at issue:

The Transvaal Indian Congress

The reformation of the Transvaal Indian Congress in May this year has been severely criticised in some quarters. A TIC supporter assesses these criticisms.

The revival of the TIC has been both welcomed and condemned. Those who see themselves as part of the progressive forces are bound to consider very carefully whether there is any substance to the criticisms of the TIC.

In order to deal with the many and varied criticisms of the TIC's revival, it is important to go beyond the level of rhetoric, and assess the fundamental analytical and strategic framework(s) that underlie these criticisms.

Let us turn to the criticisms of the TIC published in Work In Progress 26 ('TIC - the case against'). Unfortunately - due to the very brief nature of the article - the methodology advocated is very hard to follow. This writer was fortunate to have access to an unedited version of the article - but even this was not much better. One is thus forced to adopt the following approach: starting with some of the statements made in the article, an attempt will be made to tease out what the bases of these statements could be - and then examine them. In order to avoid becoming entangled in a complicated process of speculation and guesswork, I will concentrate on the TIC's position with regard to these kinds of criticisms - rather than focusing on the criticisms themselves. Although a detailed examination of the criticisms themselves would obviously be preferable, this cannot occur until such time as they are expressed more fully.

Before proceeding with this, it is important to note that criticisms of the TIC's formation come mainly from one of two positions. The first attacks TIC from the perspective of a 'class analysis' that ends up denying any importance to issues of national oppression. The second also stresses its socialist commitments, but emphasises the importance of taking into account national oppression; this perspective attacks the formation of TIC on the grounds that separate ethnic organisations undermine unified national oppression to racial capitalism. This second position is most clearly articulated by Neville Alexander (in a paper presented to the National Forum, and published above - eds). The discussion in this article will focus on the criticisms articulated in the WIP 26 article which seem to derive from the first position described above. An in depth discussion of the critique expressed by Neville Alexander will not be attempted here, although the foundations for such a discussion will be laid in this article.

The main thrust of the position adopted in the WIP article seems to be the following:
- Our struggle is to establish '... a one nation democracy with a working class ideology';
- During the 1950s, populist organisations like the ANC and the PAC organised on an ethnic basis;
- The development of monopoly capitalism has resulted in important changes in the division of labour - eg a greater impetus towards the creation of a black middle class;
- This change in '... conditions within the social formation ...' has led to united struggles across ethnic boundaries, eg the student boycotts in 1980;
- The decision to revive TIC is a reversion '... to old tactics ...' that are inappropriate due to the changed '... conditions within the social formation'.

As the original version of the WIP article says: 'The preceding analysis, presented in this article indicates that conditions within the social formation have drastically changed since the

1940s-1950s and the 1960s - and it thus becomes an urgent task of the oppressed masses to periodically change their tactics in keeping with new developments. It is on this basis then that the few decades old idea of TIC can be rejected today.'

There follow a few specific comments about TIC and its position, the main points being:
(i) Recent history shows that 'ethnically-oriented' struggles are a thing of the past.
(ii) It is inappropriate to speak of an 'ethnically' separate political organisation as, firstly, there are no such things as indian aspirations and, secondly, there are antagonistic classes within the indian community which have different interests or aspirations.
(iii) The use of ethnic symbols can entrench divisions that are difficult to overcome in the future.
(iv) The aim of political organisation is a unitary, non-racial democratic society - the struggle to get there must take on these forms.
(v) The proponents of TIC are petty bourgeois. Their petty bourgeois interests are reflected in their 'collaborationist position on the 1980 SAIC elections (they advocated participating for tactical reasons)'.
(vi) There is no class analysis in their public stance, and this is the only way they can be judged.

The first point to be dealt with is the claim that the struggle in the 1950s was led by 'populist' organisations like the ANC and that the TIC, by reverting to an 'ethnically divided' and 'populist' form, is reverting to old tactics that have been surpassed with the advent of monopoly capitalism. The writers of the WIP 26 article have not specified precisely what they mean by 'populist'; nor have they clarified the reasons why monopoly capitalism has led to surpassing of these 'old tactics'. As such, it is difficult to assess their claims. Nonetheless, this claim can be dealt with by concentrating on (a) explaining why the Congress Alliance historically adopted the form it did; (b) arguing that the revival of TIC was justified due to the concrete conditions of capitalist exploitation in South Africa; and (c) showing that the changing conditions due to monopoly capitalism do not undermine the considerations upon which this decision was based.

