

hegemony. Adam 1971 lists three important areas where the state employs its "power" to contain dissidence.

- i) symbolic alternatives manifested in the apartheid utopia;
- ii) effective police control;
- iii) economic integration and improvement in living standards of blacks.

In containing the magnitude of political conflict in the townships, the state has selectively employed the above three conditions to the detriment of the "dissidents". In Natal, the employment of brutal police force has been tempered with the activities of the amabutho or vigilantes thus rendering the police ostensibly distant from the conflict. The state-controlled media have diligently echoed the theme of "black on black" violence and constantly lambasted the "agitators" and "trouble-makers" for their role. It is now common knowledge in the townships that amabutho or vigilantes enjoy immunity from the police. This serves two purposes.

- i) the state can stand at a distance and escape international condemnation for "brutally oppressing black people";
- ii) divisions among black people weaken their thrust on the state and dissipate the strength of the resistance.

In instances where the threat becomes imminent, the state does not hesitate to move in the police and the army to "restore law and order". Even here, the state is careful to emphasise "at the request of the communities themselves", where "community" refers to the councillors, support notwithstanding.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it might be argued that both the material and ideological conditions which exist in Natal's African townships also exist in townships in the other provinces. This is true, but what is missing in the other provinces is the presence of a strong counter-revolutionary organisational base with a populist appeal. Inkatha is more than a homeland party whose function is the mobilisation of voters for local elections. Inkatha's appeal is that it has its own ideology and a material base with a stake in the system. In the present context Inkatha offers the alternative to going into the streets and getting shot – that this alternative "change through peaceful means" is no more than a slogan does not matter. The atmosphere in the townships is charged with slogans from both sides. Admittedly, the politics of "resistance" has yielded some "visible fruits": the very process of reform that the country is going through is ample proof of that. □

by Gary Baines

# THE PORT ELIZABETH DISTURBANCES OF 1920



The scene at the Baakens St. Police Station.

(Police College Library)

There exists a long tradition of black resistance to white domination. Odendaal has argued for a line of continuity between tribal or primary resistance, early constitutional protest politics, African nationalism and (might one add?), the Black consciousness movement. The strategies of resistance have assumed various forms but in seeking to protect their interests against white domination, their aims have been the same. Thus, by adopting a constitutional approach and seeking accommodation within the colonial systems, early African political organisations in the Eastern Cape were

merely displaying a different form of resistance.<sup>1</sup> However, the related development of worker resistance and the emergence of black trade unionism in the Eastern Cape – as part of this tradition – has still to be chronicled.

It would appear that the earliest instance of worker mobilisation was a strike by Mfengu beach labourers at Port Elizabeth in 1846 – possibly the first in South Africa's history.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, between 1854 and 1897 there were a further 17 strikes in the Eastern Cape.<sup>3</sup> Despite the relatively high incidence of strike action in the second half of the nineteenth century, the mobilisation of workers was not necessarily based on class interests. The bargaining power of the Mfengu beach labourers, for example, was initially due to a shortage of labour and, after the influx of labour into the Colony following the Cattle Killing of 1857, on the deliberate exclusion of other groups. Thus the Mfengu, who had been co-opted into white settler society, sought to deny the Khoi and Xhosa entry into labour markets which they monopolised.<sup>4</sup> This preference for neutralising competition to the principle of collective bargaining does not suggest 'proto-unionism' amongst the black working classes in the Eastern Cape. In fact, the writer has found no evidence of working class organisation until the First World War years.

