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WITS STUDENT

Opponent of oppression

Lillian Ngoyi



Lillian Ngoyi - inspiration for the struggle.

With Lillian Ngoyi's passing last Wednesday South Africa lost yet another of its historically outstanding leaders, a leader who devoted her life to the continuing struggle against oppression, exploitation and injustice. May Day 1950 — police kill 18 demonstrators — this precipitated a national day of protest — 26 June 1950 — this was the first time the ANC called for national work stoppage — It was regarded also as a day of mourning for those who had died in the struggle for liberation — As a political strike June 26 was an outstanding success and was subsequently adopted as South African Freedom Day.

2 years later — the Defiance Campaign — African National Congress and South African Indian Congress launched this campaign for the Defiance of unjust laws.



Lillian Ngoyi - At the peak of her career. It began in Port Elizabeth on 26 June with only 33 defiers. The campaign spread throughout the country — by the end of the year thousands of people of all races had defied apartheid, curfew laws, pass laws etc. This campaign involved a large

number of black women and it was during this campaign that Lillian Ngoyi began her political career. She was later to become president of the ANC Womens League and FSAW. Many people were forced to sacrifice their jobs and many suffered imprisonment as a result of their participation. The South African government reacted to this mass political action by arresting leaders, banning, prohibiting defiance, the Public Safety Act, the Criminal Laws Amendment Act — under this act defiers (including women) could also be whipped. The tide of defiance was therefore forced to recede. The Suppression of Communism Act prevented any attempts to mobilise people on a mass scale.

1950's were also the decade when African women for the first time actively and permanently entered the political arena. The only significant protests involving black women prior to 1950 were the 1913/14 anti-pass protests of black women in the Free State and the 1946 Indian Passive Resistance Campaign. (After this many Indian women became involved in the leadership of the Indian Congress.)

In 1954 the Federation of South African Women was founded along with the Congress Alliance, black women played a major role in opposition during the '50's. Black women were described at this time as 'the most oppressed, suffering and down-trodden of our people' — a trend which

continues today. 1950 — thousands of urban women protested against the threats of stricter influx control. This struggle against passes for black women occupied most of the 50's. In 1956 for eg when reference books were issued to women 50,000 women demonstrated against this. The end of that year saw the mass gathering of 10—20,000 women outside the Union Buildings led by Lillian Ngoyi, president of the Federation. In 1958, 2,000 women were arrested in Johannesburg during 2 weeks of demonstrations against the issue of reference books.

FSAW consisted of women from all sections of South African society. Most women (predominantly black women, but with a smattering of white women) had only a limited education. FSAW identified totally with the political programme of the Congress Alliance. Additionally they concentrated on the specific issue of expressing the needs and aspirations of women generally and fighting the legislative and customary restrictions imposed on women. Their aims were 'to create a broadly based multiracial organisation that would unite women on the common ground of their womanhood and strive for their full emancipation'.

FSAW drew up a 'Women's Charter in which it attempted to describe the harsh living conditions of most South African women.

FSAW's foundation was a direct result

of the changing position of women in society. It was only around this time that women became more economically active and began to move away from their solely 'reproductive' roles — ie in the reserves, upholding the migrant labour system. Now domestic service was the predominant employment area of black women and the presence of African women in the urban areas grew tremendously.

The activities of the Communist Party of SA and the ANC both assisted in raising awareness among women prior to FSAW's foundation and women within the ANC had begun to emerge into greater prominence with the revival of the ANC Women's League in 1943. Many women also received their political training within the framework of the growing trade union movement.

From its inception both the Federation and its leaders came under constant government attack. However during its short 9 years of activity it revealed itself as a movement capable of mobilising women on a large scale. Its activities were at times frustrated due to internal clashes but from 1954 under the presidency of Lillian Ngoyi and with Helen Joseph as secretary (a partnership that remained until the banning of Ngoyi in 1961), FSAW regained its vigour.

In 1959 discontent at Cato Manor in Natal exploded and 2,000 women gathered to air their grievances about extreme poverty, low wages and lack of facilities.

Their attempts at peaceful negotiation was met with baton charges and violence from the police. This discontent spread widely in the Natal countryside resulting in boycotts of beer halls. In 1959 it was hoped that the women's anti-pass campaign would reach new heights. However the momentum of the campaign could not be sustained. The PAC called for demonstrations against passes in March 1960 — this resulted in the Sharpeville massacre and a Proclamation of the State of Emergency. The ANC, PAC and the ANCWI were all banned. The areas within which FSAW could not operate were strictly limited and in 1963/4 it succumbed to the government onslaught.

Lillian Ngoyi must be seen as a leading light in the history of women's resistance in the 50's. She was charged in the massive treason trial of 1956 (which continued for the next 4 years). Her personality, and flair for public speaking thrust her to the forefront of the political struggle, but her energy as an organiser made her an obvious target for persecution and prosecution by the state. In 1961 she received her first banning order. In 1963 she spent 71 days in solitary confinement, under the 90 day detention without trial law. She later described this as her worst experience. Lillian Ngoyi was banned almost continuously and was prohibited from attending any social gathering.

Her constant dedication to the struggle for liberation will ensure that she will be remembered and her actions serve as inspiration to those who continue.

Oppression: 1980 style

For as long as the system has existed in South Africa, oppression by the state of those who opposed its interests has been glaringly apparent. Numerous groups have organised in opposition to this oppression and have, in turn, been brutally repressed as well.

Recently, however, there has emerged a number of groups, who have apparently been neglected by the repressive apparatuses of the state despite their outspoken and often vehement protestations against the current régime.

It is obvious, therefore, that state tactics have altered somewhat. Why, one may legitimately ask, has this method of what could be termed 'selective oppression' replaced previous heavy-handed, broad-based oppressive strategy? It is in answering this question that we can understand the nature of the recent detention of about 16 Executive members of the Congress of South African Students.

