

"THE BUSES SMELL OF BLOOD": THE EAST LONDON BOYCOTT

Mark Swilling*

In July 1983, the East London working class decided to boycott the local bus service to protest against an 11% fare increase. Although state repression in the area has left many dead, hundreds in detention, and just as many wounded, the highly politicised working class has conducted this struggle with confidence, courage and a high degree of unity and cohesion. These struggles threw up new forms of working class organisation, largely ignored by the mass media, but which have significant implications for the present balance of political forces in South Africa.

Background

East London's workers are unique in many ways. Firstly, they earn by far the lowest wages in South Africa. Secondly, there is a higher proportion of africans in the workforce (78%) than in other areas (Capetown - 17%, Durban - 53%), and thirdly, there is a higher proportion of africans in skilled and semi-skilled jobs.(1) In short, the East London working class is unique not only because it receives particularly low wages, it also has a greater capacity to engage in struggle. There are a large number of workers in semi-skilled jobs with considerable. As they are all Xhosa speakers they share the same ethnic identity. This means ethnic divisions are not an obstacle for mass organisation. In addition to this, although workers share the same conditions of racial oppression with the petty bourgeoisie, the possibility of a consolidated

* Mark Swilling is a lecturer in the Department of Political Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

article

alliance between the two is negligible. The petty bourgeoisie is relatively small and tends to be a supportive class for the Ciskei ruling class. Its interests are rooted in a rigid patronage system that is based on the chiefs and institutionalised in the ruling Ciskei National Independence Party (CNIP).⁽²⁾ Consequently, its political responses tend to be conservative and at times violently anti-working class.

The large majority of East London's workers live in Mdantsane. This is a dormitory township that is located within the Ciskei, some 20km from East London. Consequently those who live there and work in East London are officially known as "frontier commuters". Mdantsane was the product of over twenty years of bitter struggle between the poverty stricken residents of East London's townships and the state. By the late 1950s, after a decade of increasing dissatisfaction amongst africans, and a number of official enquiries by both the local and central state, a plan was devised to establish a dormitory township on the outskirts of East London.

At the same time the 1959 Promotion of Self-Government Act was passed. The creation of homeland states coincided with the need for a new township in East London. As a result, Mdantsane became a homeland township and not an urban location. This meant that it did not share the same features of the ordinary urban location. Major new innovations were introduced: greater stand sizes, provision for freehold title, developed local government structures, and relatively advanced amenities and services for a black South African township. All this did was to create a more sophisticated dormitory town despite the official claim that it was intended to be more self-sufficient.⁽³⁾ The encouragement of industrial and commercial development in Mdantsane has only begun in the last twelve months. In short, although one third of Ciskei's population lives in Mdantsane, it is a city that exists only to service East London's labour needs.

The Mdantsane population has certain significant features. Firstly, nearly half the working population is under the age of 30.(4) Secondly, when the township was built houses were arbitrarily allocated without regard for traditional, class, educational or sub-cultural distinctions. This contributed to the creation of a relatively homogeneous urban culture. This, however, needs to be qualified. In 1977 a survey found that 72% of the Mdantsane population had rural homes and that 30% still visited them on a weekly basis.(5) This close link between the rural and urban populations encourages the migration of the better educated younger people to the towns in search of employment. Finally, there is a dual communications network that is a typical characteristic of underdeveloped societies that are fairly urbanised. The oral modes of communication are just as influential as the mass media.(6) These features have affected the way the population has responded to the worst conditions of poverty and unemployment in South Africa.

The fact that a large proportion of the population live below the Household Subsistence Level(7), partly explains why East London has witnessed such intense and protracted struggles over wages in the last few years. However, with a 30-40% unemployment rate, the power of the trade unions is severely limited. It is in this context that we must understand why the organised working class has tended to take up issues outside the factory.

An attitude survey that was conducted in Mdantsane in July 1981 found that 70% of all the working class respondents identified transport as their most serious problem.(8) This was followed by crime (59%), housing (32%), educational facilities (19%) and services (17%). This contrasts drastically with the concerns of the petty bourgeois respondents (i.e. teachers, taxi drivers, traders and businessmen): 65% of this group identified crime and the general threat to property as their most serious problem. This was followed by the quality of the educational facilities (47%),

housing (44%), transport (36%), and services (7%). Transport is, therefore, a working class issue of primary importance. Transport for frontier commuters is the most important part of their lives outside the factory. As the Mdantsane bus boycott has shown, a grievance in this sphere can rapidly become a major political issue that exposes for all, the obvious link between their exploited position in the factory and where (and how) they are forced to live.

Under normal circumstances, 80% of Mdantsane's workers use the buses to go to work, 15% use the trains and 5% go by car.(9) The Mdantsane bus system was designed exclusively for the daily transportation of labour to and from East London's employers. It has no social function within Mdantsane whatsoever. It does not transport people from zone to zone for social purposes (see Appendix A). All it does is transport people to a central terminus where they can board another bus to East London, the station or even another zone (although this is rare). In addition, the main commercial centre of Mdantsane surrounds this terminus.

The Bantu Transport Services Act of 1957 provides for the subsidisation of transport costs for bona fide workers. This means that the bus company coordinates its routes to cater primarily for workers travelling to and from the industrial areas in order to get the maximum benefit from the subsidy. Although employers complain that they have to pay into the subsidy fund, it nevertheless guarantees them the delivery of their labour in bulk to conveniently located points.

