

# Sharpeville: March 21 1960

In 1960 before that terrible day of March 21 some workers resigned from work because they were preparing for that day. In March that campaign became very hot. Everywhere people wore stickers on their jackets saying 'Away with Passes'. If they offered you one of these stickers and you didn't take it you were labelled a sellout. Even people sitting in the shebeens had those stickers. Workers also wore them inside the factory.

It was the strongest campaign I've ever seen. Sometimes you saw people standing at the bus-stops asking people to burn their passes, because the idea was that people should surrender themselves at the nearest police station on March 21 without their passes. Some people started small fires at the bus-stops and everybody would take out their passes and burn them.

On the weekend before the 21st, we had parties — stokvels — drinking and having campaign workers there supplying us with those stickers and telling us about a meeting to be held. They told us not to go to work on Monday and to surrender at the new police station. They wanted to know who still had a pass. If you did you were a sell-out. You couldn't go and drink at any of the stokvels with a pass or without a sticker showing you were supporting the campaign.

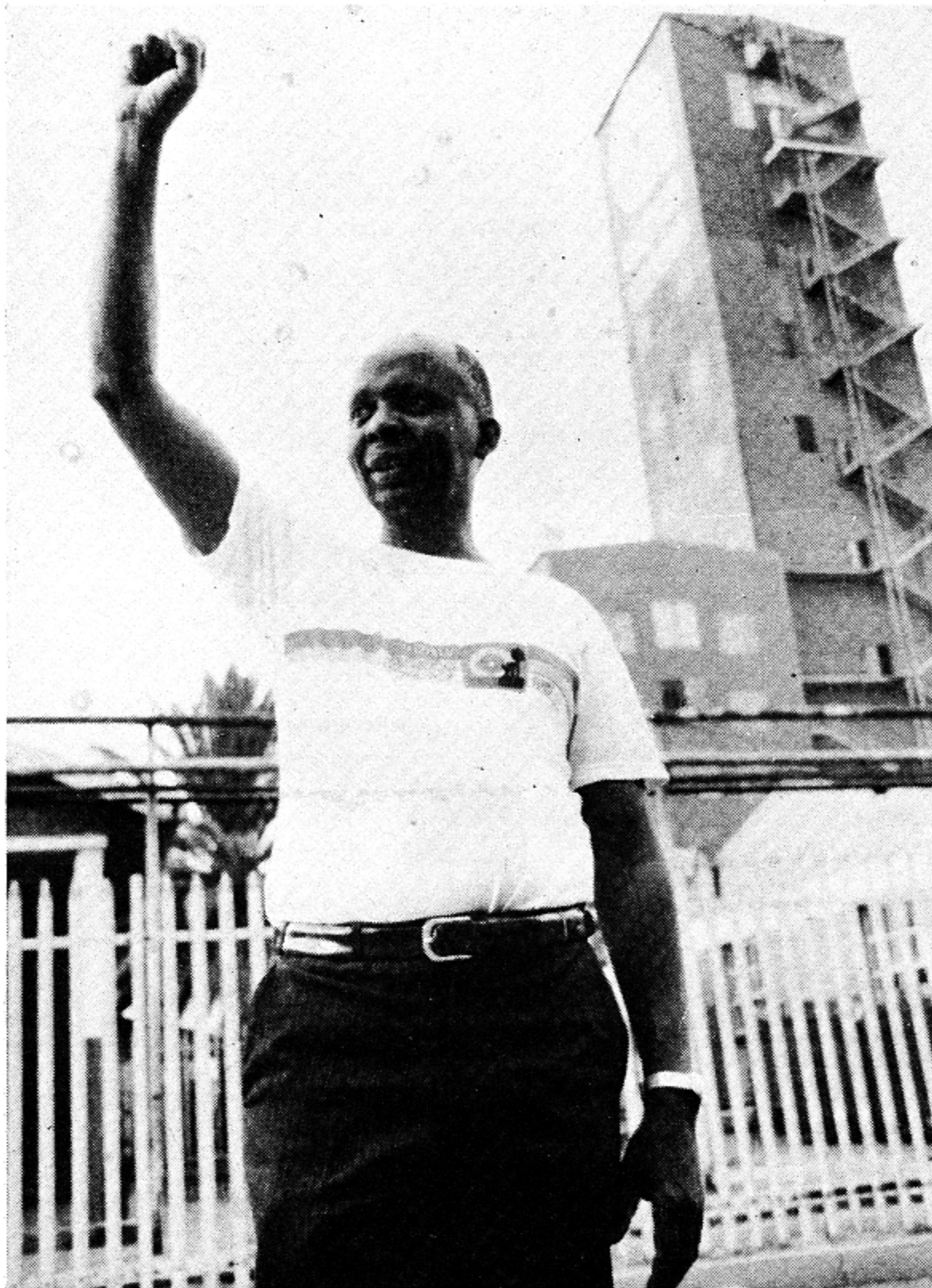
This thing was very hot. Everybody was prepared. I was doing night-shift that week. We knocked off Saturday morning. That Saturday we were in the shebeens discussing this thing.

