

# HEROES OF OUR REVOLUTION

James A. La Guma (1894-1961)

-Phakamisa Lee

It sometimes happens - history being wont to act in strange and hidden ways - that in society some men and women are moulded and shaped, usually by trials and tribulations, to rise head and shoulders above their fellowmen. History is replete with examples of people who have effected Herculean feats in the arts, social sciences and in that infinitely precarious field of politics. Such men leave indelible marks etched on the hearts and minds of the people they have sworn to serve; they epitomize the collective strength and manhood of a people, these selfless heroes of our time.

In South Africa such men have receptive ears and they hear the wretched cries of oppressed masses in bondage and they take it upon themselves to pick up the cudgel, take the sword and slay the dragon. It would be false hero-making to make it sound as though these deeds are done without major participation of the masses. One such man was James la Guma.

James la Guma was born in Bloemfontein at the tail-end of the 19th Century in 1894. He was to become one of the leading figures in the shaping of all the main forces of our revolution, namely, the national liberation movement as well as the SACP. He became a member of the proletariat at the age of eight by becoming apprenticed as a leather worker in Cape Town, thus developing a working class consciousness at a very early age.



As a 16-year old worker he went to Namibia, in 1910, at the time still a German colony. He started working in the highly-productive diamond fields along the Namibian coast, seeing and experiencing ruthless exploitation at first hand. La Guma, like countless other workers under apartheid, came to an early realization of the need of the working class to organize in order to score victories on questions affecting their very existence in all spheres of their lives and activities. A highly energetic organizer, he formed the first trade union in Namibia called the South West African Diamond Workers' Union.

Dissatisfied with conditions of labour as well as with pay led him to organize the workers in this branch of the Namibian industry in the first workers' strike in the territory. The diamond-mining industry was completely paralysed with huge losses on the side of the mine-owning capitalists. La Guma and many of his fellow workers were put on a train by local authorities and banished from the diamond fields. A year later La Guma was once more convicted, this time for organizing an anti-pass demonstration in Luderitz, one of the first actions of its kind in Namibia. In 1920 he founded a branch of the then recently-formed Industrial and Commercial Worker's Union (ICU) in Luderitz.

## I C U

The great organizational skills of this highly-conscious worker came to the notice of Clemens Kadalie who called him back to South Africa to serve in the ICU in Port Elizabeth where he subsequently became branch secretary. The Port Elizabeth branch became one of the fastest-growing in the ICU resulting in La Guma's election to the post of Assistant Secretary-General of the Union. The ICU at this time was at its peak, due largely to the great work of Communists within it like Gana Makabeni and J.B. Marks among others. As a natural consequence of the development of this class-conscious worker, La Guma joined the Communist Party of South Africa at a time when it was increasing its black membership. So high was his ideological development and capabilities - gained from practical activity in organising the working class and not from theoretical discussions - that he was elected to the Central Committee of the Party within a year after joining it, becoming together with A.T. Nzula and T.W. Thibedi the first blacks to attain leadership positions within the Party. Under pressure from the right-wing "adviser" Ballinger from the British TUC, a decision was taken by Kadalie to expel all Commu-

nists from the executive and later from membership of the ICU. The major conflict between Kadalie and the CPSA was only superficially the question of race, as Coloured and African members, La Guma, Johnny Gomas and Edward Khaile, among others, were very capable Communist Party members holding key positions in the ICU until 1926. The Communist criticism of the ICU leadership concerned (a) its unwillingness to organize disciplined industrial unions (rather than the amorphous general workers' union), to introduce rank-and-file democratic control of union funds and elections, or to pursue an active policy of strike action and; (b) "inefficiency, dishonesty and unconstitution- alism." The latter charge was made by La Guma following a national tour of ICU branches in 1926. Whereupon he concluded that Kadalie was the "arch pilferer" of them all and a "dicta- tor in embryo."

The petty-bourgeois nature as well as the self-centred- ness of Kadalie led him along ways of reformism and when criti- cised for this by the Communists, as has been noted above, he seized this as grounds for attacking them. The expulsion of the communists meant the expulsion of the most active organi- zers who had grown together with the ICU. Swiftly the right- wingers and petty bourgeois elements, cleverly manipulated by the reactionary Ballinger, took over to run the Union into the ground. The ICU withered away and finally split into atoms. In the Transvaal, the industrial centre of South Africa, Comm- unists like La Guma, purged by Kadalie from the ICU, had begun the difficult task of organizing black workers in 1927.

### NATIVE REPUBLIC SLOGAN

James la Guma had always been one of the prime supporters of the Native Republic slogan. It was not surprising, then, that this stalwart fighter joined the ANC in the 1920's and became secretary of its Cape Town branch in 1927. The Native Republic slogan was not inimical to the policy of the ANC, in its quest for a national democratic revolution in that it (the slogan) called for "an independent native South African Repu- blic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic, with full and equal rights for all races, black, coloured and white.

Like "Malume" Kotane, La Guma saw no contradiction in being a member both of the ANC and the Party. Later he became Secretary of the ANC for the Western Cape and still later Cape Town Chairman. He was convinced that the liberation of the black masses was an essential step towards the social and eco- nomic liberation of the working class.

