Organise – or die

*Whatever the role of a mysterious 'third force' and the legacy of apartheid in the recent carnage in Transvaal townships, democratic community organisations and trade unions must also bear part of the responsibility. **Greg Ruiters** and **Rupert Taylor** argue that these organisations have allowed migrant workers and squatters to become alienated from the mainstream of the democratic movement, so making them easy fodder for reactionary parties*

FROM THE third week of July to the end of September, conflict in Reef townships saw more than 800 people killed in an intense and unexpected 'civil war'. Many more were injured and left homeless. The communities worst hit were Sebokeng, Kagiso, Thokoza, Katlehong, Vosloorus, Tembisa and Soweto. Why?

The favoured interpretation of the SABC and Afrikaans- and English-speaking press has been to talk in terms of 'black-on-black' (Xhosa-Zulu) violence rooted in inherent forces of ethnic or 'tribal' identity.

This, however, fails to recognise that ethnicity has been manipulated by the ideology of apartheid to give separateness philosophical credence. Moreover, the majority of people reject such labelling. Nelson Mandela has declared: 'This violence is not, as alleged by the mass media, a conflict between Xhosas and Zulus. This is not a tribal conflict at all'.

So what are the causes?

One answer, suggested by Andrew Mapetho in *WIP* 69, is that 'it is clear there is a sinister and organised plan behind this violence'. There can be little doubt that a 'third force' has been operative in significant ways. It would, however, be dangerous - both politically and

from the point of view of analysis - merely to assert a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories stress individual and not social factors. They leave unexplained why the violence took a mass group form, why events happened when they did and do not assess the role of apartheid structures in generating division.

An adequate explanation of the conflict must seek out the hidden dynamics behind the events. It must attempt to identify the triggering mechanisms, immediate causes and pertinent underlying sociological and political conditions.

Events sparking the conflict have been acts of physical violence. At Sebokeng on 22 July the trigger was, allegedly, an assault on out-of-town Inkatha members by ANC supporters. On the East Rand, the initial spark, in late July, was over a gambling argument in the Crossroads squatter camp at Katlehong which saw a Zulu-speaker stabbed to death by a Xhosa-speaker. Both events unleashed a spiral of retaliatory killings that spread to other areas.

The immediate causes, which explain why the conflict escalated so rapidly, lie in the increasing politicisation of the townships over recent months. This is generally due to rising expectations generated by the National Party's reform moves.

More specifically, it is a result of the ANC's move to marginalise Inkatha leader Gatsha Buthelezi by calling for the dismantling of KwaZulu. A further factor is Inkatha's launch, on 14 July, as a national political party. The weeks preceding the conflict saw a strong recruitment campaign by Inkatha among Zulu-speakers and other hostel dwellers. It also saw a number of acts of harassment and intimidation by unruly township youth, often acting under ANC colours, against Zulu-speaking hostel dwellers.

These developments, which played a crucial role in sharpening differences, have to be seen in the context of underlying material conditions which reveal a picture of widespread deprivation among the main social groups involved in the conflict. What is distinctive about the pattern of conflict between mainly Zulu-speaking hostel dwellers and largely Xhosa-speaking squatter camp inhabitants is not the ethnic lines of division, but that the participants and victims of the violence are those who have been among the most severely exploited and disadvantaged by the apartheid system.

Whilst hostels - the epicentres of the conflict - house the most degraded section of the working-class, the squatter camps are home to a predominantly

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Have mass organisations addressed
the challenges raised by the recent
violence?*

jobless under-class caught in a culture of poverty. Both environments are characterised by a lack of any personal privacy or recreational facilities, and by severe overcrowding. Hostel dwellers have around three square metres of their own living space. On average the number of people living in one shack is six.

Under the migrant labour system, Zulu-speaking workers, living in cold dark single-sex hostels, are separated from family life and forced to perform the worst kind of dirty work in foundries, other heavy industry and municipalities. Their escape is to return to the increasing impoverishment of the rural areas which they call home.

