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## Lessons of the 1950s



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by Richard Monroe

Editors' Introduction:

After the 'Nkomati Accord'—the ANC must rethink its strategy

# Editors' Introduction

## After the 'Nkomati Accord'—the ANC must rethink its strategy

The Nkomati peace pact between the South African government and the Frelimo government of Mozambique makes the publication of this pamphlet on the "*Lessons of the 1950s*" all the more timely.

Why? Because the pact can only drive home the realisation among the black working people of South Africa that they are their own liberators—that no-one else can do the job for them. It can only spur on the search within the rising working-class movement for the policies, methods of political organisation, strategy and leadership necessary for a successful revolutionary struggle.

The decade of the 1950s was in many ways a forerunner and 'dress rehearsal' for the mass movement today, now facing even greater and more bitter battles against the bosses and their racist state. Understanding the lessons of the 1950s—understanding, in particular, why the movement of that time ended in division and defeat—can be a precious asset today, helping to forewarn activists against old errors and pitfalls.

### Tremendous struggles

The 1950s was a period of tremendous struggles, involving in actions, at one time or another, hundreds of thousands of people over the length and breadth of the country.

That was the period which established the tradition of the ANC as the focal point for united mass resistance; which raised its now-imprisoned leaders to unequalled prominence; which produced the Freedom Charter; and which gave birth to SACTU as the first national non-racial trade union federation based on African workers.

While the traditions of the 1950s still echo strongly in the movement today, it is not widely known or understood, especially among the younger generation of militants, precisely what policies, methods and tactics were followed by the leadership at that time—and with what results.

In that respect the memory of the 1950s has been eclipsed by the ANC's pursuit for the past twenty years of a strategy of "armed struggle". It is the carrying out of bombings and other guerilla actions by units of Umkhonto we Sizwe which has become the hallmark of the ANC.

### Blind alley

*Inqaba* has argued consistently that a guerilla strategy is a blind alley in South Africa, falsely raising hopes of victory which this method of struggle cannot fulfil. It strengthens the enemy which it is intended to weaken; it diverts the efforts of many militant youth from the essential tasks of mass organisation; and it has retarded the understanding of the working class that the only road to victory lies through the mobilisation of their own power.

Now the Accord of Nkomati has cast its own brutal light upon the issue.

Underpinning the ANC's strategy has been the belief that secure military bases could be built up in neighbouring countries as the movement for independence and majority rule advanced down the continent to the borders of South Africa itself. Then (so the thinking went), from these 'Frontline States', mounting pressure of armed actions by the fighters of MK could eventually cripple the South African state.

It must surely be admitted now that that conception of the liberation struggle lies in ruins.

### Reality

In fact, the 'Accord' between South Africa and Mozambique only makes publicly obvious what has long been the reality in Southern Africa.

Capitalist South Africa, with its developed modern industry, towers more and more over the whole sub-continent. It is an *imperialist* power—weak in world terms but a giant on the scale of Africa. The financiers and monopolists who head its ruling class need the markets, the raw materials and the labour power of the whole region to fuel their machinery of exploitation and profit.

Their drive to dominate Southern Africa politically follows from an economic drive. To safeguard their position in South Africa itself, they must extend their power beyond its borders. The might of their industry gives them the economic and military means to blackmail and bully their weak and crisis-torn neighbours.

As a result, the 'national independence' of the countries of Southern Africa is an empty and brittle shell—and will remain so until the capitalist class and capitalist state in South Africa is overthrown.

### Main threat

The main threat to the ruling class in South Africa, as their own strategists recognise, comes from the awakening power of the black working class.

Industrial development has given SA capitalism the means to build a formidable state apparatus, based on white privilege and domination, designed for the armed repression of the black working-class majority. But this same industrial development, by raising the strength, cohesion and consciousness of the workers, drives them towards their task of overthrowing the state and putting



an end to the racist, capitalist system.

In the hope—which will prove vain—of warding off this threat, the South African regime now conjures with ‘constitutional reform’, intended to disperse the black working class and divide it against itself on ethnic or tribal lines.

Economics and politics intermesh. Foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. The plan to construct a ‘constellation’ of dependent black satellite-states around the golden sun of ‘white’ urban industrial centres, cannot limit itself to the Bantustans alone.

It reaches out, striving to draw in by force also Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and even countries beyond. It seeks by these means to ground the whole scheme on firmer foundations; to keep its greedy grip on Namibia even while negotiating ‘independence’; and—by breaking out of political isolation internationally—to lean more openly on the now surreptitious backing of the major imperialist powers.

## Introduction

This introduction to “*Lessons of the 1950s*” is not the place for a full analysis of the Nkomati Accord and its likely consequences; nor for a study of the irreconcilable contradictions which will cause the strategy of the SA regime—despite the pliability of its neighbour governments—eventually to fail in both its domestic and international aspects.

The point to make here is this: *the ANC leadership itself will be compelled, sooner or later, by the realities of the struggle, by these and subsequent events, to change its strategy. It will be compelled to turn from its reliance on guerillaism to rely upon the movement of the working class, for no other force exists with the potential to take on effectively the power of the SA state.*

The sooner this fact is recognised and this turn made, the better.

## Made easier

Unwittingly, in fact, the ANC policy of guerillaism made it easier for South Africa to turn the screws on the neighbouring states, for the regime was able to use the pretext of attacking “terrorism” to cover its tactics of military aggression and economic strangulation.

Now the policy of guerillaism has suffered a public defeat. It is far better to acknowledge that than to ‘soldier on regardless’, however bravely, by old failed methods.

The reality of the situation cannot be lost on the hundreds of ANC comrades now being hounded in a number of countries of the region. More important still, however, is that fact that persistence in this bankrupt strategy can only lead to further and worse defeats in the future. Its continuation is in conflict with the best interests of the workers’ movement struggling to build itself at home.

*On the other hand, from acknowledging a defeat, the causes of which are analysed, understood and made clear*

*to everyone, the ANC can emerge strengthened.*

## Origins

This pamphlet shows that the origins of the ANC’s turn in the 1960s to the policy of guerillaism lay in the failure of its leadership to appreciate that the achievement of national liberation and democracy in South Africa depends on a successful struggle of the working class against their capitalist exploiters.

The turn to guerillaism came at the end of a long period of mass struggles, which lacked nothing when it came to courage, militancy and self-sacrifice, but which were constantly crippled by the lack of a coherent revolutionary conception and strategy on the part of the leadership.

The cause of this, in turn, was a refusal to recognise the class nature of the struggle, and a fruitless search for democratic concessions through compromise with the liberal wing of the capitalist class.

The turn to “armed struggle” was an attempt to deal with increasingly vicious state repression. But it was a continuation of an old mistake in a new and worse form—for it abandoned all efforts to build systematically the organised power of the working class; hoped to substitute for this power the actions of secret armed units; and sought its allies in the diplomatic forums of the United Nations, the governments of African states, etc.

The Nkomati Accord has given a rude shock to this entire policy—and it highlights the fact that effective solidarity in Southern Africa means *the unity of the working class of the whole region in a common struggle*. All else is illusory.

Moreover, it must be recognised that our only reliable ally internationally is the working class struggling against exploitation in all capitalist countries and against political oppression in both the West and the East.

## Digest lessons

To make a successful turn to a new strategy it will be necessary fully to digest the lessons of the 1950s, the period when the ANC stood openly at the head of the mass movement.

Today the UDF is regarded by millions of working people in South Africa as a forerunner for the eventual re-emergence of the ANC once again in its former role. That is why the launching of the UDF last year was greeted with such enthusiasm by activists wanting to unite the movement nationally in effective political action campaigns.

But, by simply repeating the methods and approach which failed in the 1950s, by not analysing and correcting those mistakes, the leaders of the UDF have already lost many opportunities for nation-wide mobilisation.

We hope that this pamphlet will assist in clarifying the tasks for the many working-class activists now trying to build and transform the UDF, and so prepare the way for the future transformation of the ANC into an effective instrument of our revolutionary struggle.



# The victory of the Nationalist Party in 1948

The ANC arose as a mass organisation in the 1950s as the black working class struggled to defend itself against attacks by the ruling class and the Nationalist Party government, elected in 1948.

The victory of the NP in 1948 was a victory for the most reactionary wing of the capitalist class, mobilising white middle-class and working-class support on the basis of naked racism. The NP government embarked on a determined programme to attack the living standards of black working people, to tighten the chains of the migrant labour system, and to divide and crush trade union and political organisation of the majority. New racial measures were instituted also against the African middle class, and against Indians and coloureds.

The NP policy of apartheid grew out of the policies of national oppression and white domination consciously pursued by the ruling class since before the turn of the century. These policies were necessary to create and maintain the African cheap labour on which South African capitalism has always depended.

SA capitalism developed late, in a world already dominated by big capitalist monopolies. Against their competition, it could make profits only by bleeding the working class dry.

At the same time, NP rule involved the more rigid, ruthless and centralised implementation of these policies by the methods of a police state. This was not simply because Malan, Strijdom, Verwoerd and their henchmen were more racially bigotted than their predecessors. Strengthened racial dictatorship was needed so that the capitalist class could expand its productive base and its wealth—and do so despite the rising strength of the impoverished black working class.

The initial growth of capitalism in SA was based on the exploitation of the workers on the mines and on the farms—where they were ruthlessly controlled and enslaved by labour-tenancy, compounds, migrant labour, etc. But from 1933 onwards manufacturing industry began to expand rapidly, overtaking mining as the biggest single contributor to national production during the Second World War.

The growth of manufacturing swelled the size of the African working class, in areas far less easy for the bosses

to control than mining and farming. Between 1932/3 and 1944/5 the number of African workers in manufacturing more than tripled, from 76 000 to 249 000. Moreover, in the Second World War, because of whites being called up, many Africans were moved into semi-skilled work.

Time and again the ruling class made clear that its greatest fear was the potential power of this **class force** to struggle against racial oppression, poverty, and the repressive state.

In 1936 the government's Native Affairs Commission stated that "turning the Native into a lower class of the population must result not only in the engulfing of the ethos of the Bantu race in a black proletariat ... but also, and inevitably, it will result in class war." The Board of Trade and Industry, in 1945, warned of the dangers of a "homogeneous native proletariat": "No government can view with equanimity the detribalization of large numbers of natives congregated in amorphous masses in large industrial centres."

African workers began to sense, and exercise, their increasing industrial muscle during the Second World War. In the 14 years prior to the war there had been 197 officially-recorded strikes, mainly of non-African workers. Between 1939 and 1945 there were 304 strikes mainly of African workers, migrant as well as non-migrant.

This period saw the first major development of industrial unions among African workers. By 1945 the Council of Non-European Trade Unions claimed 158 000 members.<sup>1</sup>

The need for uninterrupted production during the war compelled the employers and Smuts's United Party government to make some temporary concessions to African workers: real wages actually increased. But, as these concessions spurred further demands, and as the tide of war turned in favour of the Allies, the ruling class began to clamp down again on the black working class.