The travail of travelling to work usually begins before dawn. Workers have to walk on average for ten minutes on crime-ridden streets to reach the nearest busstop. They then catch a bus to the central terminus where they have to join long queues.(10) Every worker spends 2-3 hours a day travelling to and from work. Transport is a daily struggle experienced by nearly 25000 workers who are processed en masse through a single point twice a day and get compressed into 276 dirty unkempt

busses.(11) Matravers is correct when he concludes that "the public transport system becomes a service to employers and not to travellers".(12)

The Bus Company is called the Ciskei Transport Corporation (CTC). It is jointly owned by the Ciskei State and the Economic Development Corporation. Its top management are South African state functionaries and it is widely believed that Sebe is a director. It tends to run at a loss. This year it was envisaged that it would break even.(13) By October it had lost R1 million because of the boycott. Mdantsane's transport, as elsewhere in the country, is based on the spatial separation between community and workplace that forces the working class to travel the longest distances. In order to ensure the continuation of this racial form of reproduction, the state has tended to encourage the emergence of private monopolies and in some cases parastatals. This highly profitable industry and the long distance between community and workplace are the fundamental reasons why transport is such a crucial site of struggle for the working class.

The Boycott

The 11% increase was not the only cause of dissatisfaction with the bus service. There are days when commuters are left waiting for up to two hours. This means that either commuters risk arriving late at work, or else they are forced to spend extra money on a taxi to be on time. The buses themselves are dirty and broken windows are left unrepaired. The lack of bus shelters makes rainy days intolerable. A further grievance is that bus times do not always coincide with shift times.

It was this general situation of neglect and inefficiency that led the South African Allied Workers Union (Saawu) to take up the issue in 1980. Saawu used to hold meetings of several thousand people at a time in the East London city hall during that period. At one meeting, four demands were

article

drawn up by the workers which the union leadership was mandated to take to the CTC. These were: (i) the provision of bus shelters; (ii) the provision of tickets that could only be invalidated by the ticket clippers and not a weekly ticket that was paid for in full even if it was only used three times a week; (iii) students and pensioners should pay half the price; (iv) cushions must be put on the cold wooden benches. These demands were ignored.

The fare increases came into effect on the 13 July 1983. During the preceding two weeks the issue was extensively discussed amongst the organised workers and members of the political organisations. It was not, however, formally discussed at union meetings. A thousand people held a meeting in a church hall in Duncan Village on Sunday 10 July. The most significant feature of the type of organisational forms that began to emerge even at this stage, is that the unions, and especially Saawu were not involved. The meeting was organised by highly politicised workers who were certainly drawn from the ranks of Saawu, but they were not organisers or leading shop stewards. They came from a second level of leadership in Saawu's structures. A "Committee of Ten" was elected to represent the community's interests to the CTC. The committee was designed to represent "the community" which was defined as workers, the unemployed and students- with the workers in the majority.(14)

Although the committee included Saawu shop stewards, it did not represent the trade unions, nor did it include members of GWU (General Workers Union) or A/FCWU (African Food and Canning/Food and Canning Workers Union). The members of this committee were soon in detention however. Despite this, it provides us with a useful indication of which interests were dominant. Significantly the petty bourgeoisie was excluded. Unlike the transport committees of the 1950s and the Durban based Commuter Committees in 1982/83 radical petty bourgeois elements did not figure in the preparation and execution of the boycott. Similarly, the 1974-5

bus boycott in East London clearly had been led by petty bourgeois town councillors.

The Committee of Ten tried to meet CTC management on Monday 11th July. The CTC refused on the grounds that they had already talked to community leaders two months before the increases were announced. In fact they had consulted leading CNIP members, Ciskei Government officials, and Community Councillors in the South African townships like Duncan Village. As one worker put it: "the problem was that all the people who had been consulted do not use the buses".

A second mass meeting was held on Tuesday 12th in Duncan Village. About 3000 people attended. The CTC responses were unanimously rejected and a decision was taken to boycott the buses. What followed was a brilliant example of popular mobilisation. Charges of intimidation were to be made, (15) but found to be without basis. (16)

The strategy was to start boycotting from the following Monday. In the meantime those present on 12th July agreed to inform people about the boycott, even if this meant paying the higher fares for a few days. The irony, however, is that this only succeeded thanks to the CTC's refusal in 1980 to abandon the weekly ticket. The large majority of commuters buy weekly tickets every weekend. There are only two points they can buy them from - in the township or in town. It was therefore relatively easy to convince nearly 25000 commuters who were all going to feel the impact of the fare increases simultaneously, that they should not buy another weekly ticket. In addition there were also bus drivers who were encouraging the boycott. It is not surprising that the boycott was 80% effective by Tuesday, the second day of the boycott. (17)

In the first few days, commuters tended to walk to work. The burden of a 30 km walk was relieved by an emotionally explosive atmosphere of solidarity. As the defiant commuters headed towards town in what was in effect a mass demonstration, they sang freedom songs and taunted the police. At this stage police responses were confined to roadblocks and

article

body searches. However, the number of police soon swelled as reinforcements were brought in, and they became more brutal. This made walking in large numbers on the open road too dangerous. People began to use the trains.

The railway line runs along the outskirts of Mdantsane. It forms Ciskei's border with the rest of South Africa and it is run by South African Transport Services. The distance to the stations for the commuters varied from between 6 to 12 kms. The decision to use the trains was crucial for the boycott in two ways. Firstly train fares were marginally lower than the bus fares. On the 1st of August they were actually increased. However, there were no signs of protest. The commuters had made a rational choice between the lesser of two evils because they were rejecting an increase in the cost of their primary mode of transportation. Secondly, trains were the only legal public space available where people could meet and pass on information.

Ever since the boycott began it has been an extraordinary labour force that the trains took to East London each day. They crammed into carriages, lay on roofs, and balanced on couplings. Songs of defiance broke the early morning silence as the train wound its way through East London's sleepy white suburbs. Attempts by Sebe's thugs to prevent them from boarding the trains only contributed to this atmosphere of solidarity.

