

## BOOK REVIEWS

### EDDIE ROUX: TIME LONGER THAN ROPE

*by Luli Callinicos*

There has been an increasing interest shown in *Time Longer than Rope* in spite of its many drawbacks. For one thing, most of the book was written decades ago and is therefore partly outdated. Again, although it is sub-titled *A history of the Black man's struggle for freedom*, it is neither altogether a history nor was it written from a Black man's point of view. Rather, the book is *about* Black opposition, first, to the colonials' conquest and dispossession of the land and then to the suppression of the emerging working class.

Nevertheless, the book makes interesting and informative reading, and in the absence of a Black history, particularly a labour history, this book is a substitute, however incomplete and partial. (Class and Colour in South Africa by H.J. and R.E. Simons is banned and the new Oxford History of South Africa does not deal with labour history). Besides, the core of the book which deals with the inter-war years, that era of the making of a white labour aristocracy and the suppression of the Black trade unions, is a period of Eddie Roux's active years in the Communist Party and has a vitality normally missing from history books. In spite of the strides made recently in our historiography, re-interpreting the old colonial history, and in the case of the new Marxist school, going beyond the liberal interpretation, much remains neglected. *Time Longer than Rope* is still well worth reading.

The book falls roughly into three parts. It starts with a brief sketch of pre-colonial history, then moves into an interpretation of 19th century South Africa, largely in the liberal tradition of Macmillan and de Kiewiet. In this survey, an attempt is made to point out some Black heroes - it is interesting to note that this section, according to Roux's preface, started as a series of lessons for African workers in night schools during the 1930's. (Ironically, after 40 years, the need for a lucid workers' history still remains).

Roux relates the tragic tale of two heroes, Makana and Nonqause. Makana tried to fight the steady erosion wrought on his society by the Christian missionaries by founding a counter-religion for the Xhosa people. Nonqause, the "Black Joan of Arc" was a visionary thrown up by the circumstances of her time - her message would not have been relevant otherwise. The disastrous cattle-killing of 1857, like other milenarian movements, was a last-ditch response of people trapped by the realities of the power structure. Both these folk heroes lived through a time of conquest and dispossession. They tried to play their part in blocking the drive towards the eventual creation of a landless proletariat.

The era of military resistance was almost over by the end of the 19th century. Industrialisation in South Africa had already begun. The discovery of the mines, the imposition of forced labour taxes and the South African version of migrant labour was steadily depriving the rural peasantry of an adequate means of subsistence from the land. The struggle was gradually being transferred from a conflict over the land to a struggle over wages.

The second section of Eddie Roux's history is semi-biographical and has "a personal and perhaps not altogether unprejudiced flavour". Roux's analysis of the Rise and fall of the Industrial and Commercial Union of the twenties for example, focuses a great deal on the personality of its founder and leader, Kadalie. He describes the "favourable circumstances" of poverty and discontent during the time of inflation after the war. The dock workers' strike in 1919 brought its first members. Strikes and the ICU spread, punctuated by periodic massacres of workers at open-air meetings. Thus, for example twenty one people were killed at a demonstration in Port Elizabeth in 1920, five killed and twenty four wounded at Bloemfontein in 1923. As the ICU gained ground, whites became alarmed and a sedition clause was inserted in the Native Administration Act. The systematic persecution of the ICU created an internal crisis. The militant strategists, who agitated for strikes,

pass-burning and tax boycotts clashed with the "hamba kahle" (go carefully) advocates. Roux describes how at this point "large numbers of private individuals witnessed with increasing nervousness this manifestation of the growing will to unity among the Bantu". He adds sarcastically, "It was amazing how, almost overnight, many Europeans, hitherto seemingly indifferent to the plight of the Africans, now emerged as philanthropists, became 'interested in the poor Natives' and wished to do something to help them ...They saw in the ICU a powerful influence for good, if only those extremists and communists who were leading the organisation astray could be eliminated".

He goes on to describe how the establishment attempted to diffuse the ICU by co-opting it into institutions where it could be controlled more easily. "The ICU... freed of its red incubus, could affiliate to the International Federation of Trade Unions". With the prospect of recognition and status, Kadalie initiated the move to expel the communists from the ICU.

This controversy was one which was to be repeated during the Pan Africanist breakaway from the ANC in the fifties and by subsequent Black movements in the sixties and seventies against multi-racial organisations. Like the Christian Church, one of the primary weaknesses of the Communist Party was that it had an imported ideology. And as the Soviet Union was its solitary reference, it had a differential and therefore an uncritical attitude towards the decision of the Comintern. Roux gives several examples of how the SACP suppressed its own creative response to local conditions, such as the squashing of the "League of African Rights" on receiving directives from "Moscow". The Communist Party therefore laid itself wide open to the charge that it was "white-dominated", although most of their members were Black.

The long-term result of the expulsion of the communists from the ICU, Roux maintains, was the removal of that vital ginger group which challenged the ICU, not only on policy issues but on ad-

ministration as well. "The radicals ceased not, in and out of season, to demand popular control of funds and stricter supervision of the finances".

