

SACP faces critical chal

CAN the SACP escape its Stalinist past? How much of a communist party does it remain? Is the ANC/SACP alliance not a problem for the party? These three questions facing the Communist Party were posed at a UCT Summer School course.

By Simon Hoare

THE course leader, Prof Colin Bundy of the history department at UWC, pointed out that while the SACP has been able to keep pace with events and revise its strategies with some flexibility, it has not been very open or independent.

How is a party with a reputation of slavish pro-Moscow sensibility and high Stalinism to address this? In his paper "Has Socialism Failed?" Joe Slovo admits the SACP's Stalinist history, its defense of the Stalinist trials of the 1930's and its support for the Soviet invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. In conceding these "errors" of the past, Slovo seeks to re-define the party and its modus operandi, to construct an identity for a new age free of the baggage of the past. He states that "in general those who still defend the Stalinist model - even in a qualified way - are a dying breed. At the ideological level they will undoubtedly be left behind and they need not detain us here".

Whether this goes far enough in addressing the problem is a moot point. Criticism of the SACP on this score even comes from within ANC ranks. ANC executive committee member Pallo Jordan has been involved in a polemic with the SACP in which he asserts that Slovo's new perspective is insufficient and accuses the SACP leadership of creating "an air of intolerance, petty intellectual thuggery and dissembling among its membership".

The SACP is clearly undergoing major change as a result of perestroika, glasnost and the collapse of the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe. It remains true nevertheless that it is far easier for a party to purge itself of dissident members than of an undemocratic ethos.

A commitment to a mixed economy and a multi-party democracy has recently been adopted by the SACP. As the new world and national realities continue to push it from the traditional canons of communism,

in what way does it continue to be "communist" and how does it retain the support of a militant support base. In what way is the SACP's new vision of "democratic socialism" different from social democracy.

The party retains many of its defining characteristics. Marxism remains its basic tool of analysis. It continues to describe the South African situation as being that of "colonialism of a special type" (CST). CST theory has a premise that blacks have suffered dual oppression as a working class under capitalism and as blacks under apartheid. From this flows the theory of a two-stage revolution - first national liberation and the creation of a bourgeois democracy, second the building of socialism.

In the course of the Summer School the SACP was accused of selling out the working class, compromising socialism and abandoning Marxism by critics from the Marxist Workers Tendency. Tony Yengeni, party member and MK commander, responded by saying that the SACP is "a fighting party" not a talking party". This reflects another enduring element of Party philosophy - its commitment to testing its analysis by acting it out.

AT the same time, it is clear that many old certainties are crumbling and that the party is undergoing a process of change and redefinition. Eloquent testimony to this was provided by Tony Yengeni who was unable to answer



Tony Yengeni (right) with

questions about the party's economic policy because it was being revised and would only be available in a few months' time.

THE ANC/SACP Alliance is often viewed as involving the manipulation of a large national movement by a small communist elite. Bundy stated that this view was not widely held in the ANC - that the relationship between the ANC and the SACP was consistently defined by its members as one of "closeness".

Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo have gone out of their way to stress the importance of the alliance and to defend the SACP from allegations that it manipulates the ANC. Tambo, for example, asserts that both members of the alliance have influenced each other.

The SACP for its part states that it "unreservedly supports and participates in the struggle for national liberation headed by the ANC".

During the 30 years in which the ANC was banned, the SACP played a very important role. Bundy isolated the following distinct contributions that it made to the alliance during these years:

- When ANC went underground after its banning in 1961, the SACP could contribute a decade's experience of working and organising underground which was particularly important in the formation of MK;
- The SACP provided a ready-made network of linkages with the USSR, Eastern Europe and sympathetic organisations in the West;
- The USSR and Eastern bloc countries were the major international supporters of the ANC, especially in the areas of supply of military equipment and training;



SACP stalwarts Ray Alexander and Jack Simon at the Summer School.



specialist David Everatt.

- It provided a significant input of intellectual support, guidance and sophistication to the ANC. This was revealed especially at the Morogoro Conference where the ANC adopted many of the major theoretical constructions of the SACP, and
- It played a major part in theorising the armed struggle and developing political military strategy.