The position of squatters is worse; living in a state of constant poverty and insecurity, without basic services and sanitation, these people lack fundamental human rights.

The material conditions of both hostel dwellers and squatters are a direct result of the workings of capitalism under apartheid. Big business was quick to denounce the violence as carnage and barbarism. It is, however, guilty of complicity in its creation. If the migrant labour system did not exist; would the violence have occurred? Would big business have such high profits?

In order to explain the extent of the

violence, attention must be given to underlying tensions within community politics and the union movement. In particular, both hostel dwellers and squatters have not been integrated into formal organisational structures. Both groups are perceived as outsiders, politically marginal to local struggles.

Within community politics, particularly in the case of hostel dwellers, there has been a history of conflict. In Soweto, for example, there were riots at Dube hostel in 1957 and, during the 1976 Uprising, Meadowlands hostel dwellers were actively encouraged by the police to attack township residents. Suffering under a semi-pariah status, hostel dwellers have often faced attacks from township youth - themselves affected by endemic school boycotts and massive unemployment.

To township people, hostel dwellers are regarded as 'mogus' or 'amagoduka' (fools or wanderers). Zoned in buildings often situated on the edges of established communities, they do not have strong social networks which link them to townships. The fact that many hostels, such as those in Soweto, are situated near railway stations means hostel dwellers rarely need to enter townships.

Township residents' attitudes to squat-

ter camps are influenced by their fear of the many social problems associated with these settlements. Feelings of hostility have expressed themselves in calls from township residents for the eviction of squatters and the use of their land for formal housing.

The result is that, in many townships, migrant workers and squatters have been largely marginalised within or excluded from civic associations. UDF politics of the 1980s focused on national issues and mobilisation politics which at some points saw sections of youth resort to coercive tactics in enforcing stayaways and consumer boycotts. Political and social issues were not formulated or taken up in a way that drew in hostel and squatter residents. Influx control, for example, was largely ignored as an issue. This meant migrants and squatters were not sufficiently defined as part of the emerging political community.

Although some hostels have independently evolved hostel committees, only in Langa in the Western Cape were serious efforts made to organize hostel dwellers - in the Western Cape Hostel Dwellers Association (WCHDA).

In squatter camps, the transient nature of the population poses problems for organisation. But the democratic movement has tended to concentrate only on those who are formally housed. It is only in recent months that the UDF has moved to focus on the defence of squatter camps.

It is true that the prospects for more effective democratic community organisation were constrained by repressive measures, such as the the states of emergency and the banning of organisations in early 1988. But the significant point is that there are too few attempts actually to build a strong grass-roots presence in hostels and squatter camps.

Lacking adequate resources for independent mobilisation, hostel dwellers and squatters consequently remained on the edge of community struggles and found no meaningful peaceful channels for expressing and resolving grievances.

A similar pattern emerges within the union movement. Zulu-speaking migrant workers in Natal and on the East Rand

proved easy to organise and were the backbone of the early unions in the 1970s. In recent years, however, migrants have found themselves displaced in industrial union structures by younger and more politicised shopstewards.

Central to this has been the rise of Cosatu and its challenge to Fosatu's syndicalist policy of coexistence of all workers. Fosatu tended to emphasise workers' factory unity rather than political unity. Since Cosatu's emergence, hostels have no longer been central to union organisation as was the case earlier, and migrants who are unionised have experienced a degree of alienation.

Union strategies have failed to adequately address hostel dwellers' grievances and the increasing insecurity of the lowest paid workers who are largely disqualified from reform initiatives relating to housing, pensions and medical aid schemes. Unions have not effectively blocked retrenchments which affect the unskilled disproportionately, and Cosatu recently undersigned a proposed Labour Relations Act which compromises domestic and farm workers.