Nevertheless, the pressure from the working class widened divisions in the ruling class. The capitalist coalition which the UP had held together since 1933/4 began to crack, on a number of issues, central among them being what (if any) concessions could be afforded on the migrant labour system.

## Division

Among the capitalists, the farming interest swung massively towards the hard-line NP, while representatives of the new manufacturing and commercial interests questioned whether industry could develop on the basis of the pre-war labour system. Did not manufacturing industry require more skilled African labour, and did this not mean stabilised urban labour? Would it not lead to an expansion of the home market for the products of manufacturing industry if workers were paid higher wages?

These arguments, first voiced seriously in the 1940s, continued to be made by sections of the ruling class and by liberal academics in the 1950s—and they are heard again today. What they ignore is that the South African



economy is not a self-contained entity, but inseparably integrated in a **world** capitalist economy.

For its expansion, SA capitalism has continued to depend on the import of capital goods (machinery, etc.) from the advanced capitalist countries, producing on a bigger scale and more cheaply than SA could hope to match. To pay for such goods, SA capitalism has had to rely first and foremost on raw materials exports—the products of mining and farming.

The expansion of 'modern' manufacturing industry under capitalism in SA has thus been bound—and remains bound—by a thousand threads to the economic forces governing mining and farming.

While gold mining operated within a fixed world price for gold, other mineral and farming products had to compete on world markets with other cheap-labour economies in the grip of monopoly capitalism. Thus the primary sector of the SA economy—to maintain profitability, sustain its key contribution to state revenues and provide a basis for secondary industry—has always depended acutely on holding down the wages of the workers.

Moreover, manufacturing industry in South Africa has always faced the competitive pressure of the cheaper products of more advanced economies, available for import. Even to develop and retain a base in its home market, SA manufacturing industry has had to be protected and subsidised by the state—ultimately from the profits of mining. And even then, against the advanced production methods of the multi-nationals, it has had to rely on the cost-cutting of cheap labour methods.

## Real constraints

These have been—and remain today, in the conditions of economic crisis—the real constraints upon the development of South African capitalism towards liberal reform. Only the struggle of the working class, and not the pious rhetoric of 'progressive' capitalists, has proved able to improve conditions (and even then only for temporary periods) against these constraints.

The 'progressives' argued that better wages, permanent urbanisation, trade union rights, etc., could be introduced selectively and gradually from the 'upper layers' of African workers downwards. But the problem for the ruling class was that, once begun, such concessions would inevitably be demanded by all African workers, with ultimately explosive effects.

To begin along this slippery slope threatened to undermine the cheap labour system as a whole. It would also create anxiety among the white workers (on whom the ruling class relied for support) that their security as a privileged minority would be undermined.

All these factors paralysed any real reform of the system. For all these reasons, only a strong and resolute movement of the African workers could force the ruling class even temporarily to make concessions. What is, more obviously, the case today was equally the reality of the situation in the 1940s.

Fearing that the existing system of white rule could not adequately contain the rising power of the African working class, sections of the United Party leadership began,

during and after the war, to explore policies of limited reform, intended to ease the oppression of upper layers of the African population, including a small section of the urban workers, and give them a 'stake' in the stability of capitalism.

But because of the long-term dangerous implications of such a turn—dangerous for capitalism, that is—these tentative policies carried no real conviction. Instead they conveyed irresolution, deepened divisions among the capitalists, and opened the way to the 'hard' men of the Nationalist Party to gather increasing white support.

## Limits exposed

Indeed, the limits of UP 'reform'—and the real constraints on SA capitalism—were exposed in August 1946 when 76 000 African migrant mine-workers struck for higher wages. The Smuts government, increasingly paralysed on other issues, moved swiftly and ruthlessly in defence of the Chamber of Mines, pivot of the capitalist economy. Police were sent in to beat workers out of the compounds, and out of the stopes where they were staging sit-in strikes. At least 12 African workers lost their lives, and 1 248 were injured.

While the strike ended in defeat within a week, it was a milestone in the history of the class struggle in South Africa. By their vigorous action the migrant mine-workers had plainly signalled the arrival of a new stage in the rise of the black working class—and the capitalist state had no answer but brute force with which to meet it.

The defeat of the strike helped prepare the way for the Nationalist Party victory in 1948. For the Chamber of Mines, the repression of the strike by the United Party government did not lessen their fears of its division and weakness. Along with many other capitalists, some of the mine bosses swung their support in 1948 behind the NP, with its granite counter-reformist apartheid programme. This rightward movement by a significant section of the ruling class drew in its wake sections of the white middle class and workers who had not previously supported the Nationalists.

Whereas a strong forward movement by the black workers, such as existed during the Second World War and exists again today, exerts a restraining influence on white reaction, defeats give the reaction greater confidence. With the defeat of the 1946 strike, white workers looked for a strong government that would protect their sectional interests. Swings to the NP in a few key mining constituencies were crucial to its victory in 1948.

This victory was not 'inevitable' (and, in fact, in 1948, the Nationalist majority in Parliament was gained on the basis still of a **minority** of the white electorate). Nevertheless, in the conditions which developed after the war, the programme of the NP represented at that time the most secure defence of the capitalist system and hence of the interests of the whole of the capitalist class. As this fact was realised, ruling class support and electoral support for the Nationalists grew.

In the 1950s, world capitalist production and trade grew enormously, creating conditions in which the bosses could make concessions to the workers in the advanced



capitalist countries. Yet, even in these boom conditions, SA capitalism could allow no relaxation in its relentless enslavement of the African working class.

Dependence on cheap labour has not been unique to South Africa, but in fact common to the whole of the under-developed world under the pressure of the world capitalist market. South Africa's peculiarity lies not in the harsh oppression of its working class for the purpose of exploitation, but in the particular method by which this has been accomplished.

## Advantage

SA capitalism's advantage in relation to the rest of the under-developed world has lain in its mineral wealth (the basis for industrialisation) plus the solidity of its state machine, resting on racial division and the privilege of the substantial white minority.

The task confronting the NP government was to reinforce the cheap labour system—against a movement of the oppressed working class that had suffered defeats, but was still rising. The government's method was, on the one hand, to try to suppress the trade union and political organisation of the black working class, and on the other, by increasing white worker and middle-class privilege, to maintain their loyalty to the enforcement of police rule over the mass of the people.

A persistent myth peddled by liberals is that repression of the African working class in South Africa has been an evil peculiar to the Nationalist government. The reality is different.

Already, after the 1946 mine strike, the UP government was preparing legislation on the trade unions. African unions, stated Smuts, would "fall under the influence of the wrong people" unless they were brought under state control "on a basis of apartheid".<sup>2</sup>

The UP government appointed an Industrial Legislation Commission, which was kept in being by the new NP government, and reported in 1951.

"A strong body of responsible opinion", it stated—i.e. the majority of the ruling class—"stressed the serious danger which faced the country if Native trade unions were allowed to continue uncontrolled or unguided as at present." It argued that even to allow African workers access to the existing state-regulated collective bargaining system would have placed unbearable costs on SA's capitalist economy and system of white minority rule: the "logical result", it stated, would be "solidarity of labour irrespective of race" and in the longer run "complete social and political equality of all races."

If African workers "should become well organized," NP Labour Minister Schoeman explained in 1951, "—and again bearing in mind that there are almost 1 000 000 native workers in industry and commerce today—they can use their trade unions as a political weapon and they can create chaos in South Africa at any time."

Industrial legislation in 1953 and 1956 (entrenching the UP government's 'War Measures') denied African workers the right to strike legally, excluded them from established collective bargaining machinery, and essentially prohibited multi-racial unionism. 'Job reservation' provisions were a statutory protection for white workers,

under-pinning the conventional colour bar in industry. In the meantime the Suppression of Communism Act, passed in 1950, was basically being used against trade union activists—56 were driven from their positions by 1956, and this was only the beginning.

All this was accompanied by measures tightening the chains of the passbook and racial laws around the black majority, and by an assault on living standards. New restrictions on the black middle class came as part and parcel of these measures directed essentially against the working class.

Though extremely reactionary, the NP government was not a **fascist** government. Fascism bases itself on the despair of the middle class driven to a frenzy by conditions of economic crisis and turned to the service of the ruling capitalist class when the working-class movement has lost the initiative and shown itself unable to change society.

The South African ruling class in the post-war period secured white middle- and working-class support, not from their despair, but by its ability to provide them with security and privilege. Instead of the gangster mobilisation of mobs characteristic of the rise of fascism, the capitalists' white supporters became increasingly demobilised and passive as their bellies grew fatter.

What the Nationalist government set out to develop was a bureaucratic-police dictatorship over the black working class.<sup>3</sup>

Though the SA economy grew rapidly between 1947 and 1954, this was on the basis of a decline in African workers' living standards. With the onset of recession after 1954, they were increasingly hard-hit.

Industrial Council agreements ignored the conditions of the African workers, and new government Wage Board agreements (to replace those concluded during the war) were virtually non-existent. Cost-of-living allowances and other meagre social benefits for African workers were slashed by the NP government.

A SACTU survey of four representative industries in 1957 showed that real wage levels had dropped by between 20% and 40% since 1948. In the same year there were estimates that average African wages nationally were £91 a year.

Liberal 'poverty line' surveys stated that, in 1952, 69% of African families in Johannesburg were earning less than this virtual starvation level—and that, in 1957, the number had grown to 87%!

## Conspiracy

Throughout the 1950s virtually every industrial strike involving African workers, for the smallest gain, was met with a conspiracy of the bosses, the Labour Department and the police. Mass victimisation, prosecutions, deportations were the order of the day. "Lorry loads of police armed with batons, sten-guns and tear-gas bombs arrive in great pickup vans and all the strikers are arrested," wrote a trade union leader.

Despite differences in the ruling class, the Nationalist Party and United Party leaders were fundamentally united in support of measures to control and suppress the workers. At times the 'Official Opposition' tried to



recover lost ground by 'out-Natting the Nats'. In 1950 Strauss, the new UP leader, demanded that the Suppression of Communism Act be strengthened by introducing the death penalty for 'Communists'.

Throughout the 1950s employers supported to the hilt the repression by the police of campaigns of resistance by working people—and added their own threats of victimisation and dismissal of activists.

Yet, throughout the decade, black working people fought back—in the factories and mines, in the townships, on the farms, in the reserves. The crushing of the 1946 mineworkers' strike had been experienced as a severe setback especially by organised workers. The membership of the CNETU fell, largely as a result of this, from 158 000 in 1945 to less than 40 000 by 1950. Nevertheless, because of the worsening conditions of life, because of the new attacks by both employers and the NP government, working people rallied and moved again into struggle.

