

# HEROES OF OUR REVOLUTION

## ("UNCLE" J.B. MARKS 1903-72)

— NDABEZITHA KHUZWAYO

*"AS FOR ME, I COULD NO LONGER LIVE WITHOUT FIGHTING OUR OPPRESSOR".*

*Uncle J.B. Marks*

To retrace the steps in the life of Comrade John Beaver Marks is to page a life full of history. He was born in a small dorpie of Ventersdorp in the Western Transvaal on march 21, 1903. October 1972 saw the eclipse of that rich life which has since left a flame of hope and inspiration to all those dedicated to freedom. "Uncle" JB's (as he was affectionately known) parents were of working class, his father being a railway worker and his mother a laundry worker.

Like most African children who grow amidst grinding poverty and uncertain future, his choice of ambition was limited. It was not surprising that most of "Uncle" JB's relatives encouraged him to aspire for priesthood. Undeterred by social limitations and colour-bar, the young J.B. fought tooth and nail to become a teacher. After completing Primary education, his parents scraped the last penny to

see him into the doors of Kilnerton Teachers Training College in Pretoria. There J.B. was perturbed to witness and even experience harsh conditions endured by students. Being a man made of sterner stuff, J.B. Marks took up the cudgels and together with his colleagues confronted the authorities. After leading a strike against the institution, the young Marks was expelled as a "bad element". As he put it later, that experience inspired him to take "the path of active struggle against racial and social oppression".

True to the life and expectations, J.B. was to feature most prominently in trade union and political battles against the white colonialist regime. The immediate sequel to that was J.B.'s appearances on the platform of I.C.U., the Communist Party and the League for African Rights. It was only logical that in 1928 J.B. Marks joined the African National Congress. Later in life in an interview J.B. had this to say: "I was much influenced by my father who was a staunch supporter of the ANC and myself had revolted against conditions, particularly those

at the institution where I was trained, where missionaries did not treat the students well".

However, despite all obstacles, the young J.B. managed to secure the teachers' diploma. His fighting spirit and uncompromising stand earned him the hatred of school authorities at Vredefort school where he taught in the Free State and this led to his expulsion.

It was in 1929 during the anti-pass campaign organised by the Communist Party that J.B. experienced a breathtaking episode on the political platform. It was December 16, 1929, the anniversary of the Battle of Xcome, when white hooligans charged at the platform on which Marks and Mofutsanyana addressed the audience. The white hooligans, drunk and swearing: "Kaffir-voetsek!" "Kaffir-voetsek!" opened fire, murdering 11 Africans. As one was taking aim at J.B., one African woman pounced on the rascal and snatched the revolver and saved the former's life. Finally, angered and determined to punish the racist disrupters, Africans gave chase to the white hooligans who ran away. What led to the political storm was Marks' non-chalant declaration; "Africa belongs to us". The emphasis of his speech was the task of bringing about a national democratic revolution in South Africa whose pre-condition would be the demise of white supremacy for people's power.

### COMMUNIST PARTY

This was a time when the Communist Party drive to rouse the masses into

militant political action and J.B. a one of the crusaders advanced to the fore in the battle-lines. Accordingly J.B. Marks was in 1932 proposed as a demonstrative candidate for a parliamentary by-election in Germiston. What the Communist Party wanted to prove was that the majority of the people were Africans and if franchised would vote for a Communist candidate. In this way the Communist Party dramatised the injustice of the whites-only constitution. The occasion was also used to campaign for democratic rights and immediate demands such as the abolition of poll tax and lodgers' permits on Africans. The Communist Party also held several large meetings and demonstrations many of which were broken up by the regime's police. During his election speeches Marks picked on the most clear, simple and appealing cut-lines. For instance; he would emphasise the fact that the white candidate represented imperialist slavery whereas he was the harbinger of struggle for full franchise rights, unemployment, insurance and an end to colourbar. Thanks to opportune and dynamic tactics, the candidate for the Hertzog government plunged to defeat. After conducting its own ballot in the location, Marks secured a good three hundred votes. This was indeed a step of real movement, for besides exposing white farce, it mobilised and harnessed the people into the train of national liberation.

### INDEPENDENT NATIVE REPUBLIC

The 1930's up till the close of

the decade, the Party was beset with serious problems. Amongst the most pressing and serious issues was that of an Independent Native Republic. Membership was not in one over the issue. It was during these hard times that some of the Party stalwarts as J.B. went abroad to acquire the skill of the most revolutionary theory which is Marxism-Leninism in its scientific brand. This necessity found him within walls of the Lenin School in Moscow. When "Uncle" J.B. returned to the shores of his Motherland the Party was still stuck in the storm of ferocious Nationalist government assaults as well as schisms and factionalism in the Party. A gale of such storm found him excluded from the Party for a technical breach of its regulations. Rooted to party principles and discipline, J.B. remained loyal to the Party until he was re-admitted when the Party had recovered from the problems which had beset it. Commenting on these stormy days Moses Kotane stated: "The Party tended to win every united front mass organisation by blatantly controlling it and dictating its policy. A united front to be successful must be a genuine united front in which Africans could feel that they really had some power and control."