One pattern highlighting the increasing economic deprivation, insecurity and political alienation of migrant workers is their reluctance to support mass actions and strikes. The 1988 three-day stayaway illustrates this. Zulu-speaking hostel dwellers went home for that period. A Numsa national strike set for July 1990, just before the violence, drew a 53% 'yes' ballot. But a percentage of migrant workers opted for caution and this fed tensions which played a role in the conflict.

It is also significant that industrial violence has increased dramatically. Clashes between strikers and non-strikers who are often members of Inkatha's Uwusa have increased - such as at Haggie Rand and National Springs on the East Rand. Strikes have seen scabs thrown off trains and employers organise vigilante attacks.

The consequences of all this fragmentation have been dire. When the events of July occurred, there were no all-embracing community structures operating in affected areas to resolve the provocative calls for revenge and justice, and to check wild rumours. People were left to resort to informal organisational structures and open confrontation. And a cycle of violence erupted.

Clearly the primary causes of massive social disorganisation are apartheid policies rooted in supporting a form of colo-

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nial exploitation. Apart from the effects of draconian security legislation, ethnic and class divisions have been fuelled by increasing competition for scarce resources and the state's selective upgrading strategy. This strategy focuses on private home-ownership and leaves hostel dwellers and squatters out of account. The lifting of influx control in 1986 has dramatically increased competition for housing and jobs in urban areas - especially in a recessionary economic climate.

Since the 1980s, township population densities have risen rapidly but with no corresponding growth in housing and infrastructure. In Katlehong, for example, shacks have mushroomed from just a few thousand in 1980 to over 35 000. In 1989 Tembisa residents started to encroach on hostels for accommodation. Planact's report on the Soweto rent boycott showed that there is a 'mammoth backlog of housing', with a quarter of a million people on the Soweto city council waiting list while many more see no point in adding their name.

Divisions have also been engineered by big business through housing, pension and share ownership schemes. Through its strategy of 'flexible specialisation', big business has promoted division between temporary labour which is used flexibly - that is in terms of the oscillation of supply and demand - and a core skilled labour force.

All this, however, does not totally absolve the democratic movement. Greater attention could have been given to accommodating the political interests of migrants in civics and unions. Instead of being channelled into progressive politics they were left open to reactionary tendencies. Crucially, the ability of Inkatha to expand outwardly from its base has been directly proportional to the omissions and mistakes of UDF, Cosatu and the ANC.

The key point is that, on the Reef, within the hostels, Inkatha found the

space within which to mobilise. In the post-February 2 situation the ANC's slowness to take full advantage of the new openings created by the state enhanced Inkatha's position. The process of the conflict polarised people into distinct camps, forcing some middle ground elements into Inkatha by default. A stronger and more democratic urban political umbrella might have prevented the ensuing factionalism which led to violent conflict.

The conflict represents a setback for the democratic movement. The extent of the ANC's assumed support in the Transvaal has been questioned and the state's security measures under 'Operation Iron Fist' have worked to disrupt organisation and instill a sense of futility. Furthermore, Cosatu unions with migrant workers are now facing serious organisational problems. Numsa, for example, is having to cope with disruption on the shopfloor and a breakdown of local structures.

Accepting that the conflict is related to organisational shortcomings, the way forward for the democratic movement is to forge debate on the following:
• organising hostel dwellers and squatters around their specific material problems;
• how civics or other democratic formations could incorporate hostel dwellers and squatters in their structures which adequately reflect their interests;
• how, in conjunction with hostel dwellers and squatters, campaigns for the abolition of the hostel system and the defence of squatter camps can be elaborated;
• giving greater weight to material issues such as housing, jobs and living wages which could serve to strengthen a collective working-class identity;
• building broad working-class structures so as to include all workers; and
• linking national political issues with grass-roots concerns, at the same time reassessing the current style of leadership politics. In sum, there is need to develop debate on building wider democratic community structures, a more inclusive union movement and finding ways of centralising and unifying local and national struggles. The danger is that, instead of promoting united action, the democratic movement will lose ground to factionalism, threatening the hopes of a democratic South Africa. •