

## **NEVER QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT: ANGOLA, NAMIBIA, SOUTH AFRICA, AND THE BIG POWERS**

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Talks in London, Brazzaville, and Cairo, talks in New York and Geneva; talks in which government representatives from America, Cuba, South Africa and Angola met to decide what deal could (or could not) be imposed on the peoples of Angola and Namibia. In this backroom diplomacy, from which all but a few were excluded, the powers that be bargained over disengagement in Angola, and 'freedom for Namibia'. While this charade was being played out predatory South African forces swept across the Angolan countryside, killing thousands of innocent peasants, and only stopped when they faced severe casualties in their own ranks. In Namibia, where a cease fire had not been discussed, South African soldiers terrorised, and continue to terrorise, the population of Ovamboland.

There is little information about what was actually said at the talks, but that is of little importance. The negotiations that actually mattered did not take place in London, nor Brazzaville, nor Cairo, nor in New York or Geneva: those that did matter took place in private, between representatives of the two super-powers — the USA and the USSR — and of this there has been a blanket silence. What has still to be disclosed are the contents of the largely unpublicized meetings between Chester Crocker, the latter day Kissinger, and the Soviet deputy foreign minister, Anatoly Adamishin. But what is known is that the USSR, whose disengagement from the major scenes of conflict lies behind the sudden eruption of 'peace', did not have any delegates at the cross-continental conferences. Only when details of the bargaining over Afghanistan, Viet Nam, Korea and Cambodia, are disclosed, will the truth emerge on what was decided for southern Africa.

In examining the talks over Angola and Namibia, one issue is beyond doubt: the USSR has been forced by near economic collapse to withdraw its forces from the major global flashpoints. The USA on the other hand has conceded little, and has either strengthened its strategic and/or its economic

position in Asia, or has found a means to re-enter positions from which it was driven so ignominiously at the end of the Viet Nam war.

Although the situation can only be understood in global terms, the concern in this article is the conflict on the South African borders. In this thirteen year war, fought on the fields of Angola and Namibia, the super-powers have had little concern for the local inhabitants. The war that has been waged in these territories has been viewed in terms of super-power logistics, with the USSR (and its Cuban allies) lining up behind a government that has little popular support — and the USA together with South Africa (and China at one stage) manipulating, if not controlling, the tribal army of UNITA in their bid to control the mineral rich Angolan countryside.

Any solution other than that imposed by the two super-powers is not possible, although the two junior partners in the conflict — Cuba and South Africa — can be used to ensure that the fighting does not cease. Chester Crocker has announced that the 'civil war' in Angola is not covered by the talks, and Pretoria has said that it will continue to maintain security in Namibia with its armed forces. Also, both these mini-powers have their own pretensions in the region. Cuba, which has provided the troops to support the Angolan (MPLA) government, seeking a sphere of influence, and possibly some reward from the oil rich Angolan state; South Africa with its control of Angolan diamonds, and its own search for strategic minerals. More than this, South Africa sees itself as the regional super-power and is prepared to defy the USA in its bid for local supremacy.

The Angolan government, as one of the aggrieved parties, is represented at the talks, but its presence can only conceal its weakness. Its main resources are controlled by American and South African multinationals, and after the exhausting war — and its indebtedness as a result of that war — the government will become the pawn of the super powers. For the Namibian people, over whom the war has been ostensibly fought, there is no place at the talks. They are the pawns of the pawns, and SWAPO (the South West African People's Organisation), which claims to represent the Namibian peoples will undoubtedly become the puppet government of the South African regime — or suffer the fate that overtook the governments of Lesotho and Swaziland. The immediate victor has been the South African regime, which will continue its domination of the sub-continent, assist in the

subversion of Angola (if that should be necessary) and maintain its hegemony throughout the region.

To claim that the foreign powers have no right to talk about the fate of small nations would be naive in this era of super-power politics. This is the 'reality' dictated by the mega-powers, and this manipulation of the smaller nations will only cease when a working class movement emerges, freed of the cloak of stalinism, and able to raise again the banner of socialism. This is a harsh message that must be repeated until the workers in the dependencies learn that their fate is connected with the world wide struggle for socialism. The alternative, as is once again demonstrated by these perambulating talks in London/Brazzaville/Cairo/New York/Geneva is that years of struggle are brought to nought by the Chester Crockers, Castros, Gorbachevs, and Bothas.

While the talks went on, and for the foreseeable future, men, women and children have been dying in Namibia and Angola. More than that, people are being murdered in the regions that lie on the borders of South Africa. With a cynicism that belies any intention of surrendering power in any of the regions it controls, South Africa sends its agents into the 'Front Line States,' sabotaging or destroying almost at will. And to underline its killing power, foreign minister Pik Botha has now openly disclosed that South Africa has (or can make) the atom bomb.

