

A DAY TO REMEMBER

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JUNE 26 is not yet a national holiday in South Africa. But it will be quite soon. What happened on June 26 this year, little as it was in itself, has made that clear. What was achieved has immense significance for the future. Coming after the Treason arrests, the bus boycotts, the Port Elizabeth dockers' "go-slow", the announcement of an economic boycott of Nationalist-manufactured products, and a whole series of massed, peaceful demonstrations by all races against various apartheid measures, it underlined for all but the wilfully blind that the basic initiative in South Africa has passed from White hands.

We must not exaggerate. The Nationalist Party will continue to control Parliament, the police, the armed forces. The outward show of "White domination" will remain quite awhile as living people calculate these things, though not very long as history reckons. There will be still greater oppression, suffering, deprivation of personal liberties (White as well as non-White), before we reach the lowest point in our appointed course. The façade will not crack just yet.

But the non-White majority now *knows* it is only a façade. Deep in their hearts the non-Whites, and particularly the Africans, treasure the certainty, proved by the evidence of their own eyes these last six decisive months, that working-class solidarity based on the indispensability of labour to an industrial economy is a liberatory weapon against which there can be no lasting defence.

June 26 has significance for South African non-Whites. It is the day on which, in 1950, the African and Indian Congresses really came together; on which, in 1952, they launched the Defiance (Passive Resistance) Campaign against unjust laws; on which, in 1955, they concluded the Freedom Charter, embodying their ideals for a shared, multi-racial society; and on which, in 1957, they first really put their shoulders to the key lever of liberation—industrial non-cooperation.

The call went out this June from the African, Indian, Coloured Congresses and their White sympathizers for a Day of Protest against the latest racialistic excesses of the South African Government. It was addressed to the urban non-Whites who are the especial target of apartheid. Each town was left

to decide its own form of demonstration, though prayer-meetings, closing of shops, and certain sorts of unprovocative assembly were tentatively suggested. And of the Union's major cities, in Cape Town, Durban, Bloemfontein and East London, little more, if as much, occurred.

In Johannesburg, however, where the Treason arrests and bus boycotts had left an aftermath of militance,* a one-day strike was called, despite its illegality, the massing of police, threats of dismissal from the Chamber of Industries and the Afrikaans Sakekamer*, and police advice to sack all absent workers.

In the event, the strike was officially described as "a washout, only 50 per cent. successful." A senior police officer said that "only 40 per cent. did not use the buses," though a cash check-up later revealed less than one-third normal takings. Actually, in the main industrial area and throughout most of the commercial part of the city, the strike was 70-80 per cent. successful. In other Reef towns the results varied considerably. But while politicians and policemen may congratulate themselves on this "flop", that emphatically is not the mood of sober-minded businessmen who realize this could be just the beginning. Nor are they hastening, as officially advised, to add to their labour anxieties by dismissing absentees. Far more realistically, the transparent excuse is tacitly accepted that "only intimidation" kept workers away. Honour is thus satisfied without more loss.

For Africans to strike is now a crime in South Africa. Because its lower-pitched objectives kept strictly within the law and therefore may make more appeal to the less militant centres which held aloof this time, what happened in Port Elizabeth may yet prove most significant of all. Here the prescribed activities for the day were (1) prayer in the churches, (2) boycott of the bus services, (3) lighting of candles in front windows and bonfires in back-yards after dark to the accompaniment of freedom songs and political propaganda.

It must be remembered that all gatherings of more than nine Africans are banned in Port Elizabeth. Further, on June 24, the dock-workers were convened under the eyes of uniformed police and harangued by an Inspector of Labour who told them in Afrikaans that "it will be very bad for you if you do not

*Significantly, the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce, which had bloodied its nose by being too co-operative with the Nationalist Cabinet in the early stages of the bus boycotts, excepted itself from these minatory attitudes and counselled "sympathy and discretion."

come to work on Wednesday.”

So broke the grey, drizzling dawn of June 26, most discouraging to bus boycotters. Some used the buses. No one denies it. The higher the percentage claimed by officials, the more surely they discredit allegations of “intimidation.” But the bus company admitted by midday that the boycott was “very heavy” and withdrew most of its evening services to save expense. At 5 p.m. the dock workers stopped work, declining overtime and night shifts, leaving three ships to await their return next morning and proving that their morale was unbroken by earlier dismissals during the “go slow”, or by the presence (four months later) of involuntary “scabs” recruited from the famine-stricken Transkei. For three hours in the evening an inter-denominational service filled New Brighton’s largest hall. The sermon’s text was St. John XV 12 (“This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you”). The service was attended by Special Branch detectives; and the police showed unusually wise forbearance when the churchgoers formed themselves into an impromptu, if technically illegal, procession and returned home singing hymns and African National Congress songs.

As daylight ebbed and the street lights of the White city began to sparkle below them, “European” housewives in the fashionable suburbs on the northern slopes of Port Elizabeth’s hill were astonished to see the glow of bonfires illuminating the flat, black anonymous space which accommodates 60-70,000 Africans in their segregated dormitory suburb for the night.

Yes, assuredly, in that glow and the candles in the windows of the little pill-box houses or at the “doors” of the site-and-service shanties, a new South African future was born on June 26, 1957.