The trains were crucial for the co-ordination of the boycott in two respects. Firstly, workers were able to talk and discuss the immediate and long term significance of what was happening. Topics such as Ciskei's sham independence, trade unions, the causes of poverty and their power and rights as exploited workers were discussed. The significance of this style of organising is summed up by the response of a shop steward to the banning of all meetings in East London: "As long as the train is running up and down, that is our meeting place". Secondly, as the significance of the boycott penetrated into hitherto unaffected sectors of the working class, a

sense of unity and purpose began to emerge. People went out of their way to help one another over fences, onto moving trains, to protect and support each other and above all, to make sure the wounded were taken care of. It was this spirit of discipline and responsibility that one worker described in this way: "unity cannot be formed in a vacuum, it is born out of the struggle".

The Ciskei Government

The Mdantsane bus boycott has been an extremely violent confrontation between the state and the working class. Estimates of the number of people who have died range between 20 and 90.(18) Sebe's vigilantes have also beaten up and terrorised hundreds of people both in public and in the Sisa Dukashe Stadium in Mdantsane. Rape, illegal arrest, harrassment and abduction were the daily experiences of the Mdantsane population.(19) The number of people who have been detained runs into the hundreds and inexplicable disappearances are common-place. All the trade unions have had organisers and shop-stewards detained and they all report that several of their members have been killed or have disappeared. The National Automobile and Allied Workers Union(Naawu) claimed that six of its shop-stewards had died. The Ciskeien puppet regime's first and as yet only response to mass dissatisfaction is naked repression.

The most vicious perpetrators of the Ciskei regime's violent rule are the vigilantes. They are hired thugs brought in from the rural areas and let loose on the civilian population. They have been used before during the 1974 strikes and bus boycott and in the 1977 upheavals following the death of Steve Biko. In 1974 they were called the "green berets" after the notorious green caps that they wore. In 1983 they wore green armbands and on occasion white plastic bands around their ankles. They roamed the streets in groups of 3 to 5 and assaulted whoever they thought was boycotting the

article

buses. They also used two white Combi's with Ciskeian Government registration plates. The bulk of them came from the Eastern or Central rural areas of the Ciskei where they had been recruited from the ranks of a ruthless group of men that illegitimate tribal authorities use to prop up their rule. This employment provides a rather tenuous and unstable existence. These middle aged men with a measure of social status (albeit repressive) were promised land, money and jobs when they were recruited in late July into Sebe's army of thugs. They lived in the Sisa Dukashe stadium where they were looked after by former women hawkers. These women used to ply their trade at the bustops and so they had a material interest in making sure the boycott was broken.(20) The vigilantes were led by petty bourgeois elements in the township. The main leader was a former civil servant who used to edit the Government Newspaper (Umthobo). This man, who was charged for murder 18 months ago and is notorious for cruelty, was given the responsibility of administering justice. This amounted to arbitrary assault, torture, rape and harrassment of the innocent. This extra-legal coercion, however, did not break the spirit of the people. In the end it was the failure of the vigilantes to break the boycott that landed even the leaders of the vigilantes in detention.

The Ciskei regime intensified its attack on the boycotters from the 25 July. Road-blocks were set up where people were harrassed and sjambokked. Hundreds of cars were confiscated and commuters walking to work began to be seriously beaten up. At this stage large contingents of the army, police and vigilantes began using force to prevent people from using the trains. Five people were shot at the Jackson Station on the 25 July. On the 2 August, Sisa Faku, a sixteen year old school boy was killed by police. For the next few days his friends walked up and down the trains telling people about the murder.

Despite coercion and incarceration of the leadership

the boycott continued to gain momentum. There were three reasons for this: firstly the Palace Revolt; secondly, the 4 August massacre and thirdly the attitude of the employers. These factors are responsible for transforming the boycott from a short-term struggle over a bus-fare increase, into a protracted political struggle that has as its central focus the illegitimate Ciskei regime and its apartheid designers in Pretoria.

On 21 July, General Charles Sebe, Brigadier Tansager (Deputy Head of the Ciskei Intelligence Service), General Minaar (a South African Security Advisor) and another brother of Sebe (the Minister of Transport) were all detained. Since then a total of 17 top officials have been detained. The exact reasons for all this have never been revealed. What is known is that the South African Government knew what was happening and two South African policemen helped in the arrests.(21) Many in the Ciskei believe that there was an attempted coup. It was the detention of Charles Sebe, more than any of the others that was decisive in the minds of the people. Charles Sebe did not only concern himself with the army and police. He tended to involve himself directly in the affairs and personal problems of ordinary people. There was always a long queue outside his office of people who were coming to seek his help with rent problems, squabbles, eviction and so on. As well as being popular, he was the most important man in Sebe's patronage system; a status that made him the most feared man in the Ciskei. As far as the ordinary person was concerned his detention was an indication of the perverse incoherence and blatant hypocrisy of a state that claimed to embody their ethnically defined political aspirations.

The second major factor that exposed the true function of the homeland state, was the cataclysmic massacre of innocent commuters in the cold, early hours of August 4th. Police and soldiers formed an armed human blockade at the Mount Ruth and Edgeton Stations to prevent commuters from catching the

article

train. After hesitating, the crowd advanced a few paces. However, as the police drew their guns, the people stopped and in motionless horror shouted "Don't shoot, we are not at war". Without warning the police fired into the crowd. Witnesses have claimed that 15 were left dead and about 35 were wounded.(22) The fact that soldiers prevented people from going into the hospital's casualty ward to find the dead, that mortuaries were full and were known to allow undertakers to bury unidentified people, all contributed to the proliferation of rumours about the extent of the massacre.