The South Africans were present at the talks, but it must not be thought that terms were agreed to lightly by Pretoria. As long as the South Africans were victorious in the battlefields of Angola, they were unwilling to concede an inch. It was only because the South African army and its UNITA satraps were locked in indecisive battle against the armed forces of Angola, SWAPO and the Cuban forces, that 'peace' talks were agreed to.

### **The Battles in Angola**

This is the second time that the South African army has been stopped in Angola. On the first occasion, soon after the fall of the Portuguese colonial administration, and the assumption of power by the MPLA government, South African forces swept across Angola. On that occasion they were forced to retreat when the US dithered, and withdrew its support. Now, once again, the South Africans were stopped in its assault on Cuito Cuanavale.

The South African army lost air supremacy, and suffered its first serious (white) casualties. Furthermore, by the beginning of June, columns of the Angolan army (FAPLA) had moved to within ten miles of the Namibian border, and Cuban planes were used to bomb Calueque.

Such large movements of troops and armour in support of the Angolan government has required logistical regroupment, and the South Africans bought time by agreeing to talks. The UNITA forces, whose supply route to South Africa (through Namibia) was threatened, had to be relocated to bases near Zaire, where they would have access to US supplies with which to re-open the offensive — and threaten the oil wells of Cabinda.

The role of Zaire has become increasingly apparent since early 1986. The government of Mobuto Sese Seko has been accorded a pivotal position in the struggle by the USA. Zaire's supposed independence of foreign rule makes any manoeuvring less vulnerable to OAU criticism. Through the Zairian connection, UNITA can expect highly sophisticated military equipment to take control of the skies over all Angola. The long history of military involvement in the Congo stretches back to its war-time extraction of uranium, and its direct military operations in the early 1960s. The US maintained its connection with Zaire, and the joint US/Zairian military exercises held during April-May 1988 was the outcome of two years of careful and secret preparation by the US, for the building of its main base, for military intervention in the sub-continent of Africa.

### **The Exercise In 'Detente'**

South Africa has now announced that it is withdrawing its troops from Angola. Nothing is said about restitution for the thousands murdered in the fighting, nor for the material damage inflicted on the southern half of Angola. Nor should it be believed that this is an end to the war. What has altered has been the nature of the fighting. The South Africans will now operate as they have done in Mozambique after the Nkomati accord. There will be support for 'rebel' forces; raids in 'hot pursuit'; commando groups operating covertly to destroy 'enemy' positions inside Angola

All this will undoubtedly be criticised at the UN, and the super-powers will weep crocodile tears — but this will only be a

front, behind which the USA will continue its aid for UNITA, and the region will remain the plaything of the western powers. This can be the only result of the secret talks between Crocker and Adamishin. In later issues of *Searchlight South Africa* we will provide fuller details of some of the wheeler-dealer deals for establishing an American sphere of influence throughout the region, with South Africa as the junior partner. That will include a survey of the many business deals struck directly between the USSR and South Africa over diamonds and gold, and the reputed talks over a number of issues between Moscow and Pretoria — all neatly covered in the west by the barrage of 'anti-communist' propaganda from the South African government.

What is instructive, in terms of current talks, was Crocker's attempts to convene a meeting in early 1988, during a lull in the battle for Cuito Cuanavale. South Africa's Pik Botha refused to attend, ostensibly because UNITA would not be represented at the meeting. Yet, within four months, the top South African foreign ministry official, Neil van Heerden, himself a veteran of supply operations for the rebel anti-government force, the MNR in Mozambique and of the Nkomati agreement, was in London for the first round of four party talks over Angola and Namibia

What pressures (or promises) were made to the South Africans to produce this change of heart? Was it indeed the casualties suffered by the SADF, or was it perhaps that there has been some weariness with the war that has led to new thinking by sections of the armed forces in Pretoria?

For the first time in their history, the South Africans have had to arm significant numbers of blacks for the war in Angola/Namibia. The men recruited for the army, like soldiers everywhere, probably had little thought of the political implications of becoming involved in a war. The understanding was soon forced on them that they were just cannon fodder for Pretoria's grand designs on Cuito Cuanavale. The situation was cogently described in the International Institute for Strategic Studies, in its annual Strategic Survey published in May 1988:

[no longer] can the SADF leadership be confident that its ethnic Namibian units, which make up some two-thirds of its forces in Namibia, will engage effectively in conventional

warfare. In October 1987 members of the 101 (Kaokoland) and 202 (Kavango) battalions rebelled after being deployed into Angola to defend UNITA against regular Angolan forces. These were the first such incidents reported amongst black units, which had previously been deployed on counter-insurgency operations against SWAPO. South African officials, while denying reports of a mutiny by hundreds of black soldiers, acknowledged that 47 members of one battalion had been discharged, and that 27 members of the other had protested about the way they were being treated (pp.194-5).