THESE contributions disappear in the context of the new international situation and the normalisation of national politics. As the transition to democracy proceeds, the alliance must come under increasing pressure. A primary reason for this is simply that the drawing up of a new constitution and the election of a democratic government implies the end of the struggle for national liberation, the first stage of the revolution. The theoretical foundation for the alliance thus dissolves.

There can be little doubt that the ANC and SACP will enter negotiations together and will remain in alliance until after a new constitution is drawn up and implemented.

It is, however, clear that the SACP is preparing itself for an independent existence at some stage. It is attempting to create an identity and support base of its own as its large scale launchings around the country have indicated. It is assiduously cultivating a working class base. It continues to project itself as the major champion of socialism.

The nature and timing of the dissolution of the alliance is a matter of speculation. That it will introduce an important new dynamic to our politics is irrefutable. □

Simon Hoare is a law student at Rhodes University

Activists vs Academics at gender conference

By Sue Valentine

THE thorny question of the role of academics and their relation to activists and "the struggle" (the role of activists did not come under scrutiny) dominated the first ever conference on women and gender held in Southern Africa.

Conference organisers and the (mainly white) academic delegates came under fire from both activists and self-confessed black "middle class" professionals as the tensions inherent in a society as skewed as ours bubbled to the surface at the University of Natal venue in Durban.

It was on day two of the four-day conference, rich with local and international top flight women academics/researchers, that the sparks started flying during a panel discussion on "conceptualising gender".

In the chair was University of Cape Town political studies lecturer Mary Simons and on the panel were Belinda Bozzoli (Wits University sociology department), Rosalind Boyd (McGill University, Canada), Ann Levett (UCT psychology department) and Ginny Volbrecht (UCT sociology department).

At the outset, panellists made perceptive comments about the task of conceptualising gender and the need to do so in the South Africa context – a context of destabilisation, unemployment and violence. Power relations needed to be understood so that feminist scholarship, which opposed institutionalised knowledge, could move into the mainstream where power was vested, but at the same time transform those structures and practices.

Addressing the issue of who and how gender could be conceptualised, Bozzoli said it was too glib an assumption to assert that the two separate universes of academic research and on-the-ground activity could, or should, be brought together.

FOR academic work to be valuable it needed to be thorough and to stand up on its own terms. The two worlds could not be collapsed into one, but obviously it was possible for people to wear different hats and engage in academic or activist work at different times.

Responding to this from the floor, an American-based visitor to the conference argued that there should be no distinction between the two. "I am as much an activist sitting behind my desk doing research as when I might spend a night in jail for actions in a public protest," she said.

As the discussion moved from the distinction – or lack thereof – between academics

and activists, and began to tackle the predominantly white complexion of the conference, conference organisers had to explain the nature of the event.

They said that after much thought it had been decided to hold an academic conference, but that women activists would be drawn in as much as possible. Despite extensive consultation, however, there had been very little response from women in those organisations.

In response to a suggestion that the activists at the conference should meet separately to "reclaim" their space, a delegate from Mozambique observed that separate meetings were divisive and futile. "We must do things openly and together," she said.

While some of the audience felt that the differences between people should be "screamed" about in order to promote tolerance, others said that the dominance of white women academics at the event was because most women academics in South Africa were white. It was not a desirable situation, but it did reflect a reality.

A BLACK delegate lashed out at white participants saying she resented white women academics championing the cause of black women. She said black women needed to speak for themselves. Women should do their research/campaigning together, not on their own, nor on anyone's behalf.

Chemical Workers Industrial Union organiser Pat Horn told the conference that while blacks and whites seemed to have learnt to tackle capitalism together and had fought apartheid together, they had not yet learnt how to tackle the patriarchy.

"One place it still thrives is the university, therefore it is valid to have an academic based conference."

In a bid to refocus attention on the topic, "conceptualising gender", Wits sociologist Jackie Cock said attacks by women on each other fell into the state's trap. By focusing only on women the opportunity to work in new and important directions was being missed. It was necessary to move beyond and to look at gender.

"We must move away from the notion of triple oppression for women and talk about who benefits from triple privilege. We must focus properly on the concept of gender and away from narrow conceptions."

● *The conference drew together a vast and divergent range of papers on issues concerning women and gender in Southern Africa. For reasons of space we cannot do them justice here. In forthcoming issues, however, Democracy in Action will feature various aspects of the conference.* □