The recovery of the movement, and the determined mood, was already evident by 1950-1. In different areas of the country, there was a strong response to three one-day general strike calls in that period.

On May Day in 1950, 80% of the workforce on the Rand struck, demanding higher wages, the vote, and a halt to repression. Police shot and killed at least 20 workers that day. In protest at the shootings, and at the Suppression of Communism Act, a further one-day strike was called for 26 June. Though less well supported on the Rand (the CNETU leaders stated that the renewed call was "premature"), this call got a massive response in Port Elizabeth and Cape Town, and among Indian workers in Durban. On 6 April 1951 a one-day strike in defence of the coloured vote was well-supported in the Western Cape and PE.

This was only the beginning of a decade of organisation and struggle—of mass demonstrations, boycotts, defiance, strikes and near-uprisings—against poverty wages, the pass laws, price and fare rises, Bantu education, 'Bantu Authorities', 'cattle-culling', police repression, and all the other burdens.

The waves of resistance rippled from the city heartlands to the remotest parts of the countryside. By the end of the decade it was drawing in even the weakest and most isolated sections of the masses.

Writing in March 1961, Nelson Mandela described a village delegate to a national conference that year. Wearing riding breeches, a khaki shirt, an old jacket, and bare-footed, this delegate related how he "was elected at a secret meeting held in the bushes far away from our kraals simply because in our village it is now a crime for us to hold meetings. I have listened most carefully to speeches made here and they have given me strength and courage. I now realise that we are not alone."<sup>4</sup>

This great mass movement did not march forward in one straight line. Over the years the focus of struggle shifted from issue to issue; now one area took the lead, now another. As a whole, the movement went forward, halted, and then drove forward again.

From 1950 until the end of 1952 was a period of forward movement, followed by a lull until 1955/6, and then again a huge forward movement in 1956/7, the momentum of which was still not completely broken in 1961.

The movement grew out of struggles against all manner of daily burdens heaped on working people. Increasingly

the central demand which it raised—as also in our movement today—was for a democratically elected government, for 'one man one vote'.

For the oppressed working people, majority rule—a government of their 'own'—was demanded as the means to secure decent wages, homes, jobs, education, an end to the pass laws, racial oppression and humiliation, and all the other burdens.

Taken up in action by the masses, the demand for majority rule posed a **revolutionary** challenge in South Africa—not simply to the NP government and its supporters, not simply to the existing constitution of 'white minority rule', but to **the system of capitalism itself**.

## Barriers

It was inevitable that any government coming into office on the basis of one-person-one-vote in an undivided South Africa, and therefore under pressure to solve the problems of working people, would come up against the barriers of a capitalist class dependent on the cheap labour system, and a state machine constructed to defend and maintain that system.

This would pose before the aroused working class the necessity of carrying the revolution through to a conclusion—by establishing its own state power and overthrowing capitalism.

By the same logic inherent in the situation in South Africa, the very struggle to achieve a democratic government would meet the implacable opposition, not simply of the NP government, but ultimately of the whole ruling class by all means at its disposal.

Black working people in the 1950s showed their readiness to take up this battle, despite the costs and sacrifices involved. What they were looking for was the way to build the mass force to take this struggle forward effectively.

What this required above all was nation-wide trade union and political organisation of the working class, firmly rooted in the strongholds of the factories, the mines, the docks and the big farms.

But the working class, to build its organisations to their full potential and give a clear lead to the whole movement, needed to be guided—through its most advanced and conscious element—by a clear understanding of the revolutionary tasks and the class nature of the enemy.

Workers needed a clear programme, linking all the daily issues of the struggle, all the democratic demands, to the need to overthrow the capitalist class, the capitalist state and the profit system it defended. Together with such a programme, workers needed a clear revolutionary strategy—a strategy leading the way to workers' power and the socialist transformation of society.

An understanding of revolutionary strategy and programme are just as vital in periods when conditions do not yet exist for the working class to take power—for without them the movement can never raise itself to its full potential.

The lack of such a programme and strategy, as we shall go on to show, played a major part in holding back the mass movement in the 1950s, and in its eventual defeat.



# The lack of a workers' party

The industrialisation of South Africa brought into existence the massive black working class concentrated in the urban centres, and in so doing entirely changed the conditions in which the struggle—fought for many generations against colonial conquest, dispossession, exploitation and national oppression of the African people—could now be carried forward.

In action, the African working class had begun to show its emerging power, and so too its potential to lead a movement of all oppressed people for liberation.

Conditions existed not only for the building of industrial unions of the mass of workers. From the 1920s onward, a fertile ground existed at least to lay down the roots for a mass party of labour—a party which could, as it arose, have welded black workers together as a conscious political force; which could then attract the following of the rural people and win support of the urban middle-class blacks; and which also, by offering a real socialist alternative to the racist system of capitalism in SA, could eventually draw sizeable numbers of white workers and middle class away from the camp of the ruling class.

For such a mass party of the working class to have emerged in the course of struggle in South Africa in the pre-war period, would have required years of concentrated work preparing and training a working-class cadre as its backbone and leadership—in the same way that Lenin and the Bolsheviks in Russia worked from the early 1900s to lay the foundations for the workers' victory in 1917.

In South Africa, around the time of Union, a Labour Party had been formed on the basis of the organised white minority of the working class—especially the craft workers making up the labour aristocracy. Locked into the sectional interests of this privileged section, and dominated by racist leaders who sought collaboration with the capitalists, the Labour Party was never able to emancipate itself from this heritage.

From the left wing of the Labour Party, in 1921, emerged the Communist Party of South Africa, under the inspiration of the Russian Revolution. Filled with revolutionary enthusiasm and working-class determination to overthrow capitalism, the early Communists in South Africa needed to base their party unambiguously

on the awakening African working-class movement, there to root the development of their still partly-formed Marxist ideas and build the proletarian movement on sound foundations.

Correctly identifying themselves as part of the international working-class movement, the CP in South Africa joined the Communist International, a mass organisation of workers' parties, which had been formed against the background of the revolutionary wave sweeping Europe and many other parts of the world after the First World War, and which had as its core the victorious Russian Communist Party, then led by Lenin and Trotsky.

The fledgling CP in South Africa—to develop its leadership, ideas and method of work on sound lines, and to free itself of the early distortions in its perspective caused by its origins in the organisations of the white working class—vitaly needed the guidance of an experienced and healthy revolutionary International.

The tragedy of the SA Communist Party (and in a real sense the tragedy for the working class so far this century) was that the Communist International degenerated in the 1920s and thereafter, as the revolutions in Europe, China and elsewhere suffered defeats, and as the bureaucratic dictatorship of Stalin arose out of the isolation and terrible conditions of backwardness of Soviet Russia.

The dependence of the inexperienced Communist Parties around the world upon direction from Moscow turned into slavish obedience to Stalin's demands. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, ruthless purges were carried out to rid all these parties of all opposition to the bureaucracy and to impose absolute adherence, without democratic debate or criticism, to Moscow's often-changing line.

The transformation of the parties of the Communist International, among them the SA Communist Party, into uncritical servants of the ruling bureaucracy in Moscow, ran parallel with a savage counter-revolution carried out in the Soviet Union itself (which destroyed all the revolutionary gains of October 1917, apart from the central one, the state-owned property system—on which the bureaucracy had come to rest).

## Slaughter of Bolsheviks

This political counter-revolution involved the imprisonment in labour camps and eventual slaughter of tens of thousands of Bolsheviks loyal to the traditions of the Revolution and to the workers' movement internationally. By the 1930s (when all surviving 'Trotskyists' in the prison-camps, with their families down to the age of 12 years, were exterminated in Russia), a gulf of blood separated the regime of Stalin from the revolutionary government of Lenin and Trotsky. Only the label of 'Marxism' and 'Leninism', not its substance, remained.

Internationally, bewildering zig-zags in policy were imposed on Communist Parties according to the changing national self-interest of the Russian bureaucracy, as the Stalinists saw it. In the colonial world, the policy line swung from subordinating the workers to nationalist bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaders; then to absurd



ultra-left 'putchism' when conditions did not allow the workers to take power; then back again to the right.

In Europe, the policy swung from uncritical co-operation with the leaders of reformist parties; then to the sectarian ultra-leftism of refusing joint struggle with other mass workers' parties against fascism (labelling Socialist parties 'social fascist'); then to outright co-operation with imperialist powers and hence opposition to any workers' revolution in those countries.

In this latter phase (that of the so-called 'Popular Fronts', from the mid-1930s onwards), instructions were given to the Communist Parties to collaborate with bourgeois parties on a limited democratic programme, and to keep the workers' movement from advancing socialist demands. (The 'theory' of separate so-called 'stages' of revolution was vigorously propagated in this period for the purpose, and applied to every country. It has remained the gospel of Stalinism ever since.)

The Soviet bureaucracy had come, by this time, to the conclusion that a workers' revolution in any developed, industrialised country would threaten its own hold on power and privilege—for the workers of the Soviet Union would be encouraged thereby to rise and take power once again into their own hands, and establish a workers' democracy. The bureaucracy therefore set its face against any spread of workers' revolution internationally.

Against this whole background, the South African CP underwent a tragic degeneration and, at times, virtual collapse. Unable to devise a policy linking the struggle for national liberation to the struggle against capitalism and for workers' power—an idea which had become anathema to the bureaucracy in Moscow—the CP leaders in South Africa adapted themselves, on the one hand, to the nationalism of the African middle class, and, on the other hand, to the reformist promises of the liberal bourgeoisie.

In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s many militant African workers looked to 'Communism', and hence to the CP, to organise the working class and take the lead in the struggle against racialism, poverty and exploitation. However, as the party's own historians admit, in the 1930s the CP degenerated into small inward-looking factions, fighting each other with sectarian denunciations and expulsions, in an atmosphere of suspicion and intrigue. The party leadership grew increasingly isolated from the movement of the working class.

Nevertheless, some CP members continued active work in the unions, and, with the rise of a movement of African workers during the Second World War, the CP found itself with an influential position in the trade unions of the CNETU. Disastrously, the party leadership deliberately used its influence to hold the workers back from struggle.

The CP's policy during the war followed the radical shifts in Moscow's policy. First it supported the Stalin-Hitler Pact. Then, after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, CP policy switched to one of collaboration with Allied imperialism—in the name of assisting the war effort against Hitler.

Thus, the South African CP called on "all South Africans to combine their forces now and to strengthen the Government"—called, in other words, for black workers to support and strengthen the Smuts regime!<sup>5</sup>

Such a policy was not pursued only in South Africa. In Britain, the CP broke strikes, in Newcastle and other

areas. In India, for instance, the CP policy was to postpone the struggle for independence from Britain until after the war—a position that put it well to the right of the bourgeois-nationalist Congress Party.