The Port Elizabeth Industrial and Commercial Amalga-

mated Coloured and Native Workers' Union emerged as an independent organisation but, by 1920, had forged links with the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU). The formation of the national union suggests the development of worker consciousness amongst an increasingly industrialised proletariat. The Port Elizabeth branch claimed a membership of 4 000 (probably excessive) comprising mainly unskilled labour and, according to the Schweizer Commission, "the natives who have not actually joined the Union are, nevertheless, in sympathy with its work and influenced by its decisions".<sup>5</sup> While there were clearly divisions within the ranks of the Union, it was generally acknowledged that the President, Samuel Masabalala, was a popular leader. However, to the authorities and the press this demagogue was the archetypal 'boy' who had been led astray by the pernicious doctrines of International Socialism.<sup>6</sup> While there can be little doubt that Masabalala was influenced by Kadalie's efforts in Cape Town and the example of white worker militancy, the distressing socio-economic conditions of Port Elizabeth's working classes explain his support.

The transformation of Port Elizabeth from an entrepot into a commercial industrial centre made for a stable workforce as the demand for labour in the manufacturing industries did not fluctuate markedly. However, certain employers preferred to employ migrant labourers because they were found to be 'more docile and unsophisticated' and because they were less skilled and could be paid lower wages.<sup>7</sup> With drought compounding the problem, access to land in the underdeveloped reserves could no longer guarantee an alternative means of subsistence to an increasing number of migrant labourers. Patterns of migration thus gave way to an increasingly urbanised African population with all its concomitant problems. The pre-requisites of an effective trade union movement had seemingly arisen for there existed "a body of life-long wage-earners, free to sell their labour, wholly dependent on wages without prospects of becoming independent producers and aware of the benefits of collective bargaining".<sup>8</sup> But the bargaining power of the emergent proletariat was offset by a surfeit of unskilled labour in Port Elizabeth. As employers, therefore, had the 'whiphand', only wholesale mobilisation of the workforce could result in demands being acceded to.

The working classes had been adversely affected by the spiralling cost of living during the war years. Wages had not kept pace with the rate of inflation and, in real terms, the buying power of the pound (£SA) was down on the pre-war period. In 1914 the minimum wage for unskilled black labour was 2/6 a day and by the end of the War these rates had increased to only 3/-. By contrast, during the same period, "the percentage increase in the cost of foodstuffs and other necessities ordinarily consumed and used by the natives was 105%".<sup>9</sup> Employers justified wage levels on the grounds that a new minimum wage – which would entail 'across the board' increases – would necessitate the retrenchment of a percentage of the workforce in the prevailing economic climate.<sup>10</sup> Given the intractable attitude of employers, Masabalala's Union began to campaign for wage increases.

In January 1920 the Union demanded a minimum wage of 10/- per day. This was regarded as unrealistic by

employers and an increase of 6d. – regarded as an interim measure by the Union – was accepted. Negotiations continued but only on the employers' terms and with a delegation of their choice. The exclusion of Masabalala from the proceedings amounted to a snub which made the resolution of wage demands between the employers and the Union increasingly unlikely. Accordingly, an offer of 4/6 per day made by employers in early October was rejected in favour of a showdown with employers until the original demands had been met. Agitation for a general strike gathered momentum and at a mass meeting in Korsten on 17 October, Masabalala announced that a strike would be called on 3 November. This course of action was agreed to despite opposition by some of the committee who pointed out that there were insufficient funds to support strike action. At this juncture the authorities decided to intervene in order to prevent the strike by arresting Masabalala and, inadvertently, provoked a greater crisis.

Masabalala was arrested on the morning of Saturday 23 October on charges of incitement to public violence stemming from an alleged assault on Dr W.B. Rubusana at the Korsten meeting. He was taken to the Baakens Street Police Station where he was held in custody. Shortly after one o'clock a delegation from the Union requested the release of Masabalala on bail but was refused by the District Commandant of Police acting on the advice of the Acting Magistrate. During the course of the afternoon further representation for Masabalala's release also proved unsuccessful and an ultimatum was issued demanding his release by 17.15, failing which, it was threatened to effect the same by force.