The massacre had an electrifying effect on the political consciousness of the people. Within hours the boycott became a political struggle motivated by hatred of the Ciskei regime. The experience of a hotel cleaner captures the spirit of this. At the outset of the boycott in July, she complained of intimidation by organisers. As a member of the ruling Ciskei National Independence Party she was at first apathetic about the fare increases and reluctant to jeopardise her job. Her views changed radically after August 4th. The people who were killed were strangers to her, and yet she wept. She tore up her CNIP membership card and vowed never to use the buses again in her life.(23) A more politically conscious worker said: "After the shooting, what the people learnt was that the bus company and the Ciskei Government had joined". On the trains this summation of political and economic demands was reflected in the emergence of new slogans, "Away with Sebe, amandla!" became the main one.

On the same day as the shooting, the Ciskei regime responded to the new mood in Mdantsane by declaring a state of emergency. This provided for a curfew between 10.30 and 4.00 a.m., and prohibited more than four people from being together in a public place at any one time. Within a week, over 700 were arrested for violating curfew regulations although only 32 were convicted in that time.(24) This massive overloading of the prison system,

coupled with the detention of the Minister of Justice, threw the entire administration of justice into chaos. By the end of August over 1000 were languishing in detention with no immediate hope of a trial.(25)

The first organised collective response from the commuters was on National Women's Day. The 1000 people who met at a hall in Duncan Village, pledged to continue the boycott. Another meeting was called for August 13 in order to commemorate the dead. The politicised workers who were giving a measure of leadership to the boycott were aware of the need for clear direction in order to avoid demoralisation, and saw the need to gauge the mood of the people. The meeting, however, was banned. The banning order was directed at the so-called organisers of the meeting - GWU, AFCWU, Saawu and Cosas. There is no evidence to support the idea that the unions organised the meeting. As far as the Committee of Ten was concerned, 8 out of 10 of its original members were in detention anyway. Despite this the commuters maintained that the boycott would not end until all detainees had been released and the wounded and relatives of the dead compensated.

Management Responses

East London management responses have been ambiguous and inconsistent. A report compiled by the Community Resource and Information Centre and the Detainees Support Committee found that employers have at no stage assisted workers. They did not i) provide transport, ii) help workers financially, iii) make any direct or overt attempts to protest against the atrocities in Mdantsane.(26) Although, production has suffered,(27) the general attitude is that the boycott is political and hence it is not their business. The same rules concerning dismissal and late arrivals are applied, and negotiations with unions have continued oblivious to the new pressures with which they are faced. The problems in

article

Mdantsane are regarded as the affairs of another state and therefore outside of their sphere of responsibility.(28)

On the 2 August, all the unions arranged a meeting with employer representatives. Although only a few employers came to the meeting, union organisers felt that it was constructive because it gave them an opportunity to inform management about what was happening in a situation where the local newspaper, the Daily Despatch, is hopelessly inadequate as a source of information. Following the meeting, a well-known personnel manager stated that "Saawu appears to have tremendous support among the workers and the Sebe Government campaign against the union has only added to this following".(29) He went on to reject the Ciskei Government's claims that Saawu was behind the boycott, pointing to Saawu's repeated calls for negotiations with the bus company.

Students

A significant feature of the struggles in Mdantsane, is that pupils began to boycott classes in solidarity with their parents. The fact that pupils were killed on August 4 exacerbated an already uneasy situation in the schools. By the middle of August, 11 out of 12 schools were boycotting classes. Parents supported a schools boycott for the first time in the history of the Eastern Cape. The ideological orientation of the students was clearly one that was subordinate to working class struggles and not vice versa as so often happens(30).

The South African State

The South African state appeared overtly on the scene on 15 August when Pik Botha flew in to talk to Sebe. This was not the first high profile visit. Three weeks earlier, the Commissioner of Police, General Johann Coetzee and the head of the Security

police, Major-General Steenkamp, also visited their proteges in the Ciskei regime. The South African Government denied that these visits had anything to do with the unrest. Two days after Pik Botha arrived, the bus fare increases were halved. The commuters, however, were unimpressed. One of them explained, "five cents won't bring back the dead". This drove the CTC to retrench 30% of its staff in order to offset the loss of R1 million that it had incurred since the boycott began. The bus company was caught in the cross-fire. On the one hand Sebe refused on principle to allow it to alter the bus time-table and to cut down on the number of buses. On the other hand the fare reduction was a pathetic gesture in a situation that had gone far beyond an economic issue.

The intervention of South African officials came as no surprise to the people of Mdantsane, who were well aware that it is the South African state that is ultimately responsible for the deaths, torture and unrest. Despite this conviction, the people of Mdantsane have never resorted to collective violence. Stones were thrown and petrol bombs were used, but this did not go beyond a number of isolated incidents: according to Judy Parfit, there were 15 incidents involving the petrol bombing of the houses of CNIP officials and policemen. As the turbulent month of August reached a close, tension subsided, the vigilantes were muzzled, and the overt oppression of police presence was reduced. The commuters settled down to their long walks to the station and their early waking hours. Resistance had become habitual in Mdantsane.

Saawu Banned

In early September the Ciskei regime banned Saawu. Although 11 trade unions representing 350000 workers as well as some employers condemned the banning, the regime remained adamant. As far as the commuters were concerned, it made precious little difference to their bus boycott - Saawu was never organising it

article

in the first place, and it did not in any way affect their fundamental demands: to release all detainees and to negotiate with the Committee of Ten.

New Strategies

Towards the end of September the Mdantsane petty bourgeoisie began to make it's moves. The central bus terminus (point 11 on diagram - see Appendix A) is also the central commercial area of Mdantsane. There are numerous shops, trading stores and supermarkets that are owned by black business people and are well patronised by the commuters who pass through the terminus twice a day. The bus boycott is a serious threat to their businesses. This explains why some of them set up what was called the "Committee of Twenty". The chairperson is Mr Yako, a member of Parliament in the Ciskei Government. Some of the other members are Lieutenant Genda (Chief of Security in Mdantsane) and L F Siyo (Leader of the Labour Party and a close friend of Lennox Sebe). The Committee of Twenty has also tried to co-opt a number of well-known old ANC and PAC activists in order to gain legitimacy.