By such means Stalin sought the friendship of Churchill and Roosevelt. But the Allied powers, far from waging a real fight against fascism, had helped Hitler's rise to power and, through most of the war, held back their forces hoping that Germany and Russia would bleed each other to death. The major Allied war effort opened in the West only after the Germans had met defeat on the Russian front and when the Red Army was advancing into Europe.

## Imperialist war

The Allied powers waged the war as a predatory imperialist war, as Hitler did. Appeals to the working class in the Allied countries to support their capitalist governments could only push the German workers behind Hitler. The only effective basis on which to fight fascism and defend the Soviet Union was to mobilise and unite the working class in a conscious struggle to end oppression and capitalist exploitation everywhere.

What the CP policy meant in South Africa, in concrete terms, was that the party used its position within the unions to oppose and actually halt strike action. Strategically powerful sections of African workers—in the power industry, in iron and steel, and in the mines also—were held back from strike action during the war. Inevitably this led to division, confusion and demoralisation.

By the time mineworkers went on strike in 1946 they, and the whole black trade union movement, were in a far weaker position. At the height of the war, in contrast, concerted industrial action on a wide scale, supported if necessary by the mobilisation of national political strikes, could have won big concessions and speeded the whole development of workers' organisation.

The war period was one of ferment not only in the workplaces, but in the townships—with bus boycotts, squatters' movements, and a struggle against the passes. A clear lead at this time by the CP could have evoked huge support and even laid the basis for a mass workers' party.

But the opportunity was lost. Instead, the mineworkers (when they could no longer be held back) moved into action only in 1946, when the tide of mass struggle had begun to ebb. The strike lacked preparation, organisation, co-ordination and direction. It involved only a minority of mineworkers and was quickly defeated by ruthless police action. The CNETU, already losing membership, undertook to call a general strike in solidarity with the mineworkers, but failed to organise this and it never materialised.

The defeat of the 1946 strike further demoralised workers in the trade unions, and deepened the ebb of the movement there.

Thus, well before the 1950s, the lack of a mass party of the working class, with a clear revolutionary perspective and policy, was already exercising a paralysing influence on the development of the movement.



# The rise of the ANC

When the mass movement recovered at the end of the 1940s, the vacuum left by the failure of the Communist Party to build mass workers' political organisation was being filled by the African National Congress. Though the CP leaders played a role in the 1950-51 general strike calls, it was also leaders of the ANC (as well as the SA Indian Congress and other organisations) who made these calls.

This represented a radical departure for the ANC. From its formation in 1912 until this time, the ANC had been little more than a middle-class pressure group, appealing to the ruling class for the removal of its own disabilities. Only for short periods, in one area or another, did the pre-War ANC seek or find any mass support. The huge upsurges of struggle of the working masses against the ruling class which took place between the 1920s and 1940s by-passed the ANC almost completely.

During and after the Second World War a new generation of young African intellectuals sought to orient the ANC towards mobilising mass action. They were, on the one hand, *disillusioned with the failure of the ruling class to respond to the old ANC methods of petition and deputation, and, on the other hand, impressed with the power of the war-time mass working-class movement.* The ANC Youth League, espousing these aims, was formed in 1943, in the wake of the Witwatersrand strike wave of 1942.

The brutal repression of the 1946 mine strike, followed by the 1948 NP victory, angered and radicalised broader layers of the black middle class, especially the youth. It was in the wake of these events, in December 1949, that the ANC adopted what was essentially the programme of the Youth League—the Programme of Action. It resolved to mobilise a struggle for “National freedom” and an end to white domination, by means of “immediate and active boycott, strike, civil disobedience, non-co-operation and such other means as may bring about the accomplishment and realisation of our aspirations.”

On the basis of this mandate the ANC leaders, many with considerable reluctance, participated in calling the successful one-day general strikes in 1950-51.

Hundreds of thousands of workers were looking for a political lead, and gave immediate support to these calls. Thus the ANC stepped into the gap left by the absence of a mass workers' party, and became the focus for the nation-wide movement of the black working people.

The rise of mass support for the ANC was confirmed in the next major campaign which it launched: the Defiance Campaign of 1952. ANC membership mounted from a few thousand to (some would claim) 100 000. But the turn by the working class to support an organisation that, despite radicalisation, remained under middle-class leadership, opened up huge contradictions in the ANC.

As the National Executive itself stated in its December 1950 report, “the masses are marching far ahead of the leadership.”

The approach of the old middle-class ANC leadership had been, and remained, to rely on a “change of heart” on the part of the white population.<sup>6</sup> Because they did not experience life as black workers experience it, at the sharp end of the system of exploitation, they could not see that the real material interests of the capitalist class lay behind the national oppression of the African people, including themselves.

They imagined that racism could be overcome by moral persuasion of whites and by appeals to goodwill and common humanity. Hence they looked naturally towards white liberals—to the liberal wing of the **capitalist class**, together with its intellectuals, clergymen, etc.—as some sort of forerunners of an enlightened attitude that would (God willing) lead to a change of heart by the majority of whites.

## More militant

The younger generation of radical ANC leaders took a more militant line. The Programme of Action, stated Nelson Mandela later, “meant that the ANC was not going to rely on a change of heart. It was going to exert pressure to compel the authorities to grant its demands.”<sup>7</sup> *The key to this was mass mobilisation.*

Even so, however, the lack of a class analysis and perspective meant that the revolutionary implications of mobilising the working class were not grasped. If moral persuasion had failed, perhaps it would be enough to twist the government's arm.

It was still believed that winning support from liberals and ‘democrats’ among the upper-class whites constituted real breakthroughs in the struggle.

On this basis the old moderate and the young radical wings of the ANC leadership were uneasily reconciled with each other in their support of the Defiance Campaign. But in the implementation of the campaign, in the actual mobilisation of the working class, the underlying divisions and uncertainty of purpose became manifest.

**Taken as a whole**, the ANC leadership was not willing to carry out such a mobilisation fully and systematically. They were not willing to see the initiative of the struggle pass into the hands of the working class, or for the workers' class struggle to become the paramount drive and focus of the movement.

This fact largely explains the uneven character of the



Defiance Campaign in different areas of the country and why it failed to develop nation-wide momentum.

Nevertheless, like the one-day strikes of 1950-51, the Defiance Campaign confirmed that the working class was the real force in the struggle against the NP government.

It was initiated as a campaign of non-violent civil disobedience by selected volunteers against six unjust laws: the pass laws, stock limitation, the Suppression of Communism Act, the Group Areas Act, the Bantu Authorities Act, and the Voters Act of 1951. But it was most successful in the Eastern Cape, where it rapidly took on a mass character.

## Strongly rooted

In the Eastern Cape, particularly in Port Elizabeth, the ANC was most strongly rooted in the trade unions and led by trade unionists. Defiance of the law by volunteers was backed up by organised strength. When employers tried to sack volunteers, workers struck to enforce their reinstatement. Against police violence in the townships, resistance was organised. When armed police were introduced on the buses and a curfew imposed, a bus boycott was begun and a general strike threatened: the municipality backed off.

The lead given in Port Elizabeth drew into action fresh layers of working people throughout the Eastern Cape countryside. Three-quarters of the arrests of volunteers nation-wide occurred in the Eastern Cape.

The Eastern Cape alone attempted to put into practice the full plan which had been envisaged by the Planning Council for the campaign throughout South Africa. This was conceived as a campaign in three stages, commencing with civil disobedience by "selected and trained" volunteers in the major cities, continuing with increasing the number of volunteers and the number of centres, and in the third stage broadening out "on a country-wide scale and assum(ing) a general mass character".<sup>8</sup>

But in all other areas the campaign was held back from passing beyond even the first stage. Nationally, it was allowed to dwindle to a ragged halt before the end of 1952.

This did not reflect any collapse of enthusiasm among ANC activists and supporters. During the campaign thousands of volunteers had been turned away. In the early months of 1953 the ANC rank-and-file in the Transvaal and the Cape were pressing for a general strike call in support of the demands of the Campaign—despite the introduction by the government in January of new stiff penalties for civil disobedience.

In fact, however, Congress launched no further mass action campaigns until 1955. And the action campaigns in 1955, too, became paralysed and petered out for want of a vigorous lead.

In 1955 the ANC committed itself to prevent the forced removal of residents from the Johannesburg Western Areas. This was identified as the key point for implementing a general "Resist Apartheid" call.

The residents had been roused by the slogan "We will not move", and had been allowed to believe that secret plans had been drawn up to call a general strike if the police attempted removals, in order to disperse and

paralyse the forces of the state. Yet, on the eve of the removals, the ANC President in the Transvaal said: "There can be no talk of defiance in this matter."<sup>9</sup>

As the ANC Secretariat subsequently admitted, the major weakness of the campaign

would seem to be the failure of the leadership to tell the people precisely what form of resistance was to be offered on the day of removal. This information was requested time after time and at no stage was a clear and unequivocal answer given. The masses were given the impression, however, that Congress had the answer and would give it at the appropriate time."<sup>10</sup>

Similar vacillations paralysed the 1955 campaign against Bantu Education. There was widespread hostility, among parents, youth and teachers to the government's plans. Many activists wanted to organise an indefinite boycott, and even an alternative schooling system. This was, of course, utopian. But the ANC leadership, unwilling to endorse this, but unable to offer an alternative plan of struggle, blew hot and cold—disappointing those who had committed themselves to action.

Instead of mobilising consistent "pressure to compel the authorities to grant its demands," the approach was to turn the pressure on, and then try to turn it off again.

Of course ebbs and flows in the mass movement were inevitable: mass action cannot be sustained indefinitely. But the task of leadership is to assess in advance what particular campaigns can achieve, and then carry them through to a conclusion—laying a firm basis from which the movement can once again advance. Cutting off campaigns while they are still moving forward only confuses and disorganises a mass movement.

## Attitude reflected

In reality, the wavering of the leadership reflected a middle-class attitude to mass mobilisation.

The middle class is oppressed by capitalism (especially in its monopoly form) and, in South Africa particularly, by racialism—but at the same time it is raised by petty privileges above the condition of the workers. It neither controls the means of production nor produces the wealth of society: hence in the struggle between the main social antagonists—the working class and the capitalist class—it has no **independent** role to play, and no independent policy to offer. It therefore shows no consistency, but tends to bend according to the conflicting pressures on it.

Any determined **mass struggle** inevitably polarises the capitalist class and the working class against each other. Initially such a movement accentuates divisions among the capitalists, resulting from conflicts over their different particular interests and from uncertainty over their strategy. But the liberal capitalists, too, move ultimately into the camp of reaction when they face a challenge by the workers which cannot be warded off by tricks and smiles.

Only by understanding how the liberal section of the capitalists will behave once a serious revolutionary confrontation develops can the workers' movement avoid being deceived by the liberals in the earlier stages of its mobilisation.