No view of state repressive action, certainly, no view of oppression as a whole, is complete unless explained in terms of the other side of minority domination — exploitation. It is no coincidence to note that through the history of resistance in SA, any critique transcending an analysis of conflict as purely racial was immediately crushed. Particularly when that critique set about exposing the exploitative rôle of the state, rather than only the oppressive one.

Today, in the light of the changed tactics of the state, this becomes even more obvious. Whilst certain forms of opposition appear to be regarded as accommodatable, others which turn on the vital issues of exploitation are subject to even more brutally repressive steps than previously.

Prior to the 1950's there was mass organization of protest and resistance, but despite the fact that the state was actively oppressive, no real threat was posed to its existence. The 50's saw a wave of

progressive thinking amongst opposition groups. Gradually the demands they articulated began to pose a real and immediate threat to those who held political and economic power. 1955 saw 5 organizations, formed on completely non-racial lines and obviously enjoying the support of the majority of the people, signing the Freedom Charter. Political groupings began making industrial demands. Nationwide strikes and bus boycotts exhibited the power of these movements.

From 1955 onwards, the state embarked on a period of direct repression — detention, imprisonment, banning.

The 60's and early 70's saw the gradual revival of mass-based opposition, frequently organised around the Black Consciousness idea, but still subscribing to the principle of unity first. Once again oppression, accompanied by endless police beatings destroyed these initiatives.

Again, the setbacks were only temporary and the 70's were marked by a resurgence of progressive thought. Demands went to the root of the problem. Huge strikes occurred in 1973 and incisive unrest culminating in the Soweto rebellion of 76/77 left the state clutching once more for its truncheon. Thousands of young men leaving the country to join the armed struggle did nothing to soothe Vorster, Kruger and Co. and the banings of October 19th resulted in another crushing blow.

By 1979, the phase of build-up had again begun. A new régime, this time under Botha and his generals had emerged and a far more subtle and sophisticated policy was being evolved.

It was with this historical backdrop that COSAS was formed in June 1979. At a 3-day conference attended by about 80 delegates the first pre-university black student organization since the 1977 banings was established. Although its

stated aims revolved essentially around education, it was clear that the COSAS leadership represented highly motivated and progressive ideas. Ephraim Mogale, the first president, explained that COSAS was 'a new organization that had nothing to do with previous student bodies and was formed to meet the aspirations of the post-1976 student'. In explaining his rôle, he said 'I'm not talking as a leader but as a servant of my people and I'm prepared to serve their needs wholeheartedly'.

COSAS was constituted as a completely non-racial and democratic organization. Reps were elected in each school and care was taken not to include reference to any one race in the name of the organization. Whilst their aims in the educational field were encapsulated in their attack on black education and facilities — 'it must recognise the aspirations of the black as he sees them, not as the government sees them', it was also clear that their parameters spread beyond the schools. They also aimed 'to impress on students the necessity of their being involved in the attainment of their objectives, even after completing their studies'.

The first COSAS activity was a commemorative service for June 16th 1979. Other issues were rapidly picked up:

- They conducted a 'Save Walmer Campaign' in the Port Elizabeth area.
- They focussed on the International Year of the Child, holding seminars on such topics as 'Youth as victim of Society'
- In October they stood up against soldiers teaching in black schools, the proposed rent increases and rising Putco bus fares in Soweto.
- They exposed the contradictions in the 99-year lease housing system introduced in the black areas.

COSAS was also evidently involved in a considerable amount of community organisation. Not only did they have broad support in the schools, but they had

mobilised much of the worker-community. COSAS was particularly strong in trans-Soweto, the Eastern Cape and the Northern Transvaal.

In November 1979 Ephraim Mogale and one other were detained under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act.

COSAS, WASA and AZAPO came out in condemnation of these detentions.

Two weeks later, several of the COSAS local executives were detained on the same morning in a nationwide security police swoop.

Later four more COSAS leaders were detained.

About 16 in all. They are all still in detention. They have been denied access to their lawyer, their doctor and members of their families. The press has suggested that Mogale was brutally tortured in detention.

The implications of these detentions are clear. Firstly for the people detained, the state can keep them imprisoned without reason for as long as it wants, at least until enough so-called 'evidence' has been amassed by one method or another to hold a mock-trial.

For COSAS too, the results are far reaching:

Almost all of its leadership gone, the organisation is left in a vacuum. Young, less experienced leaders have to fill the gaps. Their activities are easily co-opted by groupings who do not share their aims or principles. If the new leadership continues the progressive line it will undoubtedly incur the wrath of the state. If not, COSAS will have to operate essentially as a high-school organisation. Its effectiveness must suffer for from articulating the demands of the entire working class community it is left to mobilise around school issues.

So, my original question has partially been answered.

Out of necessity, the present régime has abandoned its bland and overt style of banning entire organisations. It has

realised that by removing the really progressive elements of groups such as COSAS it can 'nip the threat in the bud', by either completely paralysing them, or crippling them to a point where their aims and actions, while ostensibly the same, in fact no longer effectively endanger the interests of those in economic and political control.

Total Strategy has redefined the enemies of the state from black opposition groups, to people who aren't accommodatable or co-optable within a system of continuing exploitation.

Whilst the liberal press may fleetingly report detentions, it continually fails to take up the ongoing issues of oppression simply because it too has been duped and progressive thought in South Africa is once again under siege.

The tactics may have changed. But the interests haven't.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM COMMITTEE

FOCUS ON 'THE POLITICS OF PROTEST'

Tuesday 19 March
BISHOP DESMOND TUTU
Great Hall 12h30

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SS1 12h30

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