Attempts by the Committee of Twenty to call three well advertised meetings were a dismal failure. They also arranged a meeting with the Committee of Ten after their release from detention on November 4th. Predictably the Committee of Twenty's main concern was how long the boycott would last. They claimed that it was through their recommendations that the Committee of Ten was released and requested that they end the boycott. The chairperson of the Committee of Ten said about the meeting:

They realised that only through us could they get in contact with the people. So long as they have the tag of the Ciskei Government, their meeting will not be successful. They do not believe in mass participatory democracy. (31)

However, their hopes were dashed when the Committee of Ten quietly informed them that they had no mandate from the commuters to open negotiations with them.

The strategies of the Ciskei state also changed towards the beginning of November. With the release of the Committee of Ten and the active participation of some of its functionaries in the Committee of 20 it looked as if a new strategy of conciliation was being adopted. However, the curfew and the continual banning of meetings in Mdantsane remained. Conciliation in this atmosphere was impossible. It served only to reveal the weakness of the Ciskei state and its defensive position.

The CTC began to get desperate. They dropped pamphlets from aeroplanes over Mdantsane and put full-page adverts in the newspapers. They hired people to sit on the buses continuously and allowed commuters to travel free of charge. All this was designed to demoralise the boycotters who plodded along in the rain and cold. The CTC has cut down on the number of buses in use and in the first week of December, they sent 100 buses to Johannesburg to be used by the Public Utility Transport Corporation (PUTCO).

The South African state still subsidises CTC heavily and consequently the boycott is a continuing burden. As far as the East London Municipality is concerned, there is an unresolvable contradiction. As D Jenkinson, the Transport Manager, put it, "I don't see the boycott ending, the people don't want to use the buses".(32) As far as the municipal Department of Transport is concerned, they do not believe that taking over the CTC is economically viable and that the "cross-border" transport network is too complex to get involved in. In other words, if the CTC collapses and withdraws its services, it seems unlikely that the East London Municipality will step in to secure the continuation of a bus service for the labour force. Neither is local capital willing to take responsibility for the transport crisis.(33)

Working class responses

After their release, the Committee of Ten decided to call a meeting of the commuters. It was only a month later on Sunday December 4th, after encountering major problems in finding a venue, that the meeting took place. Despite confusion and lack of notice the meeting was well attended. Mampunya described it in this way:

The meeting was on a high note due to the anger of the people. Everyone was full of hatred. When they talk of the buses they have a picture of the 4 August. The people say the buses are full of blood and when they pass the buses they smell the blood. Even if the prices were brought down they have lost confidence in the buses...The people realised that they need transport but the Ciskei Government must have no strings attached to it.

The meeting decided to continue with the boycott until a new bus company is established. They have mandated the Committee of Ten to approach the East London Municipality and the BCI (Border Chamber of Industries) in this regard. In the final analysis, just as it was the working class commuters that brought the bus company to its knees, so the establishment of a new one will have to conform in general to their interests. But as Mampunya admits:

We want a new bus company. We know that even if we do get another company to operate, it will operate in the same framework as the CTC, but we could talk to the new company. We know that our interests as workers will always be in conflict with those of the company. But unlike the CTC when there are increases we could say "no!".

In the meantime, the East London working class is forging a new political culture. Every commuter who travels the one hour journey from Mdantsane to East London is drawn into the dramatic atmosphere of the train culture. The commuters sing continuously,

following the emotional verses of the lead singer in the tradition of South Africa's freedom songs. They sing about Sebe and his fraudulent regime and they praise the power of the working class. They sing about freedom and their long history of resistance. They listen intently to speeches from workers and community organisers who explain each new development and inform them about political events happening in other parts of the country. Although trains are often used as venues for preaching and singing as they transport large numbers of people in South Africa over the abnormally long distances between home and work, in East London the content of this culture is largely political. It is here, in these moving cocoons at the heart of the apartheid structures where a potent mass political culture is being born, that the future of the bus boycott will be decided.

Unions and Workers' Organisations

In East London trade unions are the dominant form of working class organisation in the region. Saawu is the largest and most popular union with a signed-up membership of up to 20,000, and an even larger following. It has a presence in 29 factories and has 6 recognition agreements. The African Food and Canning Workers Union has a paid up membership of 4000 in 8 factories supported by 3 recognition agreements. The General Workers union has 550 members in 3 firms, and the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union has a paid up membership of 1766 in one factory.(34)

The organised working class of East London is rooted in a long tradition of popular struggle that has made the national political organisations an integral part of its political culture. However East London, which is similar in this respect to the East Rand, does not have any mass-based community organisations. This is significant because it means that unlike Durban and Cape Town, popular struggles tend to draw on the shop-floor struggles of the

article

trade unions. All the unions believed that it was not their role to be formally (in institutional terms) involved in the boycott. The organised workers, however, did not only get involved as members of the community and as commuters in order to "lead the people", as one worker put it; but their depth of militant cohesion provided the driving force of the boycott. Although the wider forms of political organisation that were thrown up by the bus boycott were distinct from the trade unions, they were shaped by and grew out of this union culture.

Secondly, the extent of working class organisation and the reactionary political position of the pro-Ciskei petty bourgeoisie means that working class interests tend to be hegemonic in East London's black political configuration. This means that the formation of the United Democratic Front towards the end of September in the Border region had necessarily to take account of this configuration. This also explains why Saawu decided to affiliate to the UDF on the grounds that the objections of the other unions in other parts of the country were not applicable to the East London area.

