WHY IS TPLF STRUGGLING?

Events in Tigray have moved fast and furiously in the first half of this year. International attention has focused primarily on military engagements and relief aid, largely ignoring the overall background and implications for Ethiopia as a whole. At such times it is too easy, especially for those not directly involved in the struggle, to lose sight of the root causes and basic issues involved. Given the confusing and contradictory claims of the Derg, in its frantic attempt to mobilise the Ethiopian people against the TPLF and other opposition movements, it is particularly important at this time to clearly identify the causes of the present conflict and to reiterate the basic principles for which TPLF is fighting.

In his speech to the 8th Ethiopian Workers Party Congress, Mengistu Hailemariam proclaimed “let us destroy them, or let them destroy us. The present struggle is a decisive one indeed.” In identifying the present struggle as decisive, he is right. But in all their exhortations to the people, the Derg consistently distorts and misrepresents the root causes of the conflict and the real purpose behind its declaration of war.

The Derg insists that this conflict has nothing to do with fundamental changes in the system, the democratic rights of the people or equality of the nationalities.

It claims to be defending Ethiopia’s national pride, independence and unity against ‘secessionist bandits’ in the north.

Fundamental Change
Contrary to the Derg’s claims, the present struggle is very much about fundamental changes in the system. The peasantry rose in 1974 with the slogan “land to the tiller”. The land was subsequently nationalised, under the Derg’s Land Reform Programme, but this brought little or no benefit to the farmers. Through exorbitant taxes, and levies, and strict pricing and marketing controls, any agricultural surplus is expropriated to maintain the Derg’s army and bureaucracy, and to export for foreign exchange. What the Derg calls cooperative farms are little more than state enterprises maintained by slave labour. Meanwhile the people go hungry, and are dependent on food aid.

Despite the nationalisation of the means of production and distribution, the industrial workers are no better off than before the revolution. Low wages and high inflation deny them access to what they themselves produce, and Derg control of the trade unions makes it impossible for them to organise and fight for their rights.

The people must be the beneficiaries of their production
TPLF believes that the peasants should be the beneficiaries of what they produce, and extortion through excessive taxation and levies must cease. Cooperation between the peasants is in itself a beneficial concept, but not as the Derg interprets it, as a means to further exploit and impoverish them.

The nationalised industries must come under the control of the workers, and industry must be developed specifically to meet the needs of the people, who must freely and democratically organise and be involved in the overall decision making process.

These changes are not possible under the current system, which serves only the interests of the Derg and Soviet Imperialism, at the expense of the people. The Derg is fighting to maintain this exploitative system, while the TPLF is fighting to dismantle it completely.

**Democratic Rights**

The main aim of the 1974 Ethiopian People's Revolution was to secure democratic rights. Although the revolution failed to establish a democratic government, the ruling classes were weakened, and the people managed to gain some democratic rights after February '74. But even these limited rights were revoked after the Derg came to power in September '74.

Since then, the people have been struggling for their rights, to be answered only with bullets and torture. Thousands of people have been slaughtered just for speaking out against the regime and for demonstrating peacefully. The proclamation of the so-called Ethiopian People's Democratic Republic (EPDR) declares the right to free speech, but in practise this right is non-existent under the current regime.

TPLF believes that where it proves impossible to achieve democratic rights by peaceful means, then armed struggle is the only option. The Derg is battling to retain power through continuing and intensifying suppression of the people and denial of their rights. TPLF stands for the establishment of a genuine democratic system within which the people can freely and peacefully determine their future.

**Ethiopia's National Pride and Independence**

Under Haile Selassie, Ethiopia's independence and pride had been sold to American Imperialism. Opposition to this was one of the platforms of the 1974 Revolution, and TPLF has always supported this line. TPLF fought and defeated the EDU which was trying to restore American Imperialism in Ethiopia.

The Derg, however, initially dealt with American Imperialism and then transferred its allegiance to Soviet Imperialism. The Derg claims to be fighting to safeguard Ethiopia's independence and honour. Yet it has allowed the economic, military and political infrastructure of the country to come under the control of the Soviets. Ethiopia's policies are determined in Moscow, and Ethiopia owes the Soviet Union over four billion dollars for military equipment alone. This debt in itself represents a long term burden on Ethiopia's economic viability and independence.

So while Mengistu proclaims his passionate concern for Ethiopia's national honour, the Derg has already completely sold out the country's independence to Soviet Imperialism. TPLF on the other hand, has always totally opposed the interference of any foreign power in Ethiopian affairs. TPLF is fighting to end Soviet intervention and restore Ethiopia's independence.

**Ethiopian Unity**

This is a key issue in the struggle between TPLF and the Derg, with the Derg claiming to be fighting in defence of Ethiopian unity, and that TPLF is a secessionist movement.

But TPLF has repeatedly made it clear, both in its programme and activities, that it is not a secessionist organisation. TPLF's aim is a genuine unity, based on the equality of all the nations/nationalities in Ethiopia and the free will of the people. This can only come about when a democratic system has been established, and the people can freely exercise their right to self-determination.

But the Derg's 'unity' is based on national oppression and injustice, which are built into the current system which the Derg is struggling to perpetuate, as it follows a policy of confuse, divide and rule to maintain it's hold on power.

**Real and Lasting Peace**

Another false accusation continually levelled against TPLF by the Derg is that TPLF is an organisation bent only on destruction, and has rejected the Derg's attempts to solve the problem peacefully.

But if the Derg was serious about using peaceful means, it would not have mown down unarmed demonstrators with machine guns and tanks, it would not systematically eliminate its opponents, and label all those who stand against it as terrorists and war-mongers. It is the Derg which has pursued an unrelenting policy of terrorism throughout its existence. Its hypocritical calls for peace amount to no more than demands that the people accept whatever level of oppression and denial of rights the Derg chooses to impose, without question or opposition.

TPLF stands for a true and lasting peace, but recognises that a system based on terrorism and repression can only be removed by armed struggle. TPLF is therefore, struggling to destroy the Derg and Soviet Imperialism in Ethiopia. Only then will the people be free to establish an alternative democratic system, and a genuine, secure peace.

**People's Power**

The Derg denies that the struggle between the TPLF and itself has to do with power, but the genuine transfer of power to the people is the most fundamental issue at stake in the present decisive struggle. When the military officers first took power they claimed the soldiers would be returning to their barracks when the revolution was consolidated. Instead, an unprecedented period of repression of the people followed. Any opposition, any questioning even of the regime has been labelled as counter-revolutionary, secessionist, banditry, etc and brutally suppressed.

The recently established Ethiopian People's Democratic Republic perpetuates the military regime of the Derg, with the same officers simply swapping their uniforms for civilian clothing. Essentially, nothing has changed. At no stage has any real attempt been made to transfer power into the hands of the people.

The TPLF on the other hand stands for genuine people's power. It stands for the defeat of the Derg and Soviet intervention in Ethiopia, to clear the way for a true people's democratic republic, established on the basis of the full equality and democratic participation of all the oppressed peoples of Ethiopia.