

PART
FOURTEEN:
RESISTANCE
DURING
THE 50'S
AND 60'S

The making of the
WORKING

In the last issue of FOSATU Worker News we saw how the black working class in the towns grew rapidly between 1936-1946. We also saw how a large number of strikes broke out between 1941-1946, and how the trade union federation, CNETU, grew to 158 000 strong.

These were not the only signs of discontent and militancy among black workers. In the townships workers were faced with worsening conditions. Food and other essentials were in short supply because of the war. Many traders both white and black used this as an excuse to push prices up. Also, housing was extremely scarce. During the war the number of blacks living permanently in the towns increased by more than twice. In Port Elizabeth, for example, it grew from 9 000 in the late 1930's to 35 000 in 1945. In Springs (on the East Rand) it rose from 10 000 in 1939 to 33 000 in 1951. The same thing was happening all over southern Africa, but nowhere was any new housing being built for blacks. As a result people lived in terribly overcrowded conditions, often with 20 people living in shacks in the backyard of a single house.

These difficulties produced a number of spontaneous popular movements among workers in different parts of South Africa. Food committees were organised to try and stop traders hoarding food and pushing prices up. The Communist Party of South Africa was very active in these. A little later squatter movements began to spread. The best known of

these was the squatter movement led by James 'Sofazonke' Mpanza. He led 8 000 homeless people onto open land near Orlando (Soweto) where they built shacks. Because there was no other housing for them, the Johannesburg Council was forced to allow them to stay there. Squatter movements arose in many other towns in South Africa, for example in Cape Town, Durban, Benoni, Alberton, Alexandra and Pretoria. In most cases the local authority was unable to evict the squatters from the land on to which they had moved until they had provided housing for them. It was in this way that most of the modern black townships were built during the mid-late 1950's, for example Katlehong, KwaThema, Daveyton, Mamelodi, KwaMashu.

Increases in prices also led to other forms of resistance. Several times in the 1940's attempts were made to increase bus fares. This happened in 1940, 1942, 1943 and in 1944 in Alexandra. Each time the people of Alexandra boycotted the buses for several weeks and walked the 14 kilometres to Johannesburg. Each time the bus company and the City Council were forced to give in and keep the bus fares at the old price. These successful boycotts in Alexandra acted as an inspiration to people in other townships who faced similar problems, so that boycotts soon spread to Orlando, Pretoria and elsewhere.

In these movements workers took action by themselves to solve their griev-

ances. In most cases they left the leadership of the ANC and other political parties far behind them. This was a problem because there was no political party or trade union organisation that could link these local protests together into a national movement. Bus and other boycotts began, mobilised people, and then died away. They rarely left any organisation behind them to fight other struggles; nor did they link up with other struggles in other places.

But the national political organisations — particularly the ANC — were beginning to change. In 1943 the Youth League was formed by young radicals in the ANC. They believed that the popular militancy emerging in these local struggles should be developed, directed and coordinated by the ANC so as to present a serious challenge to the State. Many of the older, more conservative leadership of the ANC were unwilling to go in this direction. However, by 1949, Youth League members — Mandela, Tambo and Sisulu — were elected to the National Executive of the ANC and a 'Programme of Action' was adopted. This committed the ANC to boycotts, strikes, disobedience and non cooperation in support of African rights.

One reason why the Youth League was able to succeed in 1949 was the election of the Nationalist government to power in 1948. The Nationalists were committed to a programme of apartheid, which promised to impose much stricter influx control on Africans, to exclude all

blacks from central political power, and to divide the different races completely into their separate 'group areas'. This programme represented an attack on all race groups and all classes in South Africa, and was responsible for the formation of the Congress Alliance. The Congress Alliance was made up of congresses for each of the different race groups together with the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

The various repressive laws which the Nationalists introduced were responsible for many protests and campaigns, for example the



National stay-at-home on 26 June 1950, the Defiance Campaign in 1952 and the Congress of the People Campaign in 1954-5, out of which the Freedom Charter was born.

However, there was another part to the Nationalists programme besides simple



Alexandra township in 1947



Edenvale shanty township before its removal to Thembisa



Torchlight parade in Durban during the late 50's

division and repression. They knew that the industry had grown so fast and so big, that a large African working class was in the towns to stay. In order to discipline the working class and to make it stable and ready to work in the factories some major problems had to be solved. No

healthy or stable life was possible without family housing, and no stable workforce was possible without a stable family life. So, the government gave millions of pounds in loans to build cheap 'matchbox' houses for blacks. However, the government expected these loans

to be paid back by the black people themselves, so rents were much higher than they could afford. Also many of the new townships were 10 or more kilometres away from the factories so bus fares were high. All this caused a new wave of protest by black workers. From 1955 the number of wage strikes increased sharply. In 1957 new bus boycotts broke out all over the country (against fare increases). This was followed in 1957 by a one pound a day campaign which was called by a workers' conference of the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

The second problem that had to be solved for the industrialists was youth crime and gangs. Township children who had not been to school were usually very 'undisciplined' workers. It was for this reason that Bantu Education was introduced — to provide schooling of an inferior kind and so discipline children for work.

These various laws and actions of the Nationalist government provoked widespread popular resistance, much of it led or coordinated by the ANC. As a result the ANC became a popular mass based national movement. However, not all the campaigns were successful. The Bantu Education boycott, for example was poorly coordinated and was only effective in Port Elizabeth and on the East Rand. Other campaigns like the 1958 stayaway only mobilised people in a few areas. In many campaigns the ANC seems to have concentrated on protest and demonstration, without developing strong grass roots organisation. A major setback was the failure to put Nelson Mandela's 'M' plan into practice after the 'mobilising' success of the Defiance Campaign. This would have divided the townships up into street, zones and ward committees, and would have given the ANC a strong, democratic grass

roots structure. The idea was to get away from 'the old methods of bringing about mass action through public mass meetings, press statements and leaflets' and to move towards more organised action. However, apart from Port Elizabeth this never happened. This was partly due to the continuous arrests and repression of ANC leaders.

The failure to put the 'M' plan into action was probably one reason why so many migrants and people who had recently arrived in the towns were not mobilised by the ANC, because these were difficult groups to mobilise by any other means. It also made it easier for the government to repress and disorganise the ANC through arrests and detentions (and in the end to ban it in 1960). Without this strong organisation in the townships it was left to SACTU in the factories to mobilise many ordinary working people. It is to SACTU we turn in the next issue.



Pimville residents watch their homes being demolished

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