

## THE CONFERENCE ON MARXISM: SEPTEMBER 1991

### Opening Address by Baruch Hirson\*

First of all let me say how appropriate this conference is, and how two years ago it would have been unthinkable. Changes which have taken place, and there have been changes if there has been no transformation, have allowed this conference [to convene]. Secondly I suspect that the organisers of this conference could not have realized how appropriate [it would be] to call this particular gathering together within a fortnight of the banning of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It seems to me appropriate that I should try to trace, partly as an historian, and partly as an activist, the relationship of what I call the Russian connection with South Africa. I can hardly call it a Soviet link because I do not know where the Soviets are any more.

In trying to decide how to approach the subject it seemed to me appropriate to recall that over the last five decades at which I have spoken to various audiences about Marxism, ranging from the City Hall steps of Johannesburg to [students] at many universities, I have told my audiences 'please separate out what I am saying about Marxism and what you have heard about the Soviet Union'. At long last I no longer have to say that, it is absolutely obvious. In talking about Marxism I am not talking about the experience of the Soviet Union, I am talking about the ideas of Karl Marx, and I am talking about working class struggles.

That is only one of many threads that I thought I should mention, but there are so many threads that I am not certain that I know how to weave them together to make a whole cloth.

### The Russian Connection

Looking at the local connections with Russia...the very first of the socialist groups I know of in South Africa were those of Russian exiles long before the revolution [of 1917], who believed devoutly that the struggle in Russia against the Tsarist regime was one of the most important of the struggles in which they could help and participate. They met in small little conclaves, they spoke Yiddish, and in that they paralleled little groups who spoke in German or in Italian. They were groups of exiles, people who had fled from Europe who brought with them their conception of socialism and the hope that tyranny in Europe would be at last overthrown. The Voice of Labour, one of the very first of the socialist organs in this country, brought out by a semi-syndicalist group around [Archie] Crawford and Pickhandle Mary Fitzgerald, took up the matter of this Russian oppression, wrote about the secret police [the Okhrana], displayed their antagonism to the bastion of corruption, and prayed for the day...when that oppressive state would be destroyed. And that is why Benny Sachs, in his reminiscences, speaking of the events of February 1917, said that the Jews of Johannesburg danced in the streets. They were not all Jews and many of them did not dance for long, but some continued to



dance and they danced through October, and unfortunately they continued to dance to whatever tune came out [of Moscow] thereafter.

However, that aside, they did dance. It was a great event. This was something they had been looking forward to all their lives and to which they continued to look forward in exile. The fact that the revolution came first in Russia deserves serious discussion and serious investigation...but that is not my particular concern now. The point is that when that revolution did come, it did have people in the streets, and also in serious discussions, to determine what was happening and what its impact on South Africa might be.

In looking at the events of February 1917, one figure [in South Africa] stands out above all others in his understanding of events. It was a most peculiar understanding, because it came not from a deep knowledge of Marxism, but from a gut reaction as he observed what was happening in the world around him. I refer to that almost unknown person, David Ivon Jones, a Welshman who had come to South Africa in 1910 as a bible puncher and ended up as a Bolshevik...He was a devoutly religious person, looking for justice and he believed he had found it in the demands for peace, for better living conditions and in socialism. The new religion as he described it, seemed to have arisen in Russia and he devoted the rest of his life to that cause. I do not want to impinge on my conference paper on Jones, but it must be said of him that, having moved to a radical position because of the actions of the white workers [of South Africa] in the [general strikes] of 1913 and 1914, and having seen how they were mown down by Smuts, he adopted the most radical solution he could find: complete opposition to the government, complete opposition to the first World War, complete opposition to the collapse of the Second International. He wrote to the secretary of the International Socialist Bureau in London [in 1915] saying that the Second International had collapsed. In that letter he called for a new international, suggesting that it be led by [the German social democrat] Karl Liebknecht, to oppose the war...When the Russian revolution started in February, Jones responded with an amalgam of ideas that approximated to the permanent revolution, before most of the Bolsheviks came to that position. He greeted the revolution in March 1917 having only the accounts in the [local] newspapers. If I ask you to look at the *Star* or *Cape Times*, or *Cape Argus*, you will see what I mean when I say that he didn't have very much information to work on. Nonetheless he could say, within two weeks of the events being reported in the local press that, in this period of advanced capitalism, the Russian workers could not stop [after] the first hurdle, they would have to move on to a second revolutionary phase, and would have to take power. And please note: this was before Lenin had arrived back at St Petersburg; when the Bolsheviks were in disarray and not sure whether they should support Kerensky or not; and when Trotsky had not yet returned to Russia. At this time Ivon Jones was already proclaiming the need for the Russian workers to continue their revolution. In some sense he advanced South African socialist ideas to the very centre of world events.