*Resister*, the journal of the Committee on South African War Resistance, puts the number of mutineers rather higher — 400 in the 101 Battalion alone. Quoting other sources, it said that nearly 100 soldiers were dismissed as a result of mutinies. In December 1987, *Resister* drew one conclusion:

When SWATF [South West African Territorial Force] troops refuse to fight, white national servicemen will be put into the front line. And they might have to go in without air cover — the Air Force cannot afford to lose more Mirages, which are irreplaceable because of the arms embargo.

It would be wrong to read too much into an event about which there is scant information, but the authorities must have been more concerned about the impact of mutinies, small as they were, than the loss of military hardware. The South African army, and with it, the entire authority of the state, would face a serious crisis if discontent among the troops got out of hand.

Equally significant has been the 48 hour stay-away by Namibian workers, in response to the call from the National Union of Namibian Workers: firstly, in support of the school students who have been demanding the removal of South African military bases near schools in Ovamboland; secondly, for an end to the deployment of the counter-insurgency unit Koevoet [Crowbar] in the townships; and thirdly, the release of all detainees.

The issue is closely related to the military situation, with soldiers accused of abducting youth (either to force them to serve in the army, or to exact revenge on the least protected part of the population in retaliation for SWAPO attacks), and to the

positioning of Koevoet forces designed to suppress discontent throughout the region.

School strikes started in March, when 700 students are reported to have gone home after a military raid on their school. Claiming that there can be no safety until the military camps were relocated, the youth have refused to return to the classroom. This won the support of their parents, and other students followed. By June, some 50,000 students were away from school, and the strike called by the unions was the next step in the campaign against army control.

This was a historic move by the workers, and although there can be little chance that their protest will be heeded, this must have demonstrated to all but the blind, that the civilian population has reached the end of its tether.

### What Next?

Despite the encouraging news that soldiers, workers and the youth have taken steps to show their displeasure with the situation, there can be few illusions that the South African government will tamely withdraw. They might prefer 'peaceful' control, and they might wish to withdraw their troops — but they will only be moved by massive pressures, or if they can a formula which will allow them to retain control on their north-western border. Nor have we any faith in the Moscow summit. Here too, the small territories are no more than pawns in the hands of the 'grand-masters'. They are to be manipulated and sacrificed in the end-game play.

There was a time, not long back, when some observers on the so-called left still proclaimed their faith in the Soviet Union as the champion of liberation. To believe that the stalinist machine, used so effectively in eastern Europe as an instrument of counter-revolution, could act as a liberating force is laughable. We doubt whether there are many such people left. That might lead to the biggest advance yet achieved: at least the workers will have understood that they have to rely on their own resources. But there are still illusions about the advances that must come when 'national liberation' is achieved.

No crystal ball is needed to predict what the future holds for Angola. Even if it was assured of peace it would face vast problems in restoring its economy, repaying its debts, and restoring its infra-structure. But it is not assured of peace. In

fact the civil war will be intensified, and with the South African withdrawal, attention will no longer be focussed on this territory. The USA can get on with its covert war in order to secure for itself a completely compliant government — unless that is, the MPLA government is willing to accept the mantle of subordination.

But it is the question of Namibia that seems to befuddle most observers. Taking their cue from SWAPO spokesmen the supporters of 'liberation' all look forward to the great tomorrow when Namibia will be free. There is still no certainty that the South African government will allow free elections in Namibia, and no certainty that a popularly elected government will be allowed to govern.

If, however, South Africa does surrender formal control of Namibia, it is not possible to envisage this territory as a viable independent state. With a population of less than one million, without its own port, with a poorly developed transport system, with a mainly subsistence rural economy, and without the capital to develop its mineral resources, the economic future of Namibia is bleak. The only current sources of employment are in the hands of white farmers, or the multi-national corporations that have ruthlessly depleted the mineral stock over the past two decades. In fact Namibia cannot survive without large scale yearly subsidies, and in most respects it can be no more than a vast Bantustan, beholden to the South African government for its revenue and for its very existence. Pretoria is only too aware of the problems that this territory will face if it ever secures 'independence,' and it is only because in the past it has been easier to hold onto the territory, and maintain its policing against potential enemies, that it did not surrender its formal hold.