

Review: The Struggle for South Africa

R Davies, D O'Meara, and S Dlamini, The struggle for South Africa. A reference guide to movements, organisations and institutions, (two volumes), London, 1984.

This is a very important reference work for the forces of opposition in South Africa. It is not a reference work in the style of the collected documents by Karis and Carter; it is, as the authors state, a book concerned with the question of power.

The basic reference material, or object of research, is the numerous organisations on the side of the capitalist class and its supporting strata and those on the side of the oppressed and exploited; the organisations involved in struggle either to maintain or change the present system of class domination. The analytical approach to these organisations "assumes from the outset that various changing forms of national oppression and racism are organically linked with, and have provided the fundamental basis for, the development of a capitalist economy in (SA)". (p2)

VOLUME ONE: THE STRUCTURES OF DOMINATION

This volume begins with an historical survey in four essays, each tracing the origins of racial capitalism from 1652 through to the period of Grand Apartheid (1948 to 1972) to end with an assessment of the Apartheid State in the Southern African region in the 1980s. The chapters devoted to "Capitalist ruling class: major forces and economic organisations", deserve a special note. Here is a useful and resourceful compendium of the major monopolies dominating the Southern African economy including the state sector corporations. While significant data - such as the value of total assets; the corporate structures of major institutions like Anglo-American, Sanlam, Anglo-Vaal, Volkskas - is compiled and presented, the primary focus locates these interests in their political and historical context.

"Moderating Nationalist Party extremism":

It is fascinating to learn of Anglo-American's manoeuvre, "practically giving the General Mining and Finance Corporation (Gencor)

to Federale Mynbou, the mining subsidiary of Sanlam", a move which was intended to moderate "some of the extremist policies of the Nationalist Party" and to "arrest the crisis of confidence confronting South African capitalism following the Sharpeville massacre". (pp28, 66) These economic manoeuvres and the well-known political alliances of the various capitalist corporations have been well-researched and documented. This is especially true in their treatment of Afrikaner capitalist enterprises, where the work of O'Meara's Volkskapitalisme is succinctly reproduced. In the chapter on the political organisations of the ruling class; the annotated chronology of class alliances and electoral pacts, which were crucial for the capitalist classes in finding a stable basis for government in the period 1910 to 1948, is most welcome. There are similarly useful breakdowns of the repressive state apparatuses and the coercive role of the legal and judicial systems.

The homelands: repression or social control?

The bantustans are analysed as a further elaboration on the repressive state apparatuses. This section is less satisfactory and reveals a tendency to rely on generalisations based on limited statistical data. The repressive role of the bantustans is not contested, but there is a tendency to see this as their only role. This stems from the assumption that the existence of the entire "collaborative black bourgeoisie...rests on the maintenance of apartheid". (p198) The real situation here is undoubtedly more complex: a large part of the "homelands bourgeoisie" is in fact recruited from the rural petit bourgeoisie whose political links with, and domination of the rural locations long precedes the post-Verwoerdian policies of promoting "Bantu self-government".

Similarly the authors overestimate the extent of urbanisation, or rather the depopulation of the reserve areas, by quoting the figure of a decline from "50% in 1921 to 8% in 1951" in the number of "economically active" Africans officially classified as peasants. (p201) It has long been pointed out that this "dramatic decline" is associated with a change in the census classification of rural African women, who were from some point in the 1940s no longer regarded as "economically active", even though it is well-known that they carry the burden of large portions of agricultural production in the reserves.

It would have been more instructive for the readers if the authors had recognised that hundreds of thousands of migrant workers,

even today, let alone in 1948, still retain access, in some form or another, to means of production in rural areas. It is at this level where the rural petit bourgeoisie ensures control and domination over the rural population through their control over conditions of reproduction of the rural households. The class position of the homeland regimes extends beyond dependence on the Apartheid state for survival, and finds its expression in the material reality of a multitude of rural households in these regions. Such a perspective would be a more tangible point of departure for those in the national liberation movement who, faced with Buthelezi's Inkatha and homeland governments, realise these are obstacles which cannot be dismissed as mere "puppets" or as "instruments of the Apartheid State". Their control and domination rests on an active material basis which has to be challenged.

VOLUME TWO: ORGANISATIONS OF THE OPPRESSED

Generalisations and the tendency to abstractionism pervades much of Volume Two. These are a reflection of political position and can be seen in the authors' treatment of the working class and its organisations.

