

# SOCIALISM

## — THE OTHER ALTERNATIVE

By John Aitchison

I believe that socialism is the only effective answer to the three gravest problems in Southern Africa: **poverty**, **unemployment** and a **fair distribution of political power**. I believe also that the socialist alternative needs to be considered at this time of talk of new constitutions for it is particularly worrying that the official opposition's proposals betray a fundamental acceptance of the present economic order. The various Bantustan governments equally show no obvious signs of disagreement with the South African brand of capitalism. Naturally, neither the Progressive Federal Party nor the Bantustan leaders want racialism, and they envisage a "non-racial" capitalism. But I believe that in the South African context there is a predetermined incestuous relationship between capitalism and racism and that seekers after an end to our social ills should opt for socialism.

The present opposition to the South African regime is emasculated by its inability (or unwillingness) to develop a critique of the capitalist system. Hence its failure to come to grips with what ails the country, for it has, at best, an exceedingly shallow understanding of how our land got into its present predicament. I believe this failure explains much of the curious dullness of the opposition in parliament itself. At a time when the PFP should be sharpening their knives for use on a government stricken by incompetence and corruption, they give the appearance of trying to stone the other side of the house to death with marshmallows.

The failure to develop this critique is not surprising. The mores of white society are so thoroughly those of the capitalist world, our school system so careful in its indoctrination of the ideals of competition, the survival of the "able", and group loyalty, the media so completely controlled by big business, that it would have been miraculous for a strong socialist tradition to have developed among whites. Most of us accept the capitalist model of society because we have been born into it and no alternative model is presented to us.

In saying this, some attention must be paid to the curious doctrine-advocated by pro-capitalists in South Africa, and one thinks particularly of Stephen Mulholland of the **Sunday Times** and Leon Louw of the "Free Market Foundation" (the 'agitprop' of the capitalists). This is the belief that what South Africa needs is not less capitalism but more of it! If the South African state would wither away, a capitalism would stand revealed so good, so pure, that injustice and oppression would cease and poverty would be no more. The corollary of this is that racialism will also wither away as capitalism gets the upper hand. Economic growth created by these colour-blind capitalists intent on the pursuit of profit will lead to liberalisation and the end of racialism. Typical words of wisdom from the protagonists of this view are "Apartheid is finished" and "Things are getting better". I believe this "Free Market" propaganda to be a dangerous delusion. It has a particularly pernicious effect on thinking whites who, though they have benefitted from capitalism, are beginning to be uneasy about the viability and/or morality of white rule in South Africa. The doctrine is soporific and beguiles them into thinking that impersonal market mechanisms

will somehow sort everything out to the good of all. There is no such impersonal mechanism and only people who take a personal responsibility for social and political change deserve a place in any future South Africa.

Far too many people, including much of the leadership of the PFP, accept the ludicrous contention that South Africa is already "socialist". They do this simply because there exist a fair number of large state owned enterprises in South Africa. But this is a travesty of what socialism is. As Julius Nyerere stated in the 1967 **Arusha Declaration**:

A state is not socialist simply because all, or all the major, means of production are controlled and owned by the government. It is necessary for the government to be elected by peasants and workers. If the racist governments of Rhodesia and South Africa were to bring the major means of production in these countries under their control and direction, this would entrench exploitation. It would not bring about socialism. There cannot be true socialism without democracy.

It is patently clear that the state controlled enterprises in South Africa are **not** run for the benefit of the whole people of South Africa, as any rail commuter from Soweto will gladly inform you and any domestic or agricultural worker debarred from the Unemployment Insurance Fund will testify. One can define socialism as the political and economic theory according to which the major means of production and exchange should be owned and controlled by the people; everyone should be given equal opportunity to develop his or her talents and the wealth of the community should be fairly distributed. The latter part of this definition is as important as the first, hence the conceptual fallacy of identifying socialism with state control of major industries.

But though South Africa is not a socialist society according to the above definition, there is much that socialists can learn from the genesis of the present political dispensation. Capitalism, as noted capitalists are all too fond of saying, created the present structure of wealth in South Africa (with a little help from their exploited black **and white** workers). Afrikaner dominated governments created a counterpoint battery of laws to protect their constituents from this very capitalism. The way they did it was unfortunate for it caused immense suffering to the vast majority of the people of South Africa. How many people today know that job reservation had its origins in the white miners' strikes of 1919 and 1922 against the attempts by profit hungry mine owners to replace them with cheap black migrants? How many people know of the great depression of the thirties caused by a breakdown of a capitalism that had overreached itself and which led to a white unemployment rate of 25% (the present black unemployment rate has probably not reached that figure yet)? It was state intervention on behalf of the white worker and unemployed that solved the "poor white" problem of this period. The government protected its constituents from "the law of the jungle" which capitalism offered, but at the cost of a rigid racist state structure that oppresses everybody else. But be that as

it may, it was in many ways a great success. A poverty stricken proletariat was built up into our present rulers (now all too keen to reach an accommodation with capitalism and join in the game themselves)' In spite of the negative side of the "success" story, I believe it does show the practicality of the socialist attack on poverty and unemployment.