By late afternoon a crowd consisting of Masabalala's supporters and by-standers and numbering a few hundred had gathered outside the Police Station. After five o'clock a section of the crowd became increasingly demonstrative and pressed hard upon the policemen who had taken up positions on the steps to the entrance of the station. Two futile attempts – one by mounted charge and the other by the use of a fire hose – were made to disperse the crowd but only served to incite its hostility. Meanwhile, the barricaded Police Station had been reinforced by a number of Railway Police and civilian volunteers who were armed with rifles and had taken up positions on the balcony of the station. Shortly hereafter firing erupted and the casualties caused by the shootings numbered 23 dead (20 Blacks, 3 Whites) and more than 50 injured.

News of the shootings spread panic and fear amongst Port Elizabeth's white population as a 'black peril' scare of some magnitude took hold. During the course of the night sporadic attempts at arson and sabotage were made on a petrol storage depot and a power station which seemed to bear out the fears of whites. The tense situation was fuelled by rumours (suddenly recounted) that Blacks had threatened the lives of white employers. Port Elizabeth's white population took steps to defend itself with armed vigilantes, mainly ex-servicemen, augmenting police patrols. Fear of repercussions from the shootings also seemed to grip the black population as a considerable exodus from Port Elizabeth occurred. Masabalala was removed to Grahams-town in the belief that this would help defuse the situation. By the following Monday calm had returned

to Port Elizabeth and the **EP Herald** editorial (25. 10. 1920) defended the actions of the Police by asserting that "had the Police not taken the extreme steps they did, Port Elizabeth would, in all probability, have had a far greater and more terrible tragedy to mourn and deplore".

The same newspaper was able to report the following day that it had 'proof' that the first shots were fired from the crowd and that, by implication, the Police had only acted in self-defence or under extreme provocation. Police testimony given before the inquest held during the week served to reinforce the opinion that the Police actions could be justified. This issue revolved around two key questions: What had precipitated the shootings? (or more simply, Who had fired the first shot?) and, What was the duration of the firing? The findings of the Commission of Enquiry which held its sittings 'in camera' in December, proved both controversial and equivocal. On the one hand, it condemned the "behaviour of the natives in assembling in force before the Police Station with the avowed determination of forcibly effecting the release of Masabalala" and, on the other hand, it censured the Police Inspector for refusing bail and not maintaining discipline amongst the volunteers on the balcony of the Police Station. The Commission stated that it had been unable to determine with any accuracy whether the first shots had been fired from the crowd, the balcony or the steps. While it was common cause that many in the crowd had been armed with kieres and certain other weapons, no conclusive evidence was forthcoming that any Blacks had had firearms in their possession. Furthermore, its conclusion that "all the firing which took place after the mob broke away was directed against fugitives; that it was unnecessary, indiscriminate, and moreover brutal in its callousness, resulting in a terrible toll of killed and wounded without any sufficient reason or justification" was a strongly worded indictment of Police actions.<sup>11</sup>

Public attention focused on the moral and legal implications of Police actions and tended to lose sight of the underlying causes of the disturbances. This was reflected in government circles by the debate as to whether the Commission of Enquiry should concern itself solely with the shootings or examine the socio-economic conditions of Port Elizabeth's black population as well. The arrest of Masabalala had reflected the position of the authorities that the unrest could be ascribed to agitation. This point of view was also reflected in the press and by the employers of labour in Port Elizabeth. A typical statement in the **EP Herald** (25. 10. 1920) stated that, "... native men ... in the warmth of their partisanship and simplicity have allowed themselves to be led astray by men of better education and stronger personality ... who, by inflammatory utterances and evil counsel excited the minds of their followers and incited them to lawless acts". Similarly, a statement issued by the Port Elizabeth chamber of Commerce in the same vein expressed the "hope that all irresponsible agitation will promptly and severely be dealt with" (**P.E. Advertiser**, 10. 11. 1920). Moreover, the government itself impugned the credibility of the Commission's findings by allowing the publication of Police statements exonerating themselves to be appended to the Report tabled in January

1921 (AN. 582 – 1921). The Commissioners, in turn, attacked this "extraordinary procedure which cannot be otherwise construed than a reflection upon the impartiality of the members of the commission".<sup>12</sup> While the Commission's findings provoked justifications from certain quarters and recrimination from others, the government was no nearer a solution to the problem of Port Elizabeth's working classes.