THE CONGRESS ALLIANCE

Criticisms of TIC, based on the charge that its 'populist' and 'ethnically divided' form are incorrect, are not new. The same charges were made against the entire Congress Alliance in the 1950s. It is for this reason that we turn to an examination of the Congress Alliance before going on to assess the validity of these attacks on TIC today.

The main questions that arise when examining the strategy of the Congress Alliance in the 1950s seems to be the following:
(a) Why work within an alliance led by the ANC - an avowedly nationalist (multi-class) movement? Why not a mass working class party?
(b) Why work within an alliance composed of separate national or ethnic organisations? Why not one national organisation?

An adequate answer to these questions would require an in depth explanation of the historical context. What follows is necessarily a summary description.

The time period under examination was characterised by the early years of Nationalist rule. They were years when the experience of racial oppression was generally heightened for all the different groups classified as 'non-whites'. Although racial discrimination had long been a part of the every day experience of all black people in South Africa, the implementation of apartheid meant a frontal attack on the few rights and freedoms still retained. It also meant a general tightening up of the measures that were meant to control the black population (greater police involvement; tightening up of influx control; etc).

The subjective experience of increased oppression that this resulted in is very hard to capture 30 years later. It is nonetheless essential to do so, if one is to adequately understand the political climate of that time. It meant nothing to state that actually this was just another form of the same old thing - capitalist oppression. This kind of abstract theorising (while obviously in one sense being true) leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of oppression and thus to the adoption of inadequate political strategies.

The different 'national' groupings amongst the black people experienced this increased oppression differently. The coloured people (especially in the Cape) experienced the harsher realities

of racial oppression for the first time. Many activists of that period point to the fact that the general political climate amongst coloured people was certainly not conducive to uniting in a common struggle with the african majority. If anything, most coloured people would have identified politically, if at all, with white parties like the United Party. The reality of racial oppression was that it had created hierarchies amongst the different 'national' groupings. These hierarchies resulted, on the whole, in people aspiring to the position of those 'races' above them and dreading any contamination from those races 'below' them. They also resulted in mutual fear and suspicion.

Although the indian community was different in the history of its struggles for indian rights, the fear and suspicion of the other national groups (especially africans) was undoubtedly there. The difficulties experienced by the leaders when trying to mobilise united action around campaigns like the 'Defiance of Unjust Laws' is adequate testimony to this. If any more evidence is required, one need only examine the history of clashes between indian and african people in areas like Natal. Born of separation, misunderstanding and fear, these incidents are a reflection of the divisions that had been sown amongst different sectors of the racially oppressed black peoples of South Africa.

But what of class? So far we have only spoken of the racial experience of oppression. Surely it is necessary to stress the underlying class nature of that oppression? Surely race must be shown to be but the tool of capitalism - serving to disguise and deflect the basic class struggles within the South African capitalist system?

These questions raise a number of very important strategic issues (as well as a number of theoretical issues which will be dealt with below). When the reality of everyday experience cannot be divorced from an overwhelming experience of racial discrimination, humiliation and exploitation, should political organisations go out amongst the masses preaching the gospel of class struggle? Must they attempt to wean the masses away from the 'false consciousness' of racial oppression in favour of the underlying class basis - get them to realise that the 'real' enemy is the colour-blind capitalist system not the 'boers'? Militants within the Congress

movement very quickly realised: that abstract formulae were not much use in mobilising the masses, and mobilisation into the realms of active political struggle was an essential moment in the politicisation of the masses; that the exploitation of labour by capital was experienced by labour in a racial form; that the struggle to overcome the abstract 'capitalist state' was the struggle to overcome the racial capitalist state - the apartheid state of Malan and Verwoerd. But what of the workers? Surely it is possible to uncover the stark realities of class struggle based on their experience on the shop floor? Surely they will be able to understand that the real struggle is against the capitalist bosses and not against the apartheid system?