## Forced to choose

When the main classes polarise against each other, this in turn forces the middle layers of society to choose between two starkly opposed forces, and ultimately two alternative 'regimes'. Sharp and apparently bewildering swings of the middle classes to left and to right have been a regular feature of revolutionary epochs in all countries.

In South Africa, the bulk of the white middle class has been drawn over a long period to the right, and with it has gone the privileged white workers. Under the impact, however, of capitalist crisis and the rising challenge of the black workers, sudden rifts and radical swings among these layers will occur in the future—both to the extreme right and to the left.

On the other hand, the majority of the black middle class sympathises and identifies with the black workers' movement, and can be drawn behind it by a strong lead. At the same time, however, elements of this middle class pass over into open alliance with the capitalists when they find they can no longer safely occupy middle ground. The first signs of this appear even in the first stages of the polarisation of labour and capital. At the end of the Defiance Campaign, for instance, the Working Committee of the ANC (Cape) noted the departure of

pleading, cowardly, and hamba-kahle leaders who were always ready to compromise after they had been flattered by taking tea with the rulers of the people. These leaders have now been isolated and are siding with their masters to justify oppression and exploitation...<sup>11</sup>

Today we see the parallel in the role of the Bantustan leaders, the President's Council collaborators, etc.

As the working class and the ruling class struggle more intensely against each other, as more and more of the old middle ground disappears, this process affects the upper layers of the middle class to an ever increasing extent (and can have the unexpected result of even previously respected leaders changing sides).

## Decisive influence

The important thing to understand is that the shifts and swings in the behaviour of the middle classes are decisively influenced by the polarisation and grinding action of the main forces of labour and capital against each other. **The bulk of the oppressed middle class can be rescued from its dilemma only by a determined lead from the workers.**

It is a characteristic blindness of middle-class leaders to seek the impossible 'middle way', by 'reconciling' labour and capital—by first supporting and then trying to hold back the struggles of workers, and by hoping to reconcile the capitalists to workers' demands. These utopian ideas often play a big role at the beginning of a revolutionary epoch, before they are overwhelmed by great events.

In South Africa, especially in the early 1950s, the ANC leadership was characterised by such illusions of reconciliation and compromise.

Thus Chief Lutuli, in November 1952 (shortly before he was elected President of the ANC with the support of the Youth League) insisted that the Defiance Campaign was not subversive, "since it does not seek to overthrow the form and machinery of the State but only urges for the inclusion of all sections of the community in a partnership in the government of the country on the basis of equality." The following year he spoke of "a democracy which shall provide for a partnership in the Government of the Union of SA within the present framework of the Union."<sup>12</sup>

But the Programme of Action and the Defiance Campaign implied more than this. They called on the people to take up a struggle for their own needs by methods—civil disobedience, boycott and strike—which inevitably brought them into confrontation with the 'law and order' of the state and the authority of the ruling class over production and society.

Carried into action, they could only bring to light that the struggle for democracy in South Africa involves a revolutionary struggle to overthrow the ruling capitalist class. They therefore struck at the very foundations of the "present framework of the Union."

To pretend otherwise would not deceive the ruling class, acutely conscious of its interests. To pretend otherwise could only conceal from the masses the understanding indispensable to their effective mobilisation.

## Hopes pinned

Not having learned the necessary lessons from the experience under the United Party and other capitalist governments up to 1948, an influential section of the ANC leadership at this time pinned hope on a defeat of the Nationalist Party in the 1953 white elections. After the re-election of the NP government (with an increased majority), there was more vocal criticism within the ANC of the "change of heart" conception. Among the critics were the radical nationalists who later formed the core of the PAC split-off from the ANC.

From this time, the ANC leadership spoke increasingly in terms of the construction of a "multi-racial united democratic front" to "challenge the forces of reaction in this country."

The African working class—with its families, the majority in society—had every interest in the widest possible unity in action of workers and all genuine strugglers. If powerfully organised, and armed with a clear understanding of its tasks, the working class could have rallied all sections of oppressed society to its side, giving a basis for workers to win over their non-working class supporters to a revolutionary programme.

In that way, the movement could have been united in the struggle for national liberation and democracy, consciously linked to the need for workers' power and the socialist transformation of society.

But this was not the kind of "united front" envisaged by the middle-class ANC leadership. They hoped to find 'democracy' while evading the question of workers' power and the struggle against capitalism.

Thus, on the one hand, their approach was to construct



the 'Congress Alliance', linking ethnically-based sister organisations led in each case by **the middle class**—the Coloured People's Congress, the Indian Congresses, the white Congress of Democrats. On the other hand, they set out to woo the support of open apologists for and representatives of **the capitalist class**.

Under middle-class leadership, they hoped to bind together the opposing interests of the workers and the bosses into a Popular Front of all classes against the NP government.

## Characteristic

Thus a characteristic ANC document evaluating the Defiance Campaign for the National Action Committee (December 1952) welcomed as a distinct mark of success the "range of white sympathy" which had been generated among "philosophers, liberals, university professors and other prominent people", including church leaders. Against all the evidence of continued implacable resistance by employers and police to workers' struggles on the factory floor, they claimed that commerce and industry were "propagating liberal and more humane policy".<sup>13</sup>

In 1954, to the ANC conference, Lutuli expressed "gratitude" not only for the formation of the Congress of Democrats, but for the formation of the openly pro-capitalist Liberal Party, on a programme of qualified franchise. Between them and "ourselves", he said, "there exists a warm sympathetic understanding". And he referred to the late J.H. Hofmeyr—Deputy Prime Minister at the time the 1946 African mineworkers' strike was crushed—as a "great South African".

Certainly the force of the rising mass movement had deepened divisions among the ruling class and its supporters. Under the more intense pressures from below today, such divisions have opened up again on an even greater scale. But these do not signify a "change of heart" by the ruling class over the defence of its material interests. They are a sign of its weakening, and of its search for new methods of trickery and division to use against the working people.

Rather than bending and accommodating to the ruling-class 'progressives', the task for the mass movement is to intensify its pressure. But the right wing of the ANC leadership, particularly, shrank from these class realities. Intimidated by the ruling class, they feared also the forces that would be unleashed by mass confrontation.

Elevated above the condition of the workers, the black middle class in Congress were susceptible to pressures from above—to the weight of the capitalist class and its state. In the wake of the Defiance Campaign, related the Congress right-winger Jordan Ngubane, the Institute of Race Relations organised meetings involving leading liberals as well as Lutuli and two former ANC Presidents. "The majority on the white side", he stated, "wanted us to pursue a course so moderate our people would promptly lynch all of us."<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, the right wing could not afford to go so far. Nevertheless, they insisted on the "non-subversive" character of the mass struggle, and were willing to use

their authority and prestige to try and maintain it within limits acceptable to the liberals.

Congress leaders showed the heavy influence of the liberals in clinging still to the dream that South Africa could be changed by an opposition party defeating the Nationalist Party in future white elections. Giving his Presidential address to the Cape ANC in June 1955, Professor Z.K. Matthews criticised the UP opposition and argued that:

Only a party with a policy diametrically opposed to that of the Nationalists' party will ever remove them from office. No such party has yet emerged **from among the people who enjoy the franchise in South Africa**. Such a party when it eventually does emerge will probably be in the wilderness for some time, but it will be the only party with a future in S.A. and will constitute **a genuine alternative government** to that of the Nationalist Party. It is such a party and such a party alone which will be able to preserve South Africa not for white civilisation, but for civilisation as such.

(Our emphasis.)

All else aside, this represented a total misunderstanding of the psychology of the white electorate. In the 1950s, the NP government was offering to the white workers and middle class the best they could expect to get in the harsh and uncertain world of capitalism—economic concessions, and the reliable defence of their privilege. This was why the UP opposition refused to budge from the same ground. The liberal splinter parties which emerged in the 1950s might win support from individuals whose conscience was disturbed, but could **never** have a realistic appeal to the majority of whites.

## Organised power

The only thing that could have begun to win respect from white workers was the strongest possible display by black workers of their determination and organised power in fighting for their own rights and class interests—and therefore for the complete transformation of society. While an appeal to the common interests of black and white workers in joining a struggle to overthrow capitalism would probably not have won much support from white workers at that stage, it was the only serious basis on which a conscious revolutionary movement of black workers could have been developed, having the prospect of eventual success.

In reality, the 'reasonableness' of the Congress leadership towards the liberal capitalists only hardened the racism of white workers and drove them further to the right. They saw in it a combination of the blacks **with the white bosses**, and thus felt threatened by it in a way which they would not be threatened by a class-conscious movement of black workers offering workers' unity with a socialist programme.

It was precisely the danger of a '*toenadering*' of the capitalists and the blacks which was always pointed to in the '*swart gevaar*' propaganda used by the NP demagogues to whip up fear among the lower-class whites.

Therefore the compromising policies of Congress leaders (and class-compromise always has this effect) con-



tributed to the **opposite** development to that which they intended.

In 1948 the NP government had scraped into office. But it **increased** its majority in each subsequent test: in the elections of 1953 and 1958, and in the referendum for a Republic in 1960.

Its support growing, the NP government grew more confident in repression. Insistence on the "non-subversive" character of the struggle did not save the Congress movement from intensified restrictions, bans, banishments—or from the arrest of 156 leaders in 1956 on charges of high treason.

## Rethink

Certainly, the state's vicious response to the Defiance Campaign did cause serious activists in Congress to rethink their earlier belief in the almost magical power of unorganised mass actions.

Thus Nelson Mandela, who at the December 1951 ANC conference had called for apartheid to be "made unworkable"<sup>15</sup> by means of the Defiance Campaign, drew sober and important conclusions in his well-known 'No Easy Walk to Freedom' speech in September 1953:

The Congresses realized that these (repressive) measures created a new situation which did not prevail when the campaign was launched in June 1952...

Long speeches, the shaking of fists, the banging of tables, and strongly worded resolutions out of touch with conditions do not bring about mass action, and can do a great deal of harm to the organization and the struggles we serve. We understood that the masses had to be made ready for new forms of political struggle. We had to recuperate our strength and muster our forces for another and more powerful offensive against the enemy... The Defiance Campaign, together with its thrills and adventures, has receded. The old methods of bringing about mass action through public mass meetings, press statements, and leaflets calling upon the people to go into action have become extremely dangerous and difficult to use effectively...

The general political level of the people has been considerably raised and they are now more conscious of their strength. Action has become the language of the day. The ties between the working people and the Congress have been greatly strengthened. This is a development of the highest importance because in a country such as ours a political organization that does not receive the support of the workers is paralysed on the very ground on which it has chosen to wage battle...

From now on the activity of the Congressites must not be confined to speeches and resolutions. Their activities must find expression in wide-scale work among the masses, work which will enable them to make the greatest possible contact with the working people. You must protect and defend your trade unions. If you are not allowed to have your meetings publicly, then you must hold them over your machines in the factories, on the trains and buses as you travel home. You must have them in your villages and shanty-towns. You must make every home and every shack and every mud structure where our people live a branch of the trade union movement, and you must never surrender.