In the introductory essay Davies et al paint a vivid picture of the rising tide of militancy amongst black workers in the period of expansion in secondary industry during the 1940s. They claim that under the leadership of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) "almost 40% of the African industrial workers were unionised" and that the CNETU's membership rose to 158,000 in 119 affiliated unions. They claim further that as a result of "militant action" real earnings of workers rose by almost 50% in the period 1939-48. (p17) The romanticisation of the labour history of the 1940s was initiated by O'Meara's work on the African mine-workers' strike of 1946. He maintained:

The rapid growth of trade unionism in the period under review (1931-1946) reflected the growing consciousness of the African proletariat - a recognition of the need for independent class action... [T]he ANC failed to recognise the alignment of class forces in South African capitalism...The unions on the other hand, effectively questioned the system of capitalist exploitation based on a racially defined labour force." (1975: p154)

These historical inaccuracies are continued throughout their assessment of the 1950s and 1960s. The figure of 158,000 members in 119 unions, has come under scrutiny in recent research. Stein

has shown that a key CNETU union such as the Non-European Confederation of Iron, Steel and Metalworkers, which claimed a membership of 18,000 in 1948, in fact had 96 paid-up members! A year later the union was non-existent. (South African Economic History Seminar Guide, UCT, 1985: pp1-11) Similarly the African mineworkers' strike was forced on a reluctant leadership through unofficial actions by the membership. While leaders of some of the strongest unions, such as the African Commercial and Distributive Workers' Union leader, Daniel Koza, were expelled for their disagreement with the "no-strike" pledge made to the Smuts government by union leaders aligned with the Communist Party.

The authors emphasise the leading role of the "official" organisations while neglecting to analyse the real contradictions which produced working class resistance and struggle. In these struggles provisional or "grassroots" leadership emerged to take the unenviable leading role, only to find the leaders of the recognised organisations in the labour movement a step or two behind, and as often debating whether or not to catch up.

The ANC: a slow transformation

This work recognises the "slow transformation" of the ANC "from a moderate, petit-bourgeois pressure group into a mass national liberation movement". (p285) For the authors, the "mass politics" of the Defiance Campaign is unproblematic, leading in linear fashion to the Freedom Charter; the formation of SACTU; the stay-aways; the pound-a-day campaign; the treason trial; bannings, repression and the turn to armed struggle. (p26) But there is no analysis of the problematic relationship between SACTU and the ANC which existed despite SACTU's providing a large part of the workpower for the various campaigns, so eloquently described by Davies et al. The ANC was in continued conflict over issues such as: changing the demands of the 1958 stay-away for a national minimum wage and the abolition of the pass laws to "Away with the Nats", in an attempt to try to influence the 1958 (white) general election; and the resort to armed struggle which made it difficult for the SACTU unions to organise. These areas should have been investigated in any assessment of the national liberation movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

The assumption of a problem-free "mass movement" rests on the premise that there is unity of interest amongst all classes of the oppressed in "getting rid of the Apartheid state"; an assump-

tion which, within South Africa today, is under increasing scrutiny but which is not questioned in the text under review.

The acceptance by the authors of the theory of "internal colonialism" as adopted by the South African Communist Party and other groups in the liberation movement, comes to grief over one all-important question: the role and independence of the working class in the national liberation movement. The working class, not the "other class forces", has been the major force and constituency in the campaigns of the ANC. It is only through the placing of working class interests at the head of the political agenda, that a real mass movement is being built in South Africa. This mass movement is directed at the heart of the capitalist class, and carries the Apartheid state away with that class, the reverse of the process envisaged by those propogating the theory of internal colonialism for whom "lasting emancipation" remains but a "possibility". (p289)

Class unity and populism

In their assessment of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) the authors show a keen critical insight: they are critical of statements by the general secretary that FOSATU should restrict itself to point-of-production issues in order to build and consolidate class unity and independence. Quoting the general secretary, they point out that the independent trade union movement is weak in relation to the number of unorganised workers in the workforce. In a recent article O'Meara and Davies explain their position on FOSATU and the independent trade unions:

The logic of Foster's [FOSATU General Seceretary] argument is to defer alliance between the proletariat and other oppressed classes until the working class consolidates its working class organisation. This implies a retreat into trade unionism." (1984)

The authors do not identify the "other oppressed class forces" nor their interest in "alliances". Neither have they recognised the real divisions within the working class and the difficult task of building class unity as a prerequisite for transforming and democratising of the entire social structure. This leads from the idealisation by the authors of the historical effectiveness and extent of worker militancy in the earlier period.

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Community organisation: "dynamic" or in decline

The major flaw in the discussion of "Community and Civic Associations" is the fact that it pre-dates the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the crystallisation of different political tendencies around and within its organisations. The Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (CAHAC), is described as the "largest and certainly the most dynamic and militant of the community organisations in the Western Cape". (p383) More recently one would have to explain why less than half the stated affiliates turned up for its last annual general meeting. CAHAC is non-racial, but there is also a separate Western Cape Civic Association, a body with African members only. In fact, CAHAC and most other community organisations in the Western Cape are in decline. The reasons for this stem from a failure to consolidate, train and extend the mass base. This is compounded by the failure of community organisations to engage consistently in mass organisational work around concrete issues and the premature absorption of these organisations into national political structures which threaten the limited organisational gains that have been made.

The Struggle for South Africa is a work of undoubted importance both in its conception and research insights. Volume One synthesises important historical and contemporary social issues. The analysis in Volume Two is inevitably rooted in the current debate in the liberation movement. The presence of such a debate is to be welcomed; to be useful it must involve a careful rendition and assessment of the historical legacy of the liberation movement and its organisations.

(Zakkie Achmat, November 1985)