Unfortunately abstract intellectualisms were never much use in the heat of struggle, for it is precisely the workers who experience the reality of racial oppression at its harshest; it is precisely the workers who suffer the most due to the realities of racial discrimination; it is precisely the workers whose position worsened most drastically with the winning of power by the Nationalists.

This does not mean that socialist militants within Congress decided to abandon the class struggle in favour of the more immediate, more urgent struggle against racial oppression. It meant that they realised the struggle of the workers, the struggle against capitalism, was at the same time the struggle against racial oppression. It was necessary for them to enter the national struggle - to mobilise the workers into this struggle - to attempt to ensure that workers became the spearhead of the Congress struggle against national oppression - against RACIAL capitalism.

POPULISM AND THE 'PEOPLE'

To reassure those who fear that this analysis has finally gone off the rails and demonstrated its 'populist' leanings - thus abandoning all pretense at class analysis - one must now look at the same issue from a more abstract analytical perspective. How one can analytically capture the nature of capitalist oppression in South Africa, and thus point to the types of strategies appropriate to overcoming it, will be briefly examined.

The South African capitalist system takes the form of a racially discriminatory capitalism. This means that capitalist exploitation has been made possible via the system of racial oppression. Racial oppression has thus made possible the extensive control of black (especially african) workers. This enhanced control has led to the possibility of far lower wages and a more controlled work force than would have been possible without it.

The <u>political</u> form of the South African capitalist system is that of the apartheid state and all the institutions and struggles surrounding it. The dominant ideology of the South African capitalist system is that of racism - the ideas and institutions that embody this racism. This ideology is not an <u>illusion</u> - a false consciousness that will somehow be overcome if the workers are 'educated'. This ideology is a lived reality - embodied in the institutions and practices that create the 'racial subject' in South Africa.

The political form of the capitalist system - ie <u>apartheid</u> - is not an illusion - a pure capitalist state 'dressed up' as apartheid. To deny the political realm of 'apartheid' any <u>efficacy</u> or reality, to speak of the struggle against apartheid as being an illusion whereas the actual struggle is against the capitalist state, is to fall prey to economism. This conception of the political makes it a <u>reflection</u> of the economic. It is entirely determined by the economic in such a way that any attempt to capture the 'relative autonomy' of the political from the economic is an absolute farce. This constant reference to the capitalist state rather than the apartheid state is a refusal to move from abstract theory to concrete or lived reality. This is where the contradictions and class struggles of capitalism are played out - in the <u>concrete historical circumstances</u> of the <u>particular society</u> under discussion.

What does this imply about the strategies required to <u>overcome</u> this form of capitalist oppression? Firstly it points to the fact that the interests of the working class and those of other oppressed <u>black</u> people will substantially overlap. This creates the possibility for a united <u>national</u> struggle against apartheid.

Does this imply a <u>class alliance</u> between different classes amongst the oppressed black masses? Does this therefore imply a <u>compromise program</u> that takes into account the interests of other classes and thus <u>dilutes the interests of the working class</u>? The answer to these questions is both yes and no. Before trying to clarify this, let us briefly examine the concept of popular-democratic struggles. Ideas on working class struggle for ideological dominance or hegemony over other classes have been developed in the understanding of popular-democratic struggles.

Ernesto Laclau, for example, pointed out the following:
(a) that ideological elements like 'Nationalism' have no necessary class belonging, ie, it makes no sense to say that (eg) nationalist ideology is <u>inherently</u> bourgeois; because nationalism can be 'taken into' the ideological framework of either the bourgeoisie <u>or</u> the working class.
(b) He then goes on to argue that not all contradictions in a capitalist society are necessarily <u>class</u> contradictions. He introduces the notion of a series of contradictions between the '<u>power bloc</u>' (those in power) and the 'people' (those who aren't). These contradictions give rise to the 'popular-democratic' ideologies.