## 'We only wanted to talk but the police beat us up'

On Sunday I don't know when I fell asleep but I was woken up at night by people shouting outside. My mother came and said people were knocking at the door and on the windows. I peeped through the window and they shouted, hey pulled me out to join them. They searched the house — they didn't want any men to remain in the houses. The sound of people banging on the doors was all around. There were a lot of people in the streets. We all went down the big street, to the police station.

Then someone shouted, 'They are coming!' and behind us there were a lot of jeeps that were infamous during that time. The police were armed with sjamboks and kieres. They also had big trucks. The S A Police and the municipal police together tried to disperse us. But when they came to us the people said, 'No.' We told them we didn't want to fight, we only wanted to talk. But the police beat us up, chasing people who ran in all directions. I ran home.

The next morning I woke up at five o'clock because I



Petrus Tom outside the African Cables factory where he used to work

## As seen by Petrus Tom

'My message to the working class is that nobody will liberate you except yourselves. Don't give your struggle to intellectuals, academics and other organisations who do not have the workers' interests at heart, who want to further their aims at the expense of the workers.' So ends 'My Life Struggle', the latest in Ravan's Worker Series. 'My Life Struggle' is the life story of Petrus Tom who is the Metal and Allied Workers Union's organiser in Vereeniging. The book spans 50 years of South Africa's rich political history. In it Petrus Tom speaks about the Anti-Pass campaign in the 60's, joining SACTU, and finally his experiences in MAWU. Here, from the book, is Petrus Tom's account of the Sharpeville massacre.

was on day shift and had to board the six o'clock bus to work. I found that there were no buses. People were busy preaching that today we would not go to work. A big crowd gathered at the bus-stop. People were making sure that no-one would work that day.

We went to the Sharpeville police station. When we got into the station yard the police locked the gates. The leader went to

talk to the police. He told them that we had come to offer ourselves for arrest for not having passes. He reported to us that the police were still waiting for instructions from their seniors. The people started singing then and surrounded the police station. The people were excited but not angry; women and children were also there.

The police blocked the main street and would not allow

people to use the big street. Even the vehicles were blocked. We were only on the western, northern and eastern sides of the police station. The south was controlled by the police. The white policemen were carrying sten guns. The black policemen had bayonets and sjamboks.

Some time later we saw aeroplanes in the sky. This attracted the people and made the crowd grow. Then we

saw the saracens coming from the southwestern part of Sharpeville. The aeroplanes were flying high and low. The people were throwing their hats to the aeroplanes. They thought the aeroplanes were playing with them. They didn't realise that death was near.

Some people were standing at the western gate of the police station. Police asked them to make way for the saracens. A plainclothes policeman was driving a grey car. He took cooldrinks from the boot and gave them to the policemen. They were chatting amongst themselves while we were busy singing.

I don't know what caused the police to shoot. But immediately after the plainclothes policeman went back to his colleagues the shooting began. We heard only one sound and couldn't see anyone standing next to the yard. People fell on their backs, sides and stomachs. People were lying all over. Both on the eastern and western sides people were trying to run away.

## 'Only when they saw the blood did they see that the police meant business'

Fortunately for me they could not shoot on the side where I was standing. That is how I managed to get away. People were running in all directions in the townships. Some couldn't believe that people had been shot, they thought that they had heard fire crackers. Only when they saw the blood and dead people, did they see that the police meant business.

There were ambulances from all over as far as Baragwanath and trucks were taking the people who had been shot dead. People were busy loading the corpses onto the trucks. Those who were hurt were taken to Vereeniging Hospital and Baragwanath under police escort.

People started crying. Some were asking what had happened. Many were looking for their relatives. Nobody went to work on the second day. They couldn't go to work without knowing where their relatives were, whether they were dead or hurt. Many managed to escape with bullet wounds. But when they went to Vereeniging hospital they were arrested immediately. The leaders of the pass campaign were all arrested; the police knew them all. But they were not hurt in the shooting. Ordinary people got hurt and killed.

'My Life Struggle' is available from the FOSATU Printing Unit, P O Box 18109, Dalbridge 4014 or from Ravan Press, P O Box 31134, Braamfontein 2017. Normal price R5, Workers' price R3,50.