In spite of the removal of the communists, persecution of the ICU continued. Its reformist friends failed to save it and over the next decade, through mismanagement and inefficiency, the movement fizzled out. Roux concludes: "The most tragic feature is that the opportunity (Kadalie) thus squandered was unique in the history of the Black man's struggle for freedom in this country. Black leaders are needed. Who can doubt that they will arise? But it may be that never more will it fall to the lot of any leader to enjoy a trust so absolute as was given to Kadalie. Remembering the ICU, the Africans are wary. No single mass movement of the Black workers in South Africa has ever even remotely approached the power that was in the ICU". In laying so much stress on individual factors in the decline of the ICU, however, Roux neglects to examine the structural constraints of South African society on the mobilisation of African workers during those relatively early years of industrialisation. The ICU was too weak to assert itself against the combined strength of White government and capital, plus the collaboration of the White workers, who seemed to lose no opportunity to scab against the Black workers.

After the debacle of backing the white workers, in the hope that the 1922 strike was a further step towards the solidarity of the working class, and particularly when it became quite clear that the new Nat-Labour Pact government was as reactionary as the Smuts government had been, more and more communists moved towards the idea that Blacks were "the real proletariat" of this country. The picture that emerges of the Communist Party from Roux's lively description of their activities is of a band of energetic and enthusiastic propagandists. In 1930 they managed to lead a huge, combined demonstration of Black and White unemployed, who attempted to enter the Carlton Hotel and the Rand Club shouting, "We want bread!" They started night schools and literacy classes, held weekly

demonstrations outside Black townships and in town squares, staged demonstrations which were regularly attacked by irate whites, plain clothes policemen and dogs, often ending in wholesale arrests, deportation and even death. Communists participated in the 1930 anti-pass campaign, put up candidates for elections amidst determined government persecution, changed their newspaper from the White-oriented *S.A. Worker* to *Umsebenzi*, fought campaigns against the Lodger's Tax (lodgers' permits), the "pick-up-vans" and the Fascist Grey Shirt. These campaigns were not always initiated by communists, but wherever there was opposition, they were optimistically and dedicatedly there. In 1936 the non-European Railway and Harbour Workers' Union was formed and two years later other African trade unions were formed by communists.

In the process, government machinery became more efficient at containing their activities. Throughout the reading of the book, one is struck by a sense of *déjà vu*. The weapons used by the state to crush opposition before the Second World War were taken out, dusted and used again by the National Party to crush the African National movements in the fifties and sixties.

For instance, the Hostility Clause to the Native Amendment Act in 1927 "aimed ostensibly at agitators who sought to create feelings of hostility between black and white" was used mostly against the ICU communists. The Riotous Assemblies Act was amended in 1929 to give the Minister of Justice the power to banish those who, in his opinion, were responsible for causing "feelings of hostility" between the black and white races. The Natal Native Code was amended in 1932 to empower the Governor General (in practice the Minister of Native Affairs) to imprison without trial for three months any "Native considered dangerous to the public peace" and to re-arrest him at the end of every three months, if the Governor General deemed it fit.

The third part of the book deals with the era of mass movements, that period of resuscitation, of

passive resistance, boycotts, stay-at-homes. With the decline of the unions in the forties, especially after the miners' strike in 1946, and the alliance of South African Congress of Trade Unions to the ANC in the fifties, emphasis shifted to the workers as consumers and in their numerical power. But the basic themes remained: the chronic housing shortages, police persecution of pass-law offenders and farm convict labour, endorsements out of the urban areas, migratory labour, the reserves of labour held in the rural areas now called Bantustans - old wine in new bottles.

This section of the book was written at a time when Roux had withdrawn from effective politics but remained an interested observer. It is the period of the rise and the crushing of the African National movements, the Unity Movement, and their withdrawal underground. Again, in the absence of any other easily available book on this section of South African history, Eddie Roux's book has become a popular reference book.

These last few chapters were written years after the rest of the book and have a distinctly "liberal" flavour. Considerable emphasis is placed on apartheid, for example. It is seen to be the villain of history. "Faced with opposition within and without their borders, the Afrikaner nationalists now cultivate a back-to-the-wall or laager mentality, and they seek to involve the whole country in a campaign of defence against aggression from without". This interpretation ignores the English-Afrikaans collaboration in maintaining the unequal structure of South African society.

I have said that the book is liberal, rather than Marxist: at the time of first publication, Roux had for more than a decade dissociated himself from the Communist Party and was later to join the Liberal Party, although he had subsequently to resign as a "named" person. "If I were asked if I were still a communist and a Marxist I would say 'no'. Marx, I believe, has contributed largely to our understanding of society. Marxism goes wrong, I think, when it ceases to be an empirical study

and becomes a dogmatic creed...In South Africa the communists did pioneer work in organising the oppressed people at a time when members of the other creeds and parties were not interested, and history will remember them for this". Like many other sensitive and committed South Africans of the twenties and thirties, joining the Communist Party, for Eddie Roux, was probably a gut reaction to the racist exploitation of a crude colonial society. If there had been a Liberal Party at the time, many would have joined it instead.

Nevertheless, Roux's lack of a socialist perspective is surprising. There seems to be little evidence of the fifteen years of communist influence in his conceptualisation of history. The Marxist tools of analysis, such as the use of historical materialism or the examination of social and economic structures are missing from this (at times) almost episodic account. In so far as there is a theme, it is mostly confined to references to the development of the racist tradition of white colonials.

Clearly, it is necessary to go beyond racism. However, a man must be judged against his time. First published in 1948, this is a pioneering work, and what is remarkable is that we have progressed so little since Eddie Roux wrote this book.

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