In looking at what was happening, Ivon Jones had no concept of one-stage or two-stage revolutions: that is a later invention of the Comintern [Third Interna-



tional], as copied by many who should know better. He saw revolution as a continuous process in which the workers having moved, would move again, because they would not stop before they took power. His concept of the permanent revolution, as I understand it, was absolutely accurate. He believed from the beginning that the Russian workers had entered into the world socialist movement, and they would help to liberate all mankind from...capitalism. He was an internationalist to the core. Not for one moment did he think of socialism in one country, never mind in South Africa. Except for one thing, that having seen the possibility of revolution in Europe, he then said that the South African workers could obviously take power because he believed they could link up with socialists elsewhere and that was essential to his entire understanding of socialism.

That was the message of Jones, and it was not accidental therefore that he was involved in the first anti-communist trial in this country, in 1919, in Pietermaritzburg, something that tends to be forgotten. Jones [and L H H Green] were tried after they issued a leaflet entitled 'The Bolsheviks are Coming'. Not coming from Russia, but from within South Africa. Dragged out of a sanatorium, desperately ill, Jones was given a jail sentence. [The case was based on a technicality – on whether the censorship laws had been broken, but the trial centred on the ideas of communism]. Only the appeal court saved him from going to prison, and that probably saved his life. Jones, desperately ill as he was, did manage to get to Europe. He had gone home to die in his native town, Aberystwyth. But, persuaded to go to Moscow, had a new lease of life: as a propagandist for the Comintern; as a translator of Lenin into English; as an admirer of Lenin and Trotsky – and he did not separate them, because they were working together to create a socialist society in Russia. What would have happened to him if he had not died in 1924, and he was seriously ill and died naturally, is hard to say. I did speak with the Russian historian, Professor Davidson, and he agreed with me that had Jones lived, he would not have lived for very long. He would have fallen in the purges, because internationalist that he was, there was no way that he would have been tolerated in the Moscow regime that followed.

In talking about the Russian connection, I want to repeat the complaint of S P Bunting, in Moscow, in 1928: that is, that the Comintern and fellow communist parties gave no advice to the SACP. When the British seamen's strike took place in 1925, and it took place mainly in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand...members of the SACP formed the core of the support committees in South Africa. They waited for some kind of message from Moscow, on how they might proceed. No message ever came. Was this because South Africa was thought of as an outpost, not recognized for what it was – a centre of world capital because it was the producer of gold?

There was no support for the communists, and no advancement of theory for the South Africans from the Communist International. It was not necessary in most cases for the South African party to get instructions from Moscow, the Russians had only to wink and the local party members blinked furiously. Whatever happened in Russia – understandably at the beginning – was followed so automatically when news came through that instructions were not needed. That is, until it



came to a political situation when our comrades of that time did not know how to proceed.

Bunting complained bitterly in 1928, but in fact it came too late: the Comintern was about to instruct. When the line was class struggle before 1928 the local party followed, because they were in tune with Moscow. When that was reversed and the new line called for a 'Black Republic', then, come what may, object as they may, the new line was 'Black Republic'. When it was 'popular front', whether they objected or not – and by this time they had stopped objecting – it was 'popular front'. When Moscow said 'anti-war', it was anti-war; when that was reversed and became 'pro-war', it was pro-war, and when it was pro-war again, need I say, it was pro-war again, the communists in South Africa [knew the time had come to change tack]. They did their patriotic duty: I remember how they sat playing poker every Sunday night with a kitty for *Medical Aid for Russia*. It was a patriotic effort on their part... Whatever was demanded of the party followed suit.

Let me say that I am sorry that I have to talk in this way. I should be the impartial opener of the conference, and I am sure that many people might be uncomfortable. I hope that we might discuss some of these things as the conference proceeds and we will see how some of these issues will emerge, but whatever might be said of the communists or the left opposition, they always followed a Russian model. Those who were expelled from the party because of genuine distress at the way the Soviet Union conducted its policies, if they stayed in politics, still followed the Russian model. This time it was Trotsky's model. There was hardly anything these people would do unless they got the support of Leon Trotsky. I think that Trotsky was a great man, but I do not think that any group can dare to say that will follow a policy because one man somewhere lays down the line. Trotsky made a really disastrous mistake in the way he advised the left opposition in South Africa in his letter of 1935. I think that by agreeing with them that they centre their work on the land question, and urging them to accept the Black Republic slogan, Trotsky was horribly wrong. I think that in this he did a real disservice to the left opposition in South Africa. Please note the way he dominated the left opposition in those days: whether it was by writing the forward to the Afrikaans edition of the *Communist Manifesto* to commemorate ninety years of that pamphlet, or whether it was to advise on the programme of the party that was formed. He did a further disservice by calling that monstrous state a 'deformed worker's state'... Yes it was degenerate – but it is doubtful whether it was a worker's state. Many continued to accept Trotsky's description of the USSR as a deformed or degenerate state. Hopefully recent events will persuade people that such a description is no longer valid.