...Here in South Africa, as in many parts of the world, a revolution is maturing: it is the profound desire, the

determination and the urge of the overwhelming majority of the country to destroy forever the shackles of oppression that condemn them to servitude and slavery.

The conclusions drawn by Mandela on the need for the **organisation** of the working class were quite correct.

But to turn them into reality, something more was needed. That was an understanding of **why** the organisation of the working class was the key—and a conscious acceptance of the need to transform Congress into an instrument of struggle in which the organised workers predominated and gave clear class leadership to the entire movement.

To put the same point another way: What was needed was an understanding of the capitalist foundation on which the apartheid system rests, and a programme rousing the working class, linking the democratic and social demands with the ideas of socialism, and imbuing the whole movement with a revolutionary perspective and strategy.

Without this conception—without a **deliberate struggle** to convince Congress activists and change the direction and leadership of the movement—there could be no fundamental break with the failed methods of the past.

Thus, in fact, neither the Western Areas anti-removals campaign nor the Bantu Education campaign was based on developing the organised strength of the working class.

To move seriously in the direction in which Mandela's speech had pointed, it was not enough for trade union leaders to be elevated into some leading positions in Congress (as happened in the 1950s, and as we see again today in the UDF). Nor was it a question of the workers being organised as 'one front'—even 'the most important front'—in a struggle of 'many fronts' (a terminology current today).

It was a question then—as it still is today—of the working class, its interests and its programme, ruling the policy of the Congress movement.

The awakening of the working class in the early 1950s, its pressure upon Congress, and the search for new direction among the ANC activists provided a fertile field in which an organised campaign to transform the movement on these lines could rapidly have made headway. What would have been necessary to achieve this, however, was the formation of a conscious Marxist tendency within Congress, unashamedly putting forward its ideas and building support systematically among the organised workers.

## Communist Party?

Was this not a role which the Communist Party might have performed in the ANC? Was such a transformation of Congress not a means of bringing into being at last the mass workers' party which the CP leaders had failed to build or even prepare before?

Again, tragically, the opportunity was missed. The CP had already degenerated to such a degree—its policies had already parted company to such an extent from the fundamental **class ideas** of Marxism—that when it turned its forces into Congress in the 1950s it merely propped up and gave a cover to the old mistaken policies and approach of the middle-class leaders.



# The role of the Communist Party in the ANC

In 1950 the Communist Party, faced with banning under the Suppression of Communism Act, dissolved itself as an open organisation—but was reconstituted underground in 1953. Those active workers who remained in the CP, or joined it underground in the 1950s, did so because they expected a lead from it in the struggle to transform society.

After 1950, states a CP historian, “Party members were to continue working in the national organisations, the trade unions and other bodies, and to help bring into being the Congress Alliance headed by the African National Congress”.<sup>16</sup>

The assumption of a mass character by the “national organisations” was, as has been explained, a consequence of the opportunities missed by the CP itself to build a mass workers’ party. Indeed, there had been a conscious abdication by the CP of its position in favour of the ANC. Thus: “There were periods, during the war years especially, when Africans flocked to the Party in preference to the ANC, only to find themselves ordered to join the Congress and make it a strong and independent body.”<sup>17</sup>

Through the 1950s, CP leaders and members had an increasingly influential position within the Congress movement. But what did the CP leadership see as the role of the Party in Congress?

Its approach was typified by the Party’s general secretary, Moses Kotane, whose official biographer quotes ANC leaders, among them O.R. Tambo, as follows:

Lutuli...on difficult questions on which he wanted advice by-passed his officials and secretaries and sent for Moses because he had discerned this loyalty in him... Even

when Lutuli was confined to the Groutville area in Natal, he would send for Moses to explain or discuss some issue he was uncertain about...

Lutuli had so much confidence in Kotane that he would not make up his mind on controversial problems until he had discussed them with Kotane. Lutuli used to say: ‘Kotane is the leader of the workers. We must hear what the leader of the workers has to say about this’.<sup>18</sup>

## What position?

What position did Kotane, or other CP leaders, express on the policies pursued by Lutuli and the middle-class Congress leadership? His biographer is quite clear: “whatever the Communists did was done through the channels of the Congress movement and in pursuit of policies laid down by the Congresses. Apart from one or two minor instances, nothing was done by the CP which was in conflict with Congress policy.”<sup>19</sup>

This reflected the fact that in practice the policies of the CP leaders were no different. How, then, did the CP explain its distinct existence as a party?

“An independent Marxist-Leninist party was essential”, asserts the official history of the SACP, “both to fulfil its **long-term** mission of winning a socialist South Africa based on workers’ power, and also to ensure the success of the **immediate** fight for national liberation and democracy.” (*Fifty Fighting Years*, p.97. Our emphasis.)

**But, surely, to achieve success, the “immediate struggle for democracy” required a conscious struggle for workers’ power!**

## Socialism

It is true that the attainment of **socialism**—meaning a society of abundance in which all inequalities, classes and the state itself can wither away—was a longer-term perspective. A democratic workers’ state in SA could only lay the foundations for a socialist society to develop in association with advances of the workers’ revolution internationally.

But to play with words in this typical manner of the CP—to **separate the struggle for democracy from the struggle of the working class for power against its oppressors and exploiters**—conceded the leadership of the democratic struggle to the middle class.

Kotane, O.R. Tambo is reported as saying, could have used his position to underline attitudes which were specific to the Communist Party, to speak from a particular position and remind everybody about the ultimate objectives of the Communist Party. But he never did that. He debated from what seemed to be an exclusively ANC standpoint...<sup>20</sup>

In this, Kotane only faithfully carried out the policy line of his party, and indeed of Stalinism internationally. Its effect was to conceal not only the need for workers’ power, but even the very idea of a different, socialist form of society, from the mass of the workers searching for answers in the school of struggle.



# The Freedom Charter

The Freedom Charter, a programme which still embraces many of the essential aims of our struggle, was adopted at the Congress of the People, held on 26-7 June 1955.

Attended by some 3 000 delegates, the Congress of the People was one of the most representative gatherings ever held in South Africa. Like the launching conference of the UDF in August last year, it aroused enormous enthusiasm in the working class.

In the run-up to the Congress, meetings were organised in different parts of the country, giving an opportunity to working people to voice and write down their demands. The Freedom Charter, reported O.R. Tambo, was "being compiled from thousands of written statements ... gathered at thousands of small meetings."<sup>21</sup>

"For months now", wrote *New Age* (23/6/55), "the demands have been flooding in to C.O.P. headquarters, on sheets torn from school exercise books, on little dog-eared scraps of paper, on slips torn from C.O.P. leaflets."

Apparently stemming from a proposal first made publicly by Z.K. Matthews, the calling of the Congress was seen as a means of raising the pressure on the white government by showing the groundswell of unity backing up the ANC's democratic demands.

It could not, of course, be the "people's parliament" which some called it—for it gathered under the threatening guns of the oppressor state and was powerless to implement its will. But this very fact highlighted for the people, who sent delegates to it and supported it, that the democratic will of the majority would always be frustrated until that state power was overthrown.

The Congress of the People thus could have provided a springboard for the launching of a new and more effective round of nation-wide action—extending and consolidating working-class political organisation for yet bigger battles to come—if the leadership had been united with a clear conception of where to lead it.

As with all the campaigns of the 1950s, the campaign of preparation for the Congress was most effective where the working class was best organised. They saw the possibilities which it opened up, and they took it up vigorously.

Thus in Port Elizabeth (as a SACTU activist, Alven Bennie, later recalled):

The workers responded with enthusiasm and we were working day and night preparing for the Congress of the People... That campaign helped us a lot... The workers would bring their demands to the offices after work. We worked till late and they would come in with their papers from different industries. We set up small committees,

not only for the Congress, but we would organize a committee of workers so that they could continue with the work of organizing for the trade unions—in the dairies, laundries, road construction, with building workers, railway workers, etc.

The real organizing of the workers was boosted by the campaign ... they had something to keep them together to discuss common problems. Some of their problems were those of higher wages, better working conditions... We explained that workers must unite, have a union to represent them. So, this gave us a chance to organize workers and explain to them that some of these problems would not be solved by the Congress of the People...<sup>22</sup>

In other areas, where the middle-class predominance in the ANC was absolute, there was little or no response to the campaign. "Although the ANC was responsible for the creation of the Congress of the People," reported the NEC in December 1955, "many of its leaders and many of its branches showed a complete lack of activity as if some of them regretted the birth of this great and noble idea."

Why should the idea of the Congress of the People have been "regretted"? Many of the middle class in the ANC sensed that the Congress would provide a forum where working-class people could raise a political voice in a concerted way, and exert public pressure from the left upon the policy of the movement. They feared losing control of the direction of the ANC.

## Revolutionary character

'Grounds' for their anxiety were evident in the revolutionary character of the demands which poured in from the working class, who wanted not only an end to racial oppression but an end to their enslavement by capitalism.

A Communist Party member has disclosed how the committee on which he served, which received and sorted these demands to prepare a framework for the Freedom Charter, censored out the many demands for "socialism" which flowed in.

Nevertheless the concrete social needs of workers for a national minimum wage, unemployment benefits, decent housing, education, hospitals, transport, etc., did find their way into the Charter and form a very important part of it. Included with them was the nationalisation clause, which was seen by workers at the Congress of the People as a cornerstone of the whole Charter:

*The National wealth of our country, the heritage of all South Africans, shall be restored to the people; The mineral wealth beneath the soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole...*

Here was embodied the recognition of the working class that the achievement of national liberation and democracy involved overthrowing the capitalist class and breaking the grip of the profit system. At the Congress, the mover of the nationalisation clause explained it to the delegates in these words:

It says ownership of the mines will be transferred to the ownership of the people. It says wherever there is a gold mine there will no longer be a compound boss. There will be a committee of the workers to run the gold mines.



Friends, we also say that wherever there is a factory and where there are workers who are exploited, we say that the workers will take over and run the factories. In other words, the ownership of the factories will come into the hands of the people.

Let the banks come back to the people, let us have a people's committee to run the banks.

The next speaker, a trade union leader from Natal, spelled out the significance which the working class attached to this clause of the Charter:

Now comrades, the biggest difficulty we are facing in South Africa is that one of capitalism in all its oppressive measures versus the ordinary people—the ordinary workers in the country. We find in this country, as the mover of the resolution pointed out, the means of production. The factories, the lands, the industries and everything possible is owned by a small group of people who are the capitalists in this country. They skin the people, they live on the fat of the workers and make them work, as a matter of fact in exploitation. They oppress in order to keep them as slaves in the land of their birth.

