

Why I Fight in Umkhonto we Sizwe

AND WHY MORE WORKERS MUST JOIN MK

- TADI MERETLO

A decade ago I started work in a factory and I joined a battle-seasoned working class.

In 1973 the standard of living for the Black workers had plummeted headlong and capitalist exploitation was rampant. In that year South Africa experienced one of the major labour upheavals in its history, over 150 000 workers throughout the country were involved in scores of strikes for higher wages and better working conditions. This was a veritable baptismal of fire for the working class, our generation of young workers learnt very early to battle for their rights, hence I joined a trade union. Later I joined the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) underground.

Although our trade unions had a status of semi-legality and the right to strike had been proscribed for many years, we repeatedly struck in defence of our rights.

The Black workers of South Africa, through their trade unions, have phenomenal battles behind them. To mention but a few: there was the Great Miners' Strike of 1946, the 1950 clashes with the police in the streets of Johannesburg, the formation of a non-racial SACTU in 1955 which was open defiance to racism, the struggles against the Works Committees and Liaison Committees, the Bantu Labour Relations Act, Bantu Settlement of Disputes Act, Industrial Conciliation Act, etc. This militant history tempered us into the fighters of the eighties.

In the 10 years since 1973, South Africa has experienced perpetual labour unrest which is reaching a climax in the 80s. There were 207 strikes in 1980 and 342 in 1981. In 1982 the whole town of Richards Bay faced labour strikes; the ferment in the Eastern Cape continued with strikes in the auto assembly industry. Also recorded were a series of strikes at National Bolts, Perskor, Republican Agency, Central News Agency, consolidated Textile Mills, van Riebeeck Dairies, Power Steel, Coca-Cola and a multiple other industries.

From our economic struggle we soon learnt that rather than settle disputes with the workers through negotiations with their representative - the trade unions - the capitalist employers elect to enlist their regular

police, traffic cops, riot squad and the security branch to deal with the workers by batons, teargas cannisters, gun-fire and their vicious police dogs. This sort of treatment is accountable for several murders. Often trade union leaders are thrown into detention where Thozamile Gqweta, Sam Kikine and other trade unionists are tortured to half-madness. These are the same dungeons where the murders of Lawrence Ndzanga, Elijah L o z a , Joseph Mdluli, Neil Aggett and other trade union leaders were committed.

When the racist police have done their handi-work, those who survive torture like Oscar Mpetha and Barbara Hoqan are paraded in front of the racist courts to be tried under such laws as Black Labour Relations Act, Riotous Assemblies Act, the Intimidation Act and other similar draconian laws.

Our history abounds with instances of naked and callous violence. In 1950 workers were gunned down in Johannesburg. In 1960 several workers were killed at Sharpeville. In 1973 we were eye-witnesses to the massacre of mine-workers by fascist bullets at Carltonville. In July 1982, 12 miners were killed. Brutal assaults on Black factory workers (such as the one that caused the Fattis and Monis dispute in 1979) and especially on mine and farm workers is rife.

R E P R E S S I O N

This is by no means the whole range in the arsenal of brutal repression against the workers, industries have been heavily militarised. The state has a law which empowers it to compel any industry to produce war material at a time of need. In terms of National Key Points Act of 1980 the state instructs managers in industries to establish defence commandos on their plants. These commandos have ostensibly been set up to protect businesses from sabotage. However these commandos are clearly meant to be an arm of the state in the furtherance of repression against African workers who strike. These commandos are manned by members of the arch-racist Confederation of Labour and the reactionary Trade Union Council of South Africa. Often these same reactionaries leave us in the factories to go and do national service and to murder our own brothers and sisters in the neighbouring African states.

Violence lurks all round the factory floor, mine shafts and on farms. This compels our workers to move away from the conventional trade unionism and to organise clandestine armed units of MK and to defend ourselves against senseless criminals. The time for the workers to carry armaments of Umkhonto we Sizwe and lead in the campaigns of sabotage, raids and ambushes is now. It is high time we pay the enemy in his own coins.

A people's war spearheaded by MK is unfolding in our country. This war is in defence of our best interest as workers. This war is at the initial stages. Our People's Army is still entrenching itself within the masses of

our people and gathering resources necessary for a protracted war, and grouping the forces necessary for victory.

Our People's Army draws its combatants from the rural areas, from the impoverished Bantustans, from that vital detachment of the national liberation struggle - the youth and students, from the vast ranks of the women, from Blacks and Whites, from Communists and Christians; and above all from the working class.

The soft spot of a country as highly industrialised as South Africa lies in the cities. This makes the role of the working class pivotal in our people's war.