Following the failure of the All-African Convention to halt the passing of Hertzog Bills to disenfranchise African people, J.B. and E.T. Mofutsanyana took the initiative in forming a committee to revive the ANC in

the Transvaal. This step was opportune indeed in that it re-invigorated the Movement in that part of the country with a vigorous leadership and effective political work. Said and done, J.B. was elected executive member of the ANC and Transvaal President in 1950.

The forties could be said to have been a roaring decade on the workers front. Unrest was simmering as over 300 000 Africans slaved in the bowels of gold, separated from their wives and pinned to slave wage flexed their muscles. This situation, miserable as it was challenging, found J.B. Marks poised as leading trade union activist. It became no surprise that in 1942 he was elected President of the African Mine Workers Union. In the same year J.B. was elected to the Presidency of the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions. In both capacities he exercised a tremendous influence on trade union development.

#### AMWU

The tornadoes of the roar in the 40s came to pass in 1946. In April of 1946 a Conference of the African Mine Workers Union (AMWU) decided to put forward the demand for a 10 shillings a day. After mine owners balked at the demand a chain of strike actions broke out. On August 4, 1946 a public conference of over one thousand delegates was held in Golden City where it was decided to call a general strike of all mine workers as from 12 August 1946. As workers braced themselves for the strike-confrontation, Marks warned workers: "You are challenging the



J.B. Marks (left) presiding at a mineworkers' meeting in the forties.

basis of the cheap labour system. You must be ready to sacrifice in the struggle for the right to live as human beings". The strike trail involved over 100 000 miners led by Uncle J.B. himself. The workers were adamant on a 10s a day wage and improvement of living conditions. Police opened fire injuring 1 248 and killing nine people. "Uncle" J.B. was arrested and miners forced back to work.

That strike and political storm has since engraved indelible imprint on the road to a free and democratic South Africa. Indeed, the 1946 miners strike can be confidently christened as a major lodestar to militant miners' strikes which have since proved an immense threat to the fascist regime. The mid-1982 country-wide strikes in the gold, coal and platinum mines echoed this truth.

True to the words which he expressed in a Moscow Conference that "there is no way to emancipation except that of revolutionary armed struggle," J.B. Marks lived by the revolutionary

zeal and inspiration befitting a revolutionary. During his new task of campaigner and leader of the liberation movement abroad, Comrade J.B. proved an outstanding ambassador of his people. He also endeared himself to the hearts and minds of MK cadres more especially by his down-to-earth relation to cadres and candid solution of problems. Little wonder that whenever problems arose "Uncle" J.B. would avail himself in the camps and face up to problems with cadres. One Comrade, June Kokoana said of Uncle J.B.: "I remember him as a passionate, fatherly, friendly and revolutionary leader. His honesty and modesty remains a shining example".

Now that a decade has gone by since that towering figure ceased to be among the living, we need to examine our steps along this arduous road of revolutionary struggle which he illuminated with his life. The call for unity of trade unions as issued by the Hamanskraal, Langa and Johannesburg summits is a most welcome step. Needless to say, "Uncle" J.B. would have

encouraged this step as "real movement". This is the right course in that it answers such burning questions as how workers' movement must survive, grow and become effective in preservation and defence of workers' interests. The call for "One Industry, One Union, One South Africa, One Federation" is exactly what "Uncle" J.B. would be striving for. A veteran revolutionary and trade union champion, he is a shining example underscoring the necessity of combining trade union and political battles in a war of liberation. That some trade union activists and leaders have blazed this trail can only mean a deepening of our revolutionary tasks and

progress. The slogan, "An Injury to One is an Injury to All" must be seen to be a thread running through all our common burdens under and struggle against apartheid. It is a call to arms. In the face of such demonic arenas as Bantustans, President's Council, OMSBPB, Unemployment and repression, the ball is in our court. This must be taken in line with achievements Umkhonto we Sizwe has secured on the battle arena against the enemy. "Uncle" J.B., as part of our people's dedicated and dynamic leadership serves as an indistinguishable flame of hope and inspiration to all those dedicated to freedom and independence.

# LEARN with DAWN

## *You too Countrymen, can be a Freedom Fighter*

1. South Africa was conquered by the gun and today is ruled by the gun. Untold terror and bestiality is daily meted against the lot of the downtrodden Black masses to which you belong. Not a day and not an hour passes without black men, women and children being forced to kiss the ground in salute to their tormentor. This cannot be left to continue unchecked...

2. The enemy's arsenal is a collec-

tion of a variety of weaponry from several Western imperialist and capitalist powers that shore up the apartheid system, covertly and at times overtly. We the downtrodden and deprived by law the right to learn the manipulation of these weapons - obviously the enemy fears an angry oppressed black man who can handle a gun...

3. But the enemy is not as strong as he claims and his guns can be