Now friends, this is a very important demand in the Freedom Charter. Now we would like to see a South Africa where the industries, the lands, the big businesses and the mines, and everything that is owned by a small group of people in this country, must be owned by all the people in this country. That is what we demand, this is what we fight for and until we have achieved that we must not rest.<sup>23</sup>

Nothing was said publicly at the Congress, by any ANC or CP leader, to contradict this view. Nevertheless, the real attitude of the leadership was different, as soon became apparent.

One of those who had brought the nationalisation clause as a resolution from the Cape has recalled a bitter struggle, not only by some ANC leaders, but also by leading 'Communists', to prevent its inclusion in the Charter.

Then, once the delegates to the Congress of the People had returned home, the leadership began to re-interpret the Charter publicly and deny its anti-capitalist character.

## Criticised

At the Natal ANC conference in October 1955, a resolution criticised the nationalisation clause on the grounds that it "creates the impression that something will be taken away from someone (maybe the 'Haves') and given to some other person (maybe the 'Have-nots'). We would prefer something like this: 'shall be shared equitably among all the people'."

(It has yet to be explained how wealth can be "shared equitably" while the productive forces are privately owned and the economy is based on profit and exploitation.)

This conference also disliked the demand for a 40-hour working week (it was unnecessary "padding"!), and stated that "making unused housing space" available should not require more than one family to live under one roof. (Even in the enormous mansions of the rich?!)

Reflecting similar views, Lutuli insisted (in a statement prepared for the Treason Trial) that the ANC did not favour abolition of private ownership of the means of production.<sup>24</sup>

Nelson Mandela, too, took this line publicly in 1956.<sup>25</sup> He was still repeating it at the Rivonia trial in the 1960s:

The realisation of the Freedom Charter would open up fresh fields for a prosperous African population of all classes, including the middle class. The ANC has never at any period in its history advocated a revolutionary change in the economic structure of the country, nor has it, to the best of my recollection, ever condemned capitalist society.<sup>26</sup>

In no way did the Communist Party leadership ever express disagreement with these positions.

For example, in a document prepared for the defence in the Treason Trial, a leading CP member, Jack Simons, supported the Lutuli/Mandela interpretation of the Charter. He stated that it did not call for public ownership of the means of production, and that it contained no suggestion of a transition to a classless and socialist society. Adhering to the 'two-stage' conception of Stalinism, he asserted that, in the conditions of South African autocracy, Marxists could be expected to work for a bourgeois democracy.<sup>27</sup>

## Necessary?

The Congress and Communist Party leaders argued that this 'interpretation' of the Freedom Charter was necessary in order to avoid frightening the black middle class away from the Congress movement. But the Freedom Charter called for the nationalisation, not of the little township shop, not of small private property, but of the **commanding heights of the economy**.

With workers' democratic control and management of production as a whole, based on the main concentrations of industry, mining, agriculture and finance, small private businesses would in fact be necessary to facilitate distribution and small-scale services through a lengthy transitional period. In contrast, a "bourgeois democracy", leaving the economy to be organised on criteria of profit, would leave the middle class at the mercy of capitalist monopolies.

In reality the Congress/CP leadership backed off from the nationalisation clause of the Freedom Charter because they were still pursuing a futile search for reconciliation between the demands of the masses and the interests of the liberal capitalists.

For the same reason, they could not move to build systematically upon the enthusiastic working-class support which the Congress of the People and the adoption of the Freedom Charter had aroused. The lack of a revolutionary **class** conception of the struggle thus blunted the thrust of the movement at every point when clear leadership was needed to march forward.

Instead of a renewed campaign of action the ANC launched a campaign... to get a million signatures in support of the Charter. What effect this was supposed to have in changing the real relationships of power in South Africa was a mystery (and for that reason petitions usually leave workers stone cold). This petitioning campaign managed to get an estimated 100 000 signatures, mostly in the Transvaal, and then fizzled out.

From this time, ANC and CP leaders placed increased emphasis on trying to organise an "anti-Nationalist



front"—a front based not on mass unity in action, but on assembling the widest possible range of support, mainly verbal, of anyone to the left of the government.

Thus Walter Sisulu, writing in *Africa South* (January-March 1957), stated that

Even the United Party will have to make up its mind. It will be faced with the question of joining with the Nationalists completely and sharing the fate which will face all racialists, or joining with the larger family of the democratic forces against apartheid.

Just how the black workers could be part of the same "family" with their capitalist masters—or in any way rely on them for real support—was not explained.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, from 1955, the lull in the mass movement was beginning to end. The struggle launched by African women in 1956 against the government's attempt to impose passes on them, and the bus boycott in Evaton, were signs of a resurgence. By early 1957 the mass movement had reached its highest point in the decade, with the Alexandra bus boycott and the nation-wide echo it evoked

among working people.

In 1955 SACTU was formed, a non-racial trade union movement whose founding principles provided the basis on which mass fighting trade unionism could have been built.

Yet Congress leaders were as much, and indeed more, preoccupied with the twists and turns of the remainder of the tiny black middle class, and the liberals who associated with them.

Inordinate attention was paid, for example, to an inter-denominational conference of African churchmen held at Bloemfontein in October 1956 to consider the NP government's Tomlinson Commission proposals on the Bantustans. The clergy's opposition to these proposals, and their decision to call for a "multi-racial conference" of "national leaders" was, it was claimed, an "important step" in the "broadening" of the "anti-Nationalist front".

Yet, surely, what really mattered was not the support of this handful of individuals, powerless on their own account, but the organisation of the as yet unorganised mass of the working class, thirsting for a clear lead.

## The birth of SACTU

The formation of a trade union federation based on the African workers and upholding clear principles of non-racial workers' unity, was long overdue. The South African Congress of Trade Unions, founded in March 1955, thus held enormous promise for the working class.

The old 'official' trade union movement was dominated by a leadership reared in the worst traditions of craft unionism and racial sectionalism—interested only in advancing the privileges of a mainly white minority of workers, by methods of class-collaboration with the employers.

The attitude of that leadership had been summed up in their telegram replying to a request by an international trade union body for information about the 1946 African mineworkers' strike:

Appears natives were misled by irresponsible people. Police methods controlling strike drastic but warranted. Such action was necessary to maintain law and order and prevent chaos.<sup>29</sup>

In almost every capitalist country, unskilled workers

have had to take on their own shoulders the task of organising themselves, meeting with indifference or hostility from older craft unions. In SA, where craft and race privilege have reinforced one another, this was even more the case. The traditions of struggle by African mineworkers, the tradition of the ICU in the 1920s, the success of the CNETU during the Second World War, showed the potential of organisation on this basis.

Within the official Trades and Labour Council (from which TUCSA was later to emerge), black workers were tolerated as second-class members and hamstrung in their organisation. Pleas to this leadership to give a lead in organising and mobilising African workers fell, not surprisingly, on deaf ears.

The Communist Party long pursued a policy of trying to change the Trades and Labour Council, but without success. As late as 1950, the CP criticised the CNETU for rejecting affiliation to the TLC.

In fact, the final impetus to the formation of SACTU came when the leadership of the TLC unions bolted the door against African workers, leaving the non-racial unions no alternative but to strike out independently. The Trades and Labour Council dissolved itself in 1954 and became "reconstituted" with a constitution barring unions with African members from affiliation.

### Weakness

The weakness of trade union organisation among black workers at that time was shown in the initial membership of SACTU. In 1956, the 19 affiliated unions had a total membership of only 20 000—when 1 to 2 million African workers were potentially unionisable.

Of these 20 000, the majority were concentrated in



three registered unions and their African 'parallels': Food and Canning; Textiles; Laundry and Dry Cleaning. Unionisation in these sectors of black workers in the early 1950s had been relatively 'easier' than elsewhere because in them production had expanded rapidly, allowing employers to make some concessions.

From the beginning, SACTU's policy reflected the understanding of worker activists that, to secure decent wages and conditions, the struggle could not be confined to an 'economic' struggle with employers, but involved a **political** struggle.

However, what was **not** made clear—mainly because of the influence of CP ideas within SACTU—was that this political struggle necessarily required working-class leadership, and a programme for workers' power and the overthrow of capitalism, in order to succeed.

For this reason, when SACTU affiliated to the Congress Alliance, it was not to bring the Congress movement under organised working-class leadership and a workers' programme, but merely to provide worker support for the middle-class policies and methods long enshrined in Congress.

The building of SACTU into a fighting trade union federation embracing the mass of workers should have been made a central task—indeed the central task—for the Congress movement, with all its authority and resources. Mass industrial organisation was the only basis on which the employers and the regime could have been tackled effectively in the political arena too.

Clearly such a task was by no means an easy one. In an article welcoming the formation of SACTU, banned Textile Workers' leader Mike Muller pointed out some of the serious implications involved:

(I)t is childish self-deception to give out that the mere fact of the formation of this new trade union body is itself a turning point.

...trade unions must not be 'post offices' referring complaints within the narrow limits of wage determinations and agreements to the Labour Department and Industrial Councils... But to take up a grievance, to lead the workers themselves to act on it unitedly, that is the lifeblood of trade unionism. To teach the workers by their own experience that they can change their own life is at the root of the conception of the political role of trade unions...

The potential membership of (SACTU) is limited only by its means and ability to organise the unorganised workers. Besides this one task, all other tasks are of no consequence. It can stand on principles until it drops, it can campaign politically until it is winded, but if it fails to bring into the trade union movement a large proportion of the nearly one million unorganised workers, then its very survival is doubtful.<sup>30</sup>

To achieve its goals, SACTU needed to break through to organising the heavy battalions of industrial workers on a massive scale—in metal and engineering, in steel, in transport, and on the mines. But although these were identified as the critical tasks from early in SACTU's development, and although many worker-militants strove valiantly to take this work forward, the necessary headway was not made.

At its highest point, in 1961, SACTU's membership had increased to some 53 000, the majority of whom were still in light industry. Less than 40 000 were African workers.

This was not the result of any apathy among the workers. As SACTU's 1959 conference itself recognised, "the organising of more workers into effective new

trade unions has not kept pace with the degree of consciousness prevalent among the workers."

Indeed, SACTU organising work in the 1950s was hard hit by state repression. But South African workers—as the 1970s showed vividly—have found methods of laying foundations for mass organisation, including in heavy industry, in the face of the most efficient repressive techniques by the state.

It is quite true that, as a result of the growth of industry, African workers had by the 1970s become far more numerous and were placed in a far better strategic position in industry than was the case in the 1950s. But if, already in the 1940s, 158 000 black workers could be organised in the CNETU, the opportunities certainly existed after 1955 for SACTU to organise many more.

## Main problem

Really, the main problem was the **political approach** taken to the struggle for democracy, which was manifested in the whole Congress leadership, as well as in the leadership of the CP and SACTU.