Laclau then shows how, for the working class to win power, it must engage in a process of <u>ideological class struggle</u> as well as political class struggle. This ideological class struggle includes the attempt to become representative of the 'people'. This means that the working class has to struggle to 'take over' the 'popular-democratic ideologies' and weld them to the working class struggle for socialism. In this way the working class becomes the leader of the 'people' in the struggle to overcome capitalism. This is different from the notion of class alliance where one class is dominant and its interests dominate those of other classes by virtue of its greater strength. The creation of working class hegemony or dominance does not mean that working class ideology is <u>imposed</u> on other classes. It means that the popular-democratic ideologies are <u>incorporated into the framework</u> of working class ideology in such a way as to create a new ideology - that of the '<u>people</u>'.

Let us now return to the question surrounding the nature of the Congress Alliance. It is clear that our theoretical discussion (using theoretical tools that were not available in the 1950s) has brought us to the same point reached by socialists within the Congress Alliance:

the need to enter the <u>national democratic</u> struggle, to mobilise workers to become the spearhead of struggle against national oppression - against <u>RACIAL</u> capitalism.

This rather schematic discussion obviously leaves a lot of questions unanswered - but nevertheless points out the direction in which those answers must be sought.

THE TIC REFORMATION

What then of today and the decision to reform TIC? This leads to the question of monopoly capitalism. What changes does this imply to our analysis of the reasons for the form of struggle adopted in the 1950s?

Monopoly capitalism has certainly resulted in changed conditions of capitalist accumulation which have resulted in a number of structural problems arising - a shortage of skilled labour; structural unemployment; etc. At the same time the popular-democratic or national-democratic struggle has led to a political crisis thus creating a general situation of organic crisis in South Africa. This crisis has meant that the state has been forced to rearrange the form of exploitation in such a way as to alleviate the crisis. What has changed as a result of this reorganisation? Only those aspects that may affect our previous analysis of the 1950s will be looked at. This is not to imply that the current reforms have not changed the situation at all, only that they do not affect the analysis of certain specific areas.

One of the most important changes is the attempt to draw indians and coloured people into the parliamentary process. This is supposed to be the beginnings of a deracialisation of South African society. It is, however, accompanied by the concluding strains of the apartheid opera - the attempt to eliminate the majority of african black people from South Africa, placing them in 'independent states'. This supposed deracialisation has not eliminated or even fundamentally changed the <u>racial nature</u> of capitalist oppression in South Africa. It has not alleviated the everyday experience of racial exploitation suffered by every black (african) person - in fact it has made some areas worse. Monopoly capitalism has not led to any change in the situation where the different

'national' groups are separated off from one another - fear and mistrust one another and exhibit racial prejudice towards one another. This is not to deny that many activists have overcome these barriers - nor that struggles have, to <u>some</u> extent, changed the general climate in these communities. It is only to stress that (a) we have a long way to go, and that (b) monopoly capitalism makes very little difference to this situation.

The one area where monopoly capitalism has made a big difference is with regard to the size and composition of the working class. This, combined with the increased unionisation of the working class, has opened up possibilities for a greater working class influence on opposition activity. This does not, however, fundamentally change the political position of the 1950s. It only means that the role of the workers as the <u>spearhead</u> of national-democratic struggle can be more easily assured. It only means that the possibilities for working class ideological hegemony are increased.

What then of the TIC? How does the decision to revive the Transvaal Indian Congress relate to the above analysis? The discussion was based, firstly, on the recognition of the <u>continued</u> problems of separation, prejudice, and suspicion spoken of above. This meant that a <u>common</u> national struggle with other oppressed groups could not be <u>assumed</u> but had to be <u>worked for</u>. Methods had to be adopted that would successfully <u>mobilise</u> the people within the indian community and thus facilitate the <u>possibility</u> of then uniting in a common national struggle. This points to the <u>second</u> problem on which the decision was based. The indian community (especially in the Transvaal) had not been politically active in any significant way since the 1950s. Practically the only political activity was that of the reactionary leaders of the South African Indian Council (SAIC) who were attemting to incorporate the community into the government's 'reform' schemas. The problem was thus two-fold - to break the hold of reactionaries on the political arena in this community <u>and</u> to mobilise the people into active political activity once again. Only once this had begun to occur, could the attempt to once again <u>unite</u> the struggles of the oppressed peoples <u>in political practice</u> take place.