At the second national conference of the ICU held in Cape Town in July 1921 the delegates called upon the Smuts government to allow workers to commemorate 23 October as a national holiday. The request went unheeded and the events of that day are all but forgotten (even as far as historians are concerned). Were it not for the limitations of the popular memory 23 October would probably be accorded the same recognition as 21 March and 16 June as milestones in the liberation struggle. In retrospect, the loss of life on that occasion might seem to pale into insignificance in the light of the staggering death toll in the present unrest. But it is precisely this perspective which imbues such a historical precedent with particular relevance. With greater hindsight and objectivity than Clements Kadalie, it is difficult to concur with his view of the significance of the Port Elizabeth disturbances that "with blood the ICU was set on its way to work for the amelioration of African labour".<sup>13</sup> □

#### REFERENCES:

This article is based on research for a M.A. Thesis (Rhodes University) but does not purport to provide more than a superficial analysis of the events described herein. However, it does have the benefit of insights gained from previously 'untapped' archival material, interviews, etc. Only two published accounts provide more than the usual fleeting reference to the Port Elizabeth 'disturbances'. These are **The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of South Africa** (Oxford, 1978) by Peter Wickins and an article by Robin Bloch in **Africa Perspective**, No. 19 (1981) entitled 'The high cost of living: The Port Elizabeth "Disturbances" of October 1920'. Unfortunately, both these accounts rely entirely on published records such as government papers, newspapers and other secondary sources.

1. See in particular, Andre Odendaal's unpublished Ph.D. Thesis (Cambridge, 1984) **African Political Mobilisation in the Eastern Cape 1880-1910**.
2. E.J. Inggs, 'Mfengu Beach Labour and Port Elizabeth Harbour Development 1835-1870', p. 1. A paper presented to the **Economic History Society of Southern Africa Conference, June 1986, Rhodes University, Grahamstown**.
3. Alan Mabin, 'Strikes in the Cape Colony 1854-1899', **University of the Witwatersrand, African Studies Seminar**, 1983, p. 35.
4. See Inggs, op. cit., and Moyer, R.A., 'A history of the Mfengu of the Eastern Cape 1815-65' (unpublished PhD Thesis, London University, 1976), pp 287-305.
5. Report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the causes of, and occurrences at, the Native disturbances at Port Elizabeth on 23rd October, 1920, and the general economic conditions as they effect the Coloured and Native population (AN. 143-1921). Its chairman was C.A. Schweizer and its other members Dr A. Abdurahman and Dr A.W. Roberts of Lovedale.
6. Bloch, op cit, p. 47. See report in **The Star**, 27. 10. 1920 which was repeated in the **EP Herald** of 30. 10. 1920. However, three days later the **EP Herald** apologised for having published incorrect information about Masabalala (2. 11. 1920).
7. U.G. 22 – 1932: Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-32, para. 545, 547, 556.
8. Webster, E(ed) **Essays in Southern African Labour History** (Johannesburg, 1978), p. 112.
9. Schweizer Commission Report (AN. 143 – 1921), p. 2.
10. See, for example, the text of a speech by the Chairman of the Port Elizabeth Chamber of Commerce, **P.E. Advertiser**, 10. 11. 1920.
11. This paragraph based on the Schweizer Commission Report, pp. 8,9.
12. Letter addressed to the Acting Prime Minister by the Members of the Commission appointed to enquire into the Native Riots at Port Elizabeth on the 23rd October 1920 (AN. 656 – 1921), p. 1.
13. Kadalie, C., **My Life and the ICU** edited by Stanley Trapido (London, 1970), p. 52.