### **The War, the USSR and the Communist Party**

The view taken towards the USSR affected the entire attitude towards the war. The CPSA was confused, some Trotskyist groups resolved the problem by dissolving themselves. It is not possible to understand how they could have done that: it was inexcusable. Only two small groups, one in the Cape, and the other in Johannesburg functioned openly: and they adopted an anti-war position. Whether that attitude was correct needs serious discussion and serious



debate. But it was not central to the politics of the time. The black working class did not give a damn about the war: they were interested in day-to-day issues. That emerged clearly from the documents I found when I came to write my last book. The Africans were concerned about their working and living conditions; about the right to form trade unions and to strike, and whether their community problems could be solved. That is why they boycotted the buses or demanded more houses. [Their actions ignored appeals by communists and the nationalist movements, among others, that they do not strike, or do not disrupt production].

### **The Post-war Era**

It was after the war that the situation seemed to take a different turn. The Soviet Union was now the first among equals of those who had defeated Hitler. The reason for that victory (and that defeat) I still find unanalyzed in most of the books I read. But whatever the reasons for those events, the CPSA altered course after the war, both because of events overseas and locally. The party members were devastated by Churchill's speech at Fulton in 1946 where he said that an 'iron curtain' was descending on Europe, and this was followed by the Truman doctrine, which heralded the start of the cold war. However, just when they were about to alter course they were banned. The members of the CPSA went into the ANC and, whether they did this for good or bad reasons, they were able to establish themselves inside the nationalist movement in South Africa. They imported into the ANC a sense of organization, a certain backbone that must not be denied for one moment, and they also imported Stalinist methods.

After the banning of the ANC in 1960, its exile body became increasingly indistinguishable in form from Stalinism...A process of transformation that was helped on by support from eastern Europe with money, with publishing, with scholarships and with arms for struggle. The members of the ANC — and I do not know which were members of the SACP and which were not — they were indistinguishable — picked up the methods of the secret police: in East Germany, Cuba and the Soviet Union. In this way they conducted themselves in ways little different from the communist parties, so called, throughout Europe. It is this which laid its stamp on the High Command's actions in the mutiny in Umkhonto we Sizwe in 1984: to the forms of interrogation, torture and killings. I am not concerned here with whether the people who conducted that mutiny were right or wrong in their appraisal of the military situation in Angola. I do know that most of them were not spies. I do know that most of them were not agents of the government, and I do know that they were brutally murdered by the security department of the ANC. And I do know that those methods have continued and still continue despite denials by the ANC. There are still members of the ANC in prison in Tanzania, who are being beaten with iron rods and mutilated. I do know that people are being accused falsely and being excluded for false reasons inside the Congress movement.

This is not, [I repeat], not the fight for democracy that we were told would come out of the ANC. This is a fight for the establishment of a kind of control which is

finally being buried in the Soviet Union — or hopefully it is being buried — but is still alive in the ranks of the ANC and the SACP.

Please do note, that whether you accept what I say or not, there are a whole series of questions that have to emerge from your deliberations, which must take these events into account. We have to understand the meaning of the Soviet Union's impact on South Africa, the way in which it affected our politics, yesterday, today and unfortunately still tomorrow. The way in which these ideas have been imported into the political movements of this country, the way in which they affect both those who were in the Communist Party, in the ANC, Azapo, the PAC, and in the little groups of the Trotskyist tendencies...the Marxist Workers Tendency, the SWP, the WRP, and so on — they too have to confront this issue and decide where they are in terms of the problems of what was represented not only by the Soviet Union, but the concept of revolution, the concept of socialism, the internationalizing of our struggle, so that Marxism can be revived and flourish, and play a really active part in the transformation of this country.

By that I do not mean through a market economy. I do not mean it through a mixed economy, or a social welfare state. I mean through the control of society, by the producers of that society, in an international movement which will transform not only South Africa but the world.

This is not going to take place immediately. It might only take place over ten, twenty or thirty years. We still have time to learn what the problems are so that we can play our real part when the time comes. I can only say that I hope that your deliberations, which might not be as partisan as mine has been, will at least be fruitful and that some ideas will come out of them.

\* Although there was a prepared paper, the outline of which I followed, I did not read from it and preferred to ad lib. This allowed for spontaneity but also led to repetition and some slips of the tongue. The address has been shortened and corrected. Readers of *Searchlight South Africa* will recognize ideas elaborated in previous issues that had to be shortened to fit the time available for the address. Additions, inserted in the interest of clarification, are in square brackets — BH.