ETHNICITY AND SEPARATION

The question then arises - 'why mobilise the people on the basis of being indians? - why not on the basis of a non-racial national movement?' The basis of an answer has already been pointed to above. The reality of political struggle is such that one cannot mobilise people politically on the basis of some abstract notion of politics. Organisation begins from where the people themselves are - from their perceptions of the burning issues of the movement, and proceeds from there. Organisations can only successfully mobilise the broad masses of people if they take these realities into account. The reality of South African racism is that it has succeeded in dividing the oppressed people 'racially' - by imposing separation and a hierarchy of racial oppression. This form of oppression has introduced a dynamic that pushes 'racial groupings' into seeking alliances with those above them on the 'racial ladder' in defense against the threat from below them on that ladder.

The next question that arises is 'why bother with mobilising these people anyway - shouldn't one be concentrating only on the workers within these groupings?' The answer has, once again, been partially dealt with already. Firstly, workers are by no means exempt from the realities of racial oppression - and thereby reflect the very same starting point (level of consciousness) spoken of above. Secondly, the theoretical and strategic discussion in earlier sections pointed to (a) the overlap in interests between all oppressed people and (b) the necessity for the working class to mobilise the broadest possible grouping of oppressed people into a popular-democratic or national-democratic struggle under its hegemonic control.

What practical implications does this have for the debate on the TIC? It means that progressives in the indian community need to mobilise the broadest possible grouping of people in that community under a progressive leadership and within a progressive direction. It means that the TIC needs to unite in struggle with all other organisations of the oppressed peoples. It means that this united democratic front must ensure that the workers are the spearhead of the struggle and that working class ideological hegemony is fought for within this alliance. There are obviously many other questions that could be dealt

with but they would take us beyond the scope of this article. Let us now turn back to some of the more specific points made in the WIP article.

Criticisms regarding a 'reversion to old tactics' that have been outdated by monopoly capitalism have now been dealt with. The first of the more specific criticisms is that recent history has shown that 'ethnically oriented' struggles are a thing of the past. The full (unedited) version of the WIP 26 article bases this statement partly on claims that the student boycotts of the 1980s are one demonstration of this point.

The TIC has no interests in promoting the use of 'ethnically-based' organisations as a permanent feature. It does, however, insist that this approach is used up to that stage when political realities determine that it is no longer necessary. This means that the TIC has no interest in denying those areas where it has been possible to work in a united fashion under the auspices of one organisation. The student boycotts, however, are not a good example of this. If anything, they demonstrate that unity across racial barriers can be built - but only with the adoption of very carefully considered strategies that take the realities of separation into account. The beginnings of these boycotts were in 1976 - where the african students led the way, and called on other students to boycott. The response was slow in coming and very uneven. The boycotts in 1980 - led by coloured pupils in the Cape - again called for support from other scholars. Again the response was very uneven. The famous Committee of 81 in the Cape was hailed as a model of organisation and discipline in the conduct of a student boycott and yet even there the problems emerged. The african students seem to have never been totally integrated into this committee - as demonstrated by the fact that they continued their boycott after the other students called theirs off. In closing this point it can again be stressed that the TIC has no interest in denying the possibility or desirability of united student organisations - quite the contrary. However, this unity must be created - not just assumed; strategies adopted must take into account the realities of racial divisions and base their plans on this starting point; students (and others) should not fall into the trap of assuming unity and later

finding that their plans collapse as a result.

The next criticism states that there are no such things as 'indian' aspirations and that our community consists of antagonistic classes. It has been demonstrated above that the fact of class divisions has not been ignored. Neither is TIC based on some kind of ethnic triumphalism. There is, therefore, no need to go into these points in any more detail. This point leads into the next criticism which warns that the use of ethnic symbols can entrench divisions difficult to overcome in the future.