The repressive terror tactics of the Ciskei state, which included detaining union organisers and leading shop stewards, failed to cripple the organisations. Instead the responsibility for the union fell on the shoulders of the slightly less experienced but equally capable shop stewards and unemployed former shop stewards. As far as Saawu is concerned, to believe that without its high profile leaders it would collapse, is quite simply a misconception. Between September and December, preliminary negotiations over recognition were completed in four companies, negotiations were initiated in another four companies and discussions with three companies took place where agreements already existed. In other words, Saawu is able to draw on a reservoir of highly capable organisers who have the capacity to take control of the daily administrative functions of the union.

Saawu, consciously stood back from the boycott because it wanted to protect itself from further repression and to consolidate its base on the shop floor. This created a space for the emergence of the Committee of Ten, a leadership that was not accountable to the trade union, but to the commuters. Many East London workers perceive Saawu as the symbol of their struggle: popular, defiant assertive mass-based and committed to democracy and non-racialism. Nonetheless the pressure from below which the boycott unleashed demanded new forms of organisation. Although it is impossible to say much more about these new embryonic forms of organisation, we can gain some idea of the diffuse political texture of the struggles in the area by tracing the alliances that emerged during the boycott.

East London has witnessed the possibility of linking community and workplace struggles under the hegemony of working-class interests. Although the same applies to the East Rand, in the form of the Shop Steward Councils, in East London similar structures still need to be devised. How this works itself out in the future will probably follow the pattern of alliances that emerged during the boycott. The elements that were regarded as part of the struggle were the unemployed, the unorganised, the lumpenproletariat, students, the aged (an old man was made a member of the Committee of Ten precisely because of his age), and the rural poor (some of whom supported the boycott). Alliances with the petty bourgeoisie were accepted as a possibility under very strict conditions. Melvin Mampunya put it in these terms:

We need their support and courage. But we are not prepared for them to take leadership - they must be behind the workers. We know how they can mislead us...

They do not see themselves as part and parcel of the struggle, but with the decrease in profits they are changing their minds as they are losing out when the people do not

article

go to the terminus.(35)

However, the nature of such an alliance is entirely dependent on the particular object of struggle. Transport is a pre-dominantly working class issue in which the petty bourgeoisie show relatively little interest. Thomazile Gqweta put it in these terms:

While it is true that the workers are the most conscious element and provide the backbone of opposition, it does not mean that Saawu is in the forefront. Workers have every reason to be leaders in this boycott - they are the people who pay the busfares, and provide the students and unemployed with the money to travel. They are the people who suffer most and so take up the issue most actively.(36)

It was these factors that explain the kinds of alliances that have emerged out of the bus boycott.

There is no doubt that there is a political vacuum in places like East London and the East Rand, where there seem to be the pre-conditions for the formation of a working class political agency that goes beyond the trade unions and yet is rooted in the objective interests of the working class. There is as yet no reason to believe that this role will not be fulfilled by the UDF. The UDF, however, does not claim to be a long term organisation, and hence there are still questions within and outside it's structures concerning its ability to sustain political organisation. Nor is it clear whether trade unions, and not a separate political agency of some kind are the right mechanisms to mediate the relationship between a popular democratic front like the UDF and the working class in a given local area. It is in this context, where the contours of the working class movement are still hidden from view by a combination of repression and the embryonic nature of organisation, that we must understand the dramatic symbolic meaning of a union like Saawu and of the Committee of Ten. How this will translate into a more concrete political agency will depend entirely on what questions are thrown up in the struggle.

An organiser from the General Workers Union raised one of the questions:

The boycott hangover might bring about the formation of community organisations. Even the ignorant people have seen they have no shelter or defense. In the Ciskei they are homeless and defenceless. The atmosphere is such that something can form here. Workers are more organised now.(37)

For Melvin Mampunya, the idea of a "civic body" is appealing:

If we have a civic body it will consist mainly of workers. People have confidence in the workers as the people are disillusioned with those who gave us up to the homeland government. There is a need for a new civic organisation but not led by the trade union.(38)

Another Committee of 10 member clarified the political role of the working class in a future civic organisation:

A trade union can't play a role in the community but it's workers must be deeply involved in the community.(39)

On whether the UDF can fulfill this role, Mampunya said:

No. UDF is an umbrella body. A civic body could affiliate to the UDF, but the UDF cannot fulfill a role on a civic level.(40)

These quotes reveal that there are workers with mass support who are thinking seriously about their role in the formation of the political future of the working class.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the outright rejection of the Ciskei regime as a legitimate state is the primary political response of the commuters. This implies a demand to be reincorporated into South Africa.

The bus boycott has been met by coercion and attempts to portray the struggle as the work of

article

agitators. These are short-term measures designed to defuse the immediate crisis. What must necessarily follow are concessions that attempt to deal (albeit partially) with the underlying causes. As far as Mdantsane is concerned, reincorporation into South Africa is not on the agenda, since it would be tantamount to dissolving the Ciskei as an entity. It is not only the second biggest black township in South Africa, but a third of Ciskei's population lives there. This unresolvable contradiction between the minimum demands of the commuters and the maximum concessions possible on the part of the state represents a serious challenge to the apartheid political system and its fragmented state configuration.

In the short-term, interim concessions can only come from the negotiations between the Committee of Ten, the Municipality and the BCI. The transportation of the labour force from one of South Africa's biggest black townships is no mean feat. There is no reason to believe that the municipality or East London's industrialists will be willing to take on the responsibility. In the final analysis, the root cause of this contradiction is the structural fault of locating the poorest sections of society so far away from the points of production. The solution to East London's transport crisis can only lie in a post-apartheid society based on new forms of production and reproduction.

