point in the life of the feudal regime. The Third Estate - a chamber of Parliament for the representatives of the masses - pressed for the conversion of the States-General into a Constituent Assembly which was to draw up a new democratic constitution for France. The question on the agenda was one of the transfer of power from the monarchy to the coalition of class forces opposed to it. The storming of the Bastille (a prison-fort where most opposition leaders and activists were incarcerated) on the 14th of July 1789 marked the beginning of the revolution. It continued - going through various stages of rise and fall - until the coup d'etat on November 9, 1799 led by Napoleon Bonaparte. Though led by the bourgeoisie, which by then was revolutionary in its political outlook, the revolution was shaped by the active participation of the popular masses.

The French Revolution was bourgeois democratic in as far as its tasks were concerned, i.e. the liquidation of feudal property relations and the political and ideological superstructure, represented by the Ancient Regime. But unlike other bourgeois revolutions before it, the French Revolution was the one revolution in which the popular masses took an active part. It was a revolution from below and not from above. "The destruction of feudalism by the French Revolution and the advent of the bourgeois regime was made possible only by the cooperation of the popular masses". (Understanding the French Revolution, p.101). To that extent it can safely be said that the French Revolution was a revolution in the true sense of the word.

The French Declaration of Human Rights had an imprint of participation by the popular masses. The basic principles of "Liberty, Fraternity and Equality" which were the cornerstone of this declaration were to act as a lodestar for future revolutions. To this day the relevance of these principles to all those who are engaged in struggle for freedom and social progress cannot be overemphasised. They are important to us in South Africa. There are no more important rights than the right to self-determination, freedom and equality! South African revolutionaries, in their struggle against the Apartheid regime, draw inspiration from the principles articulated by the French 200 years ago.

One other lesson to be drawn from the French experience concerns measures to be taken to ensure that a revolutionary government addresses itself to the needs of the people. The methods adopted by the Jacobins, such as the banning of the export of capital, control of the banks, the levying of progressive taxes helped to secure the independence of the French Republic. These measures compare very well with the economic clauses of the Freedom Charter, especially those on the nationalisation of monopoly industry, the redistribution of land among those who work it.

Political independence without economic emancipation - declares the ANC STRATEGY AND TACTICS - will be meaningless. If we are to redress the awesome imbalance in the distribution of wealth in our country, the people have to be in control of the commanding heights of the South African economy. In this way the state shall be in position to direct the process of generating the wealth necessary to eradicate mass poverty, landlessness, unemployment and hunger so that all South African shall enjoy equal standards of living.

This was not the experience of the French Revolution. Its fruits were plucked by the upper classes, but it taught the value of consistency, loyalty to the revolution, revolutionary steadfastness, so much articulated by the words of Danton, one of the foremost French revolutionaries, "AUDACITY, MORE AUDACITY, ALWAYS AUDACITY!"

Another area of interest concerns the need to defend revolutionary gains against external aggression. In our day this has become an axiom, but it suffices, for the purposes of this paper, to mention that it was the French Revolution of 1789, which put this ideal into the realm of practical politics. As we engage our immediate enemy in battle, so too must we build up such forces as will enable us to defend our revolution in the event not only of external aggression, but also of internal counterrevolution. As Lenin put it, only that revolution which can defend itself is worthy of the name. The world revolutionary movement provides us with ample examples of numerous occasions whereby imperialist sponsored plots aimed at undermining the revolutionary gains of various peoples were hatched. Angola, Nicaragua and Mozambique are cases in point. It would be folly on our part to struggle at so much cost only to witness, idly, our efforts undermined.

The most important thing to always bear in mind is that our struggle is not taking place in a vacuum, but in the era of National Liberation, socialist and other revolutions. It is taking place in the epoch of a general transition from capitalism to socialism on a worldwide scale. Therefore our revolutionary movement does of necessity bear the imprint of this process. That being the case, and since the Movement is part of the forces of National Liberation, for democracy, freedom and social progress, we have to be receptive to other people's ideas and experiences in the process of enriching our own revolutionary theory and practice. Needless to say that in so doing we shall not be aping our friends and comrades, but taking from them that which, in our opinion, is good for us and our people. But we can only make our choice provided we know what is in the package. Herein lies the importance of observing the bicentenary of the French Revolution.

Lastly, it should be borne in mind that revolutions are not made to order, but rather are the results of objective processes that flow independently, our wishes notwithstanding. On the other hand, the existence and activeness of subjective factors does necessarily influence the tide of events. One of the starkest features of the French Revolution, as with the revolutions of the early centuries, was the absence of political parties or movements, with coherent programmes, strategies and tactics. Perhaps one could argue that political organisation of society was not as sophisticated as it is today. Nonetheless, the absence of such parties or movements then, seen in the light of present-day struggles, underlines the importance of a political party or movement that will be charged with responsibility of directing the struggle and leading the masses in a conscious and decisive way. In South Africa we have such an organisation in the form of the African National Congress. The present task of the ANC, as was amply clarified in the January 8, 1989 Statement of its National Executive Committee, is to build an all-embracing, broadly-based coalition of all anti-apartheid forces. There are no obstacles insurmountable enough to prevent those who are genuinely interested in the downfall of the apartheid regime from uniting in action against the common enemy. Unity of the revolutionary forces plus their links with, and leadership of, the masses is essential if victory is to be achieved.

L. C. Mabasa
31st May 1989