Certainly the use or promotion of ethnic separatism is reactionary and must be deplored. By ethnic separatism is meant the kind of tendency that promotes ethnic differences as the basis of organisation – using this to build barriers within which an exclusive ethnicity becomes the foundation of a power base within that community. Equally one must condemn the stupidity of an ostrich stance (ie, 'If we ignore the manifestations of "ethnicity" perhaps they'll just go away'.)

TIC advocates a strategy, based on these realities of separation, that can build up a truly united struggle against oppression and injustice. It must again be stressed that a simple assertion of the desirability of united national struggle means nothing – that unity has to be built.

PRINCIPLES AND ANALYSIS

The last point concerns an issue that underlies the last three criticisms of the WIP 26 article (as summarised above). It is suggested that (i) one is aiming for a unitary non-racial, democratic society and that the struggle to get there must therefore take on these forms; (ii) the implication that any discussion about tactically participating in elections for bodies like SAIC is 'collaborationist' and 'petty bourgeois'; (iii) the implication that unless organisations publically proclaim their adherence to a 'class analysis' they must be trying to 'pander to' the petty bourgeoisie.

The issue that underlies all three of these criticisms (and some of the others) is that of the place of 'principles' in the process of struggle. There have been many cases where organisations claiming to use a class analysis as a guide to

their strategy have also relied on the guidance of a number of absolute 'principles'. These 'principles' are 'absolutes' in that, regardless of the circumstances at the time, they are the framework within which strategy is planned. Any transgression of these principles is taken to be inherently (ie regardless of the situation) reactionary. The movement/organisation best known for this kind of approach is the NEUM, often called the 'Unity Movement'.

The use of a critical analytical framework seems to imply the following: (a) That this analysis clarifies the forces at play in a particular situation; and (b) therefore points to certain actions that are necessary in order to, most effectively, intervene in that situation.

In other words, the analysis is a guide to action, and enables one to assess a particular historical situation in order to clarify what is at stake in that situation. This point is important because often analysis is used in an 'abstract way' that has very little applicability to any particular historical situation. This leads to the use of concepts like class as if one existed in some kind of ideal or 'pure' capitalist society without any of the nasty complexities of real life situations or societies. This is the first point to draw attention to. The second is that the imposition of any previously decided absolutes which are to act as guides to action in conjunction with an anlysis can only limit our understanding, or render any analysis totally superfluous. Why is this?

For the following reasons: (i) An analysis involves a set of conceptual tools that help to make sense of a concrete situation in order to decide how to act. (ii) If we have taken prior decisions as to what kind of actions are permissible, then the anlysis can only operate as long as it doesn't contradict these obstacles. (iii) This means that an anlysis – which claims to take all the relevant issues into account in trying to understand a situation and then decide how to act on it – is reduced to taking into account only those factors that won't lead to contradicting the absolutes. This operates in the same way as prejudices.

As one can see from the above discussion, the use of absolute

principles in conjunction with a concrete analysis makes no sense at all. It involves a set of concepts that are used only as labels. It can no longer function as an analytical tool.

Having said all this, what relevance does it have to the criticisms of TIC? It seems that these are all variations of the problematic approach discussed above. To assert that TIC's aim is a unitary non-racial society and therefore it must take on these forms is to assert a principle. It denies the possibility of reacting to a specific historical context that may call for a response contradictory to the one advocated above. To imply that any discussion about the possibility of tactically participating in elections for bodies like SAIC is 'collaborationist' or 'petty bourgeois' is to assert a principle. It denies any possibility of examining that context in order to make a decision. The decision has already been

made - regardless of the context. This is not analysis - this is a new 'morality of action' embodied in a set of principles. To then go on and claim that this decision is taken from within a class analysis is a direct contradiction.

This article began by claiming that the contribution in WIP 26 is very brief and thus difficult to respond to. I then went on to respond at great length. The WIP 26 article was used as a way of discussing a lot of misunderstandings about the TIC position that have been expressed - but have not appeared in print. The major critical position that has yet to be dealt with is the one developed by Neville Alexander. The explanation of the TIC's position contained within this article goes a long way towards demonstrating why his attacks on TIC are baseless. While a more direct discussion of his position is important, it must wait for another occasion.