The boycott has come at a crucial point in East London's economic history. Attempts to promote industrial development in the decentralisation area called "Region D" (Eastern Cape, Transkei, and Ciskei) by attracting investment have been seriously threatened by the boycott and the atrocities that occurred. The Automobile Association, the US State Department and various other bodies advised people to avoid going through the Ciskei.(41) This, plus the Haysom Report led East London capital to believe that potential investors had been frightened off.(42) How sustained this threat to accumulation in the region will be depends entirely on how the

bus boycott is resolved.

"Independence" for the Ciskei was nothing more than an inheritance of a poverty stricken rural population and a volatile urban community that has not been separated from the desperation and misery of its rural environs. It is these conditions that explain the extreme pressures that have come to bear on this puppet state. It has been severely challenged from below by the bus boycott and from within by what was ostensibly an attempted coup and the subsequent detention of most of its top security and ministerial officials. These crippling internal and external assaults cannot be divorced from the insurmountable problems of attempting to establish a state on the basis of a society that has been expressly designed to service those manifestations of contradictions for which the central state refuses to take responsibility: poverty, unemployment and disease.

The Ciskei state has failed to break the boycott by coercion. In fact, coercion actually contributed to the success of the boycott. A state that rests purely upon violence, can only succeed if the coercion that this involves is extensive and sophisticated. Significantly both Somoza in Nicaragua and Sebe in the Ciskei used naked force in an extreme way with no apparent consideration for the strategic political consequences (Somoza bombing factories and Sebe beating up the population in the local soccer stadium have the same ring of mindlessness about them). This kind of coercion cannot be justified in any terms and therefore it cannot be accompanied by an appeal to non-coercive sources of legitimacy in the way, for example that the South African state can. The arbitrary use of the means of violence by a state causes the total alienation of the population, and in so doing, in spite of coercion, an ever widening space is cleared for the generation of mass struggle. As this escalates, the state can only continue to exist if it relies heavily on an externally based coercive (or legitimatising) power: the U S A in the case of

article

Somoza and the central state in the case of the Ciskei. In the final analysis, Ciskei is "uncle Botha's backyard" complete with a vicious dictator and developed forms of mass struggle!

The forms of organisation that emerged during the boycott have important implications for the democratic movement in South Africa. The boycott was also the first wave of working class action since the 1981-1982 strikes. In this context, it is significant that these embryonic forms of organisation seem to be leading towards a linking up of workplace and community struggles under the leadership of working class interests. Although this still needs to be worked out in practice, it does contain the basic features of what may be called working class politics. Although many political organisations are committed in principle to the development of this contentious notion of working class politics, it is possible that East London workers have, in the process of a bitterly intense struggle, managed to forge the as yet crude and underdeveloped outlines of what this may entail in practice.

POSTSCRIPT

At the time of going to print the Committee of Ten is refusing all concessions offered by the CTC. The basic demand remains that the CTC must be restructured without the involvement of the Ciskei government. (Eastern Province Herald, 22/3/84)

Footnotes

1. Hirsch, A. & Kooy A., "Industry and Employment in East London", South African Labour Bulletin (SALB), 7/ 4 & 5 Feb. 1982 p.55.
2. Green, P. & Hirsch, A., "The Ciskei - The Political Economy of Control", SALB, 7/ 4 & 5, Feb. 1982, p.74.
3. Gordon, T.J., "Mdantsane: The evolution of a