In 1928 the Cape Town branch of the ANC passed a

resolution calling for greater co-operation between the ANC and the CPSA. They placed "full and unqualified confidence in the CPSA" because it was the only political party in South Africa advocating full freedom and equality for all races. Also because it was the only party which championed "the cause of the workers of South Africa irrespective of colour and knows no colour discrimination within its ranks." This resolution also called the constitution of the CPSA as correctly interpreting the aims and aspirations of the workers of South Africa. They then called upon the HQ of the ANC to explore every means of co-operation with the CPSA. This was a far-sighted and far-reaching viewpoint to have been held by a branch of the ANC at the time. This also smashes to smithereens the conception spread by our detractors that the ANC during that period, was an outrightly conservative and anti-communist organization.

Within the Party itself James la Guma propagated the Native Republic slogan, calling, as has been mentioned above, for the national liberation of the oppressed blacks as a necessary first step towards a socialist revolution. He was one of the people who felt that the failure of the blacks to pass the "Specific gravity" test stemmed not from their inadequacy but from the wrong policy pursued by the Party on the national question. This brought about a great deal of controversy that this was a reformist approach whilst still others clung to the viewpoint that an immediate socialist revolution was the only way forward. A fierce ideological struggle erupted around this issue.

### **LEAGUE AGAINST IMPERIALISM**

Meanwhile in 1927 La Guma went to Brussels as a CPSA delegate with J.T. Gumede, ANC president, to the conference of the League Against Imperialism. Thereafter they visited the Soviet Union, with La Guma returning later in the same year to attend the celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. He had discussions with Bucharin and other members of the Comintern Executive in Moscow. The following year the Comintern adopted the Native Republic slogan and forwarded it to the CPSA. La Guma reported that Bukharin had said that the white workers in South Africa, soaked as they were with imperialist ideology, were not of primary revolutionary importance in this country. He was expelled twice from the Party during this period. His main ideological adversary was Lazar Bach who, it must be remembered, had had some altercations with Moses Kotane. La Guma had been one of the most inveterate opponents of Bach in the Communist Party, and a few

years earlier had called for a commission to investigate the activities of Bach whom he described as a "serious menace to party welfare and progress". The local District Party Committee had arranged for the commission, but in finding that Bach himself was a member of the commission, La Guma withdrew in disgust, and was later expelled, to be re-admitted to the Party in 1931. Through all these expulsions and readmittance La Guma remained loyal to the Party, serving as one of its most dedicated leaders throughout its most stormy period in the 1930's.

In the Cape La Guma had been one of those taking the initiative in the formation of the National Liberation League, launched in 1935 with Mrs Z. Gool as President and La Guma as Secretary-General. The foundation conference adopted a programme and constitution which pledged "to unite all individuals organizations, complete social, political and economic equality for Non-Europeans with Europeans in South Africa". Although this was an organization of Coloured radicals who hoped to attract African mass support, a point worth stressing is that white radicals played a part in the National Liberation League. In 1950 La Guma served on the last Central Committee of the CPSA before its banning.

### INTEPRID FIGHTER

As the saying goes, it's hard to keep a good man down; it must have been infinitely very hard for the South African racist regime to dampen the revolutionary spirit and resolve of an intrepid fighter like James la Guma. He carried on his work during the hectic fifties, participating in all the activities which were shaping the future of our country and our movement. In 1957 he was elected president of the South African Coloured People's Congress (earlier called the South African Coloured People's Organization). His political and revolutionary activity could not - by any stretch of the imagination - have passed the notice of the fascist legislators. In the 1960 state of emergency La Guma was detained for four months.

James la Guma - affectionately known as Jimmie - died in 1961 still active in the struggle of the working class and the oppressed masses of South Africa. His contribution to the liberation struggle, his acute vision of a future South Africa, places him in the ranks of the immortals and his memory transcends the grave. He participated in all the momentous battles which shaped both the working class movement as well as the national liberation movement through the length and breadth of our country. He saw the transformation to mass action and later

the closure of all legal means of struggle.

He died, however, just shortly before the first blows were struck by the masses using new means - armed struggle under the direction of the ANC and its armed wing, Umkhonto We Sizwe. Such were the people both the known and unknown, who helped to create and cement the ANC-SACP Alliance into what it is today, in order to lead the masses to national liberation of the oppressed blacks and ultimately to the liberation of the proletariat of all races in South Africa. A fine example of Unity in Action.

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# NAKED AMONG WOLVES

by

**BRUNO APITZ**

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## Chapter 12

From one day to the next, a new man had turned up in the commando of the effects room, allegedly as a substitute for the two arrested men. The circumstances under which the new man had come into the commando seemed suspicious not only to Pippig but to all the others. No new man ever came to one of the camp's important commandos, whether the infirmary, the effects building, the work records or the clerks' room, before his dependability of character was examined by the responsible inmates of the work records and the clerks' room, [who had the job of supplying the labour commandos. This was founded on the peculiarity of the prisoners' self-government system; proposals for the employment of a new man in such a commando were made by prisoners in leading positions to the SS labour service fuhrer. The SS camp administration never bothered over the inside considerations that preceded such a proposal. All they cared about was that "everything tallied" in the camp, because they themselves were neither able nor willing to direct the complicated camp apparatus.

Pippig sensed the falsehood and made no comment. What was the new man supposed to do, he asked. The new man wore the identification of a political prisoner; no one in the