Umkhonto We Sizwe has infinitely exposed the vulnerability of racist South Africa's military and economic infrastructures to sabotage. The skill it has shown at Voortrekkerhoogte, SASOL, Leyland (during the '81 strike), Koeberg and over a number of fuel depots and electric transformers has left the racist capitalist system in trepidation. In the years ahead, the role of the Black workers will determine the advancement of our People's War and the routing of the enemy. The industrial workers of South Africa, spread through Durban, Port Elizabeth, Welkom, East London, Pretoria, Ermelo, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Bloemfontein and other cities where Umkhonto is active, hold the key in the desire to advance our war effort.

C E N T R A L

The vastly experienced Black working class of South Africa has long concluded that the alleviation of the problems of the workers in South Africa would remain a myth as long as the political system of apartheid is not dismantled. The workers have recognised their central role in the struggle for political, social and economic emancipation. In the words of SACTU's Declaration of Principles adopted in 1955:

"THE FUTURE OF THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA IS IN THE HANDS OF ITS WORKERS, IT IS ONLY THE WORKING CLASS IN ALLIANCE WITH OTHER PROGRESSIVE-MINDED SECTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY THAT CAN BUILD A HAPPY LIFE FOR ALL SOUTH AFRICANS; A LIFE FREE FROM UNEMPLOYMENT, INSECURITY AND POVERTY, FREE FROM RACIAL HATRED AND OPPRESSION, A LIFE OF VAST OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL PEOPLE."

SACTU believes that the struggle for national emancipation led by the African National Congress is in the best interests of the workers. The implementation of the Freedom Charter under an ANC government would guarantee economic and political advancement for the workers. It is this perspective that drew me to SACTU; and I joined its underground work.

The growing non-racial and democratic trade union movements, wherein we were involved before being forced to leave our country, is fragmented on a

variety of issues. However the majority of the South African workers who constitute the membership of these trade unions is unanimous in rejecting the red-herring of "no politics in trade unions". This rejection is accompanied by an increasing recognition of the value of the Freedom Charter by a number of trade unions. The security police bash the heads of trade union leaders in a desperate attempt to link them and their militancy to the ANC and SACTU. The new legalisation of the ANC has been possible, thanks to the great support of the trade union movement. The workers frequently fly the flag of the ANC at their meetings and at the funerals of working class martyrs such as Joe Mavi and Neil Aggett. This is open and defiant identification with the ANC.



Mourners alongside the hearse at Dr. Neil Aggett's funeral.

As our class stands poised to lead the titanic battle against racism, we ought to draw lessons from our numerous strikes including several general strikes that we have waged. In 1946 there was the epic Mine Strike that sent shock waves all over the capitalist circles in our country. In 1961 there was the General political strike at the time of the declaration of the racist republic. In 1976 there was the general political strike when the workers in Johannesburg protested at the murder of their children. From these experiences we have learnt the lethality of the General Political Strike.

The racist capitalist system in South Africa stands on the black working class and it will be felled by the black working class in alliance with progressive sections of the society. Our labour is indispensable to the system and a general tools-down by miners, farm workers and domestic workers and the whole spectrum of black workers, would have a disastrous effect on the economy and bring roofs tumbling down upon the apartheid system. We have enough strength to mesmerise the enemy.

C R I S I S

The sum total of the lingering economic crisis, the worsening impoverishment of the Black workers and the heightened organisation and militancy of the working class provides fertile ground for forging ahead.

SACTU with its vast experience in working legally and illegally has a specific role to play at this point in time. The SACTU underground should recruit greater numbers of workers into the ranks of MK.

Without unity the workers cannot deliver deadly blows against the system. Sadly the trade union movement still lacks the unity required for a working class-led victory. The existence of several unions in one industry, and several trade union federations and centres in one country leads to rivalries and animosities within the trade union movement. A worker has nothing to fear from another worker! A trade union truism goes: With unity the struggles of the workers are never lost.

AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL!

VICTORY OR DEATH, WE SHALL WIN!

LONG LIVE THE ANC!

LONG LIVE SACTU!

LONG LIVE MK!

"So far only a small group of the black workers is organised into trade unions. It is the task of the existing democratic trade union movement to ensure that the unorganised workers are in fact organised. This organisational drive must encompass also the workers in the mines and in agriculture. We do have to bend all efforts to ensure that every worker belongs to a democratic trade union. Therefore with all the power at our command we make a special appeal to the democratic trade union movement to come together again and actually succeed to draw up and adopt a plan for the united action of the democratic non-racial trade union movement. There is no obstacle too formidable to stop us achieving this goal."

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