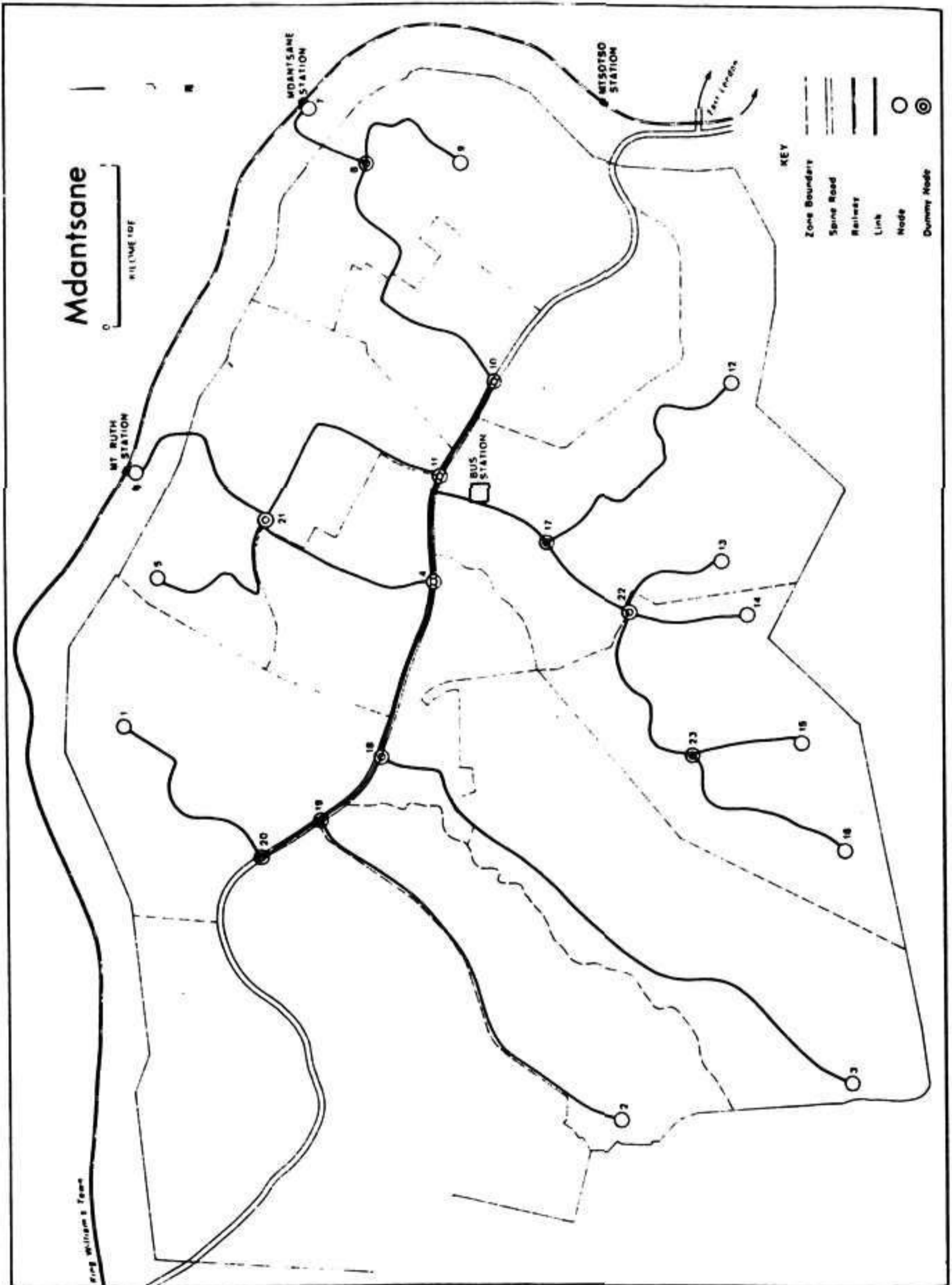
- Dependency", in Cook, G. & Opland, J., (eds),
Mdantsane: Transitional City, Institute of
Social and Economic Research, Rhodes
University, Grahamstown, 1980.
4. Daniel, J.B., & Waxmonsky, R.W., "Migration
Characteristics of Black Industrial Employees",
in Cook & Opland, *ibid.* p. 55.
 5. Gordon, *op. cit.* p. 23.
 6. This is the finding of a fascinating study by
Switzer, L., "Politics and Communication in the
Ciskei, an African Homeland in South Africa,"
Occasional paper Number 23, Institute of Social
and Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1979.
 7. Human Awareness Programme, "Ciskei: An
Assessment", Special Report No. 2.
Johannesburg, 1981, p. 28.
 8. The survey was conducted by Jeff McCarthy of
Rhodes University and the results were analysed
by Mark Swilling. The only results from the
findings that have been published are the ones
that appear in this article.
 9. Matravers, D.D., "It's all in the day's work",
in Cook & Opland, *op. cit.* p. 40.
 10. Capitalist bus companies always undersupply
buses in order to make sure that each queue
will be longer than a busload. This guarantees
them full bus loads and hence maximum profits.
In 1975 a survey found that 45% of those
questioned complained that there were too few
buses. Matravers, *op. cit.* p.35.
 11. Jenkinson, D., "East London - Mdantsane Commuter
Transport Study", Report No. 719/3667, East
London Municipality May 1982.
 12. Matravers, *op.cit.*, p.36.
 13. CTC was formed in January 1975 when the
previous owners, the Tolgate Holdings Group,
were forced to sell out in order to stop a two
month long bus boycott over fare increases.
Sebe initiated a takeover bid of the crippled
company believing that if the Ciskei Government
owned it, the people would support it. In the
end the strike was broken by vigilantes. See

article

- Ormond, R., "Azikwelwa", SALB 1/8, Jan-Feb 1975.
14. Interview with 2 shop stewards in East London, 26/10/83.
 15. Interview with Mr. Saunders, past chairperson of the Border Chamber of Industries, 24/10/83.
 16. Interview with Judy Parfit, journalist from the Eastern Province Herald, who was assigned to the boycott for three weeks, 25/10/83.
 17. Hayson, N., "Ruling with the whip: A Report on the Violation of Human Rights in the Ciskei", Centre for Applied Legal Studies, Occasional Paper 5, October 1983, p.25. Daily Dispatch, 19/7/83.
 18. Judy Parfit claims that after thorough investigations in this connection, she cannot say that more than 20 died. Hayson puts the number at about 90 because he takes into account disappearances and various extra-legal possibilities.
 19. Hayson, op. cit., establishes the extent of this brutality beyond doubt.
 20. Ibid. p.48.
 21. Eastern Province Herald, 30/7/83.
 22. Hayson, op.cit., p.35.
 23. Interview with Judy Parfit.
 24. Hayson, op.cit., p. 56
 25. Ibid. p.42.
 26. Community Resource and Information Centre and the Detainees Support Committee, "Preliminary Report on the Effect of the 'State of Crisis' of Labour in the East London Area", Johannesburg, 1983, p.4., unpublished.
 27. Interview with Mr. Saunders conducted by Judy Parfit in August.
 28. ibid.
 29. Eastern Province Herald, 6/9/83.
 30. Hayson, op.cit. p.76.
 31. Interview with Melvin Mampunya conducted by the author and Sue Albertyn in East London, 8/12/83. All further quotes from him are taken from this interview.

32. Interview with D. Jenkinson, Transport Manager, Department of Transport in the East London Municipality, conducted by Sue Albertyn, 9/12/83.
33. Interview with Mr. Saunders.
34. All the figures obtained during interviews with the organisers from all these unions conducted by the author in East London, 27-28th October 1983.
35. Interview with Mampunya, op. cit.
36. Gqwetha, T., "Stop Killing my People", SASPU National, 4/4, October 1983.
37. Interview with David Thandane, GWU organiser in East London, 27/10/1983.
38. Interview with Mampunya, op. cit.
39. This member of the Committee of Ten was unemployed when the boycott started. After his release from detention he became an organiser for Saawu.
40. Interview with Mampunya, op. cit.
41. Eastern Province Herald, 15/10/83.
42. Interview with Mr. Saunders.

APPENDIX A: TRANSPORT ROUTES IN MDANTSANE



Source: Cook and Opland, op. cit.