The basic reason why South African capitalism won't end poverty is that it doesn't try to. Capitalism is by definition the pursuit of profit without state restrictions. The great productive resources of capitalism will never be invested in ending poverty because it would not be profitable. Capitalists would only try to end poverty and unemployment if it got in the way of their making money and in the South African context poverty does not. A classic example of the inadequacy of the capitalist solution to our problems is the Urban Foundation. The "Urban" in the title is itself a give away. The Foundation was a panic response to the urban uprisings of 1976. Its strategy is to build up an urban middle class. Its main preoccupation is housing (naturally I do not deny the great need here). But its result will be along the lines of these excerpts from an article in a recent issue of the Sunday Tribune Finance and Property magazine:

"The picture was supplied by the Urban Foundation, but it has added significance in drawing attention to the magazine's editorial comment, which underlines the opportunities becoming available to property salesmen to sell homes to the blacks. With black housing still among the most critical problems facing the country, it is pleasing to note that the magazine, official organ of the Institute of Estate Agents, is becoming increasingly aware of the huge market that will soon be available . . . Trading in property assets by blacks will inevitably become big business and we must expect some sizeable black estate agencies to emerge. Naturally, they will want to become part of the existing property establishment – and indeed this is already happening. The institute recently signed on its first black member."

Such "progress" offers absolutely nothing to the majority of black workers, the migrants and the unemployed. The evidence for the lack of interest among most capitalists to an ending to poverty should not be looked for in the often noble sentiments expressed by people like Harry Openheimer. Rather, get hold of your local Chamber of Commerce minutes and you will see what commitment capitalists have to ending it. From the Chamber of Mines (which, incidently maintains a cartel agreement that no mine may pay **more** than an agreed rate for black labour) down to the lowliest capitalist enterprise, I have yet to hear of a single firm that has willingly recognised a black trade union (although there is not a single legal impediment to their doing so). Capitalism has no plan to find 2 million people jobs. The only answer for that is a socialist one involving a planned use of the rich resources of South Africa with initially a huge state intervention to create the necessary jobs. The urge to do this (remembering that much of the wherewithal will come out of your taxes) can only come from a system committed to putting people before profits.

It is true that in search of profit capitalism is excellent at providing for people's **wants** – those of you who are relatively rich will know this. You can get literally anything out of the capitalist system if you want it. You can buy that superb hi-fi, you can go on Barclaycard to England for a holiday. It is all done efficiently and well. No one denies that.

But South African capitalism has no answer to human **need** – to the human need for food in the belly, a job one can work at with dignity, adequate training or education, a house over one's head wherever one lives. Capitalists make goods for the market – for the people who have the money to buy. So capitalists inevitably produce most of their goods for whites. They do not produce goods which the poor

people of this world really need. A good example of this is television. Millions of rands of capital have been poured into making SATV the most technically perfect TV system in the world. The cheapest TV set which enables you to make use of this medium costs about R150 (a black and white portable). The people who really **need** television, the poorly educated semi-literate (and one can think of the educational possibilities of television) cannot afford R150 and are unlikely ever to be able to utilize television. Yet Victor Papanek demonstrated in 1970 that a single channel black and white television set capable of withstanding the most extreme African conditions could be produced to retail at about R7. Now no capitalist is going to make these in South Africa for the simple reason that one makes a bigger profit from a R150 set sold to well-off whites (let alone the profit from the R900 big screen colour sets) than from R7 sets sold to everybody.

Socialism, if it is true to itself, puts people first. This may sound strange because of the common identification of socialism with a very crude "Marxism" which says that economics is the only reality. The truth is the opposite, socialism does not measure people purely by economic criteria. And hence a society which is just and democratic, but which isn't very rich, is infinitely preferable to a society which has all the wealth in the world but which is racked by alienation and division. Hence I believe that a country like Tanzania does provide a model for us in spite of its poverty. (I find it significant that it was poor socialist Tanzania and not rich capitalist Kenya which invaded Uganda in an attempt to end the tyranny of Amin.)

Life in a socialist South Africa would mean a richer social life for us all. Whites would undoubtedly be poorer (a situation in which whites (17% of the population) possess 73% of the wealth is intolerable and would have to be changed). But surely it is a cost worth paying for an end to poverty and unemployment. Surely it is a cost worth paying for the participation of all members of society in the decisions that order their lives, whether it be on factory floor, city council or parliament.

Finally I would like to make some suggestions about a socialism that is relevant to South Africa:

Firstly, I do not think such a socialism would imply state ownership of everything. What need is there to deprive people of their modest personal property and even small businesses? What is important is that the people as a whole derive maximum benefit from the resources of the country. Taxation of institutions such as the mines may be quite as effective a way of doing this as nationalisation. It is quite possible that there is quite enough state ownership in South Africa already. It is regrettable that many socialists have been afflicted by a puritan obsession with rationalising the world. Hence one must not have six firms delivering milk in the morning, one must get one firm to do it. There is no need for this "Tidy things up socialism". The only important thing is that everybody gets milk! Secondly, the actual form of national government might well be changed. There may even be some merit in the recent government/opposition suggestions about consensus government. Certainly traditional African political systems had ways of reaching communal consensus on important issues. Parliamentary democracy is not the only form of democracy. The new communications technology could also aid the formation of a real participatory democracy. (You may have noticed that opinion polls are now banned in times of election). However, though a new consensus model of government needs exploring, caution is necessary, for it could become, as it is certainly intended to become when advocated by the Nationalist Party, simply a new form of the old strategy for maintaining white dominance.

Thirdly, it is not enough to end racial discrimination. Even if "apartheid" were dismantled overnight the most serious of our social evils would remain. A socialist voice will be needed to drive this point home. □