This regarded the working class not as the spearhead of a struggle for power whose leadership would rally all the oppressed—but as merely 'one component' in a 'struggle with many fronts', that could achieve its aims with the support of the liberal bosses. Thus the building of the trade unions was not given the priority, in energy and resources, which it desperately needed.

The point is not altered by the fact that, in conference speeches throughout the decade, leaders like Mandela, Tambo, Sisulu, Lutuli, and others called on ANC members to build the trade unions and to become members of trade unions. As the NEC itself admitted in its report to the ANC's last conference as a legal organisation in December 1959, "ANC members and branches have not realised the importance of working in trade unions."

Whereas for workers trade unions are essential instruments, not only for defence of living standards but for schooling themselves in the struggle for power—for the Congress leadership they could not be allowed to become more than bargaining instruments with the employers. The 'politics of the working class', as the leaders saw it, should be confined to supporting a democratic struggle led by the middle class.

## Subordinated

Therefore SACTU's affiliation to Congress—instead of a means to consciously transform the ANC, which would have been quite possible with a Marxist understanding and leadership—became a means of subordinating the 'independent' trade unions to Congress, to middle-class politics and leadership.

Political policies of class-compromise with liberalism always lead to a tendency to hold the workers' movement back even from the full pursuit of the economic



struggle—for if workers become 'too' self-confident and demanding, this might offend the liberal bosses.

As Nimrod Sejake, one of SACTU's most militant organisers on the Rand in the 1950s, recounted in the last issue of *Inqaba*, the response of the SACTU office to plans for calling a strike which had been prepared in nine metal factories simultaneously, was to say: "Nimrod, that is too much".

## Contested

The reformist approach did not go uncontested within SACTU: the pressure from the working class, expressed particularly through SACTU's African worker activists, ensured this. In SACTU's early years, for example, this was evident in the debate over how to respond to the government's Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956.

This Act (taken together with the Native Labour Settlement of Disputes Act of 1953) completed the exclusion of African workers from the officially-recognised and state-regulated trade union system, and carried the racial division of coloured, Asian and white workers to new extremes. It banned the registration of new 'mixed' unions, and racially segregated the membership of existing mixed unions.

To make a clear break from the past methods of 'official' trade unionism, and to turn resolutely towards building powerful non-racial unions based on African workers, it was necessary for the SACTU unions to take a united stand against the terms of this law—even if that involved defying it. As was argued forcibly within SACTU by a number of activists, African workers had no option but to strike illegally to defend themselves. The restrictions imposed by law could not be made to operate if they were defied by the workers in a united way.

Oscar Mpetha summed up this position to the 1957 SACTU conference:

The reason we are faced with an IC Act of this nature is because workers had accepted previous IC Acts, which gained them temporary advantages. We need not find ways and means of working within the Act. We could not leave the onus to a few unions. SACTU as a progressive organisation had to reject the Act... Why could we not negotiate from strength? Must we beg that a piece of paper will negotiate for us, that white workers should negotiate for us? Have we no confidence in our own workers that they will change the tide in South Africa? We must not under-estimate their strength.

Mpetha's position was countered with the argument that the SACTU unions were still weak and thus could

not defy registration.<sup>31</sup> In reality that is precisely why it was necessary to defy it. A clear lead was needed to educate the working class—still at a relatively early stage of building their movement—not only on the need to uphold without compromise non-racial unity of their organisations, but also to rely **only** on their own organised strength.

The Communist Party gave no clear direction on this central problem facing SACTU, and CP members in SACTU in fact pulled in different directions.

The leaders of the biggest registered unions in SACTU (including among them some prominent Communists) decided to accept registration on a racial basis, thus leaving the onus of any defiance of the law to the African workers alone.

This decision was made unilaterally, and without thorough discussion among the union members, despite the 1957 SACTU conference having agreed to postpone a decision in the hope of achieving a united stand.

Thus the Textile union amended its constitution to include coloured workers only; the Laundry union divided into separate single-race unions; and the Food and Canning union decided to confine membership to coloured workers, organising African workers in the parallel AFCWU.

## Bitter battles

In the recession of the late 1950s these registered unions, just like the unregistered unions, were thrown into bitter battles against retrenchments and wage cuts—in which the registration certificate was no assistance at all. In fact the bosses and the state carried out a concerted attack on all the SACTU unions—to deny them stop orders, victimise their members, and break their shop-floor organisation.

While a Marxist policy is not a magic key, it would certainly have helped the class fighters who were the lifeblood within SACTU in their tremendously difficult work. With the aid of a Marxist understanding SACTU could have been built into a more powerful force, better able to defend all workers against attack.

Indeed, many opportunities did arise to build a mass trade union movement, in particular from 1957 when, as a result of the upsurge of the mass movement, SACTU launched its campaign for a national minimum wage of £1 a day.



# 1957-58: The movement in a crucial phase

By 1957 any relative lull in the mass struggle in South Africa had completely evaporated. This reflected itself partly in a rise of strike action, from the low point of the decade in 1953 to a high point in 1955-57. **But the weakness of the workers' organisations meant that the movement flowed predominantly along other channels.**

What provoked this movement were specific attacks by employers and the government: fare increases, the introduction of passes for women, and the imposition of 'Bantu Authorities' in the reserves.

Economically, SA capitalism was entering a recession, and the ruling class sought to lay the burden on the workers. "It would seem", stated the government's Viljoen report on industry in 1958, "that the boom in secondary industry has for the present largely spent its force." In fact, between 1955/6 and 1959/60 only 5 397 new jobs were created for African workers. The capitalists held off wage concessions even for white workers in, e.g., building and engineering during this period.

Early signs of resurgence of mass struggle were the launching of a bus boycott in Evaton in July 1955, and the burning of passes by women in Winburg in March 1956. In both cases militant and determined action under local leadership produced victories. As a result of the women's action in Winburg, the government stopped issuing passes to women for six months. In Evaton, after a boycott for more than ten months, bitterly and violently contested, the fare increases were withdrawn and a measure of control over the running of transport was conceded to a locally-elected committee.

The demonstration of 20 000 women from all over South Africa at the Union Buildings in August 1956 (called by the Federation of SA Women) showed the enormous militant potential of working-class women. This was only the beginning.

From the end of 1956, when the government again

started issuing passes to women—in country districts and small towns—a spontaneous struggle erupted, drawing in the men as well. During 1957 this escalated, involving general strike action in some towns, and merging with resistance to Bantu Authorities in a number of areas in the Transvaal. From April, for example, there was an open mass revolt under way in the Marico district.

Meanwhile the same was taking place in urban areas. On 7 January 1957, a bus boycott began in Alexandra in protest against a decision by PUTCO to raise bus fares by 1d (one penny) to 5d. From the start it was a solid demonstration of working-class solidarity. The boycott spread immediately to Sophiatown and Lady Selborne in Pretoria—and to Atteridgeville, Mooiplaats, Newclare in Pretoria, as well as to Germiston and Edenvale.

On January 13th, workers from Moroka and Jabavu—20 000 or so—joined in solidly, **even though fares had not been raised there.** In February, solidarity boycotts began in other parts of the country—Randfontein, Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage, Bloemfontein. In March an existing partial boycott in Brakpan was made total. In April a bus boycott developed in Worcester.

The working-class atmosphere of the movement is captured in contemporary accounts:

(F)or five or six hours every day endless streams of walkers filled the pavements. Over the rise that obscures Alexandra Township from the main road came the eruption of workers in the dawn hours when mists and brazier fires mingle indistinguishably together. End to end the road was filled with shadowy, hurrying figures. Then the forms thinned out as the younger men with the firmest, sprightly step drew away from the older people, the women, the lame.

In the late afternoons and early evenings, the same crowds turned their backs on the city and again took to the roads. Down the hill the footsloggers found it easier (though by the tenth and eleventh weeks of the boycott many shoes were worn to pitiful remnants), the spindly-legged youngsters trotted now and then to keep up, the progress of the weary women was slower still, here a large Monday washing bundle carried on the head, there a paraffin tin, or the baby tied securely to the back.

(Ruth First, in *Africa South*, July-September 1957.)

"Not since the days of the Defiance Campaign", she continued, "had Africans held so strategic a position... Throughout the long weeks of the boycott, the political initiative in South Africa passed out of the hands of the Government and the Cabinet and into the hands of the African people."

## Initiative

On the whole, the initiative lay with the working class. According to the then ANC activist, Tennyson Makiwane:

The protest by the people which has soared to such inspiring success these few weeks has been achieved with the minimum of fuss and bother, no central co-ordination of the boycott and wholly local direction of the protest movement.

(*Fighting Talk*, February 1957.)

In Alexandra, the leadership of the boycott was in the hands of a People's Transport Committee, responsible



to mass meetings. Local ANC activists were prominent on it.

In fact, the Alexandra boycott broke through an increasing isolation of the **national** ANC leadership from the mass mood. They had played no part in the earlier Evaton bus boycott, and when they had been approached by the women in Winburg for advice on how to respond to the government's introduction of passes, they had advised the women not to burn them.

## Guidelines

Guidelines issued to activists by the Congress National Consultative Committee on the women's struggle over passes, in December 1956, showed that one important conclusion on the implications of the struggle had begun to dawn:

The pass system is the foundation of the whole cheap labour system in South Africa; the ruling class will not easily be forced to give it up. It follows, that victory in the struggle against the pass laws must not be looked for in every minor skirmish against the enemy... Final victory for the people means the end of the cheap labour system in South Africa. It can only be achieved finally by the overthrow of the ruling class, and by the winning of the Freedom Charter as the ruling policy of South Africa.

But from this fact, the document **failed to draw any clear conclusions** on how to prepare and mobilise the working people for these revolutionary tasks. Instead, it concentrated on warning that acts of resistance and defiance could not be expected to produce results. Instead of a clear lead, there was, effectively, no lead.

On the one hand, stated the guidelines, "Nothing should be said or done which would discourage ... acts of defiance, passive resistance" by the women. (Actually the women's defiance was far from **passive**.) "But", it continued,

this is not the only way to fight, nor even the best way. Even widespread acts of passive resistance alone cannot, in the long run, deter the government from its course, if it is determined to use all its force, authority and power to enforce its will... We must not let our enthusiasm blind us to the prospects of overwhelming government force—mass deportations, sackings from jobs, evictions from homes, etc.—which can be unleashed against passive resisters, to break their resistance.

What alternative was proposed to take the struggle forward? Only generalities so vague that no-one would be able to draw from them a direction for any clear campaign:

There are other ways of struggle against the pass laws, each of which has its place. Pass laws can be fought by demonstrations and strikes, by petitions and meetings, by boycott and resistance and disobedience, by active struggle as well as passive. Which of these ways is best? This can only be conceived in the precise circumstances in which we find ourselves in each area at any one time. Sometimes one and sometimes another... We must be ready to use any and every means of struggle which are appropriate and possible at any time and which advance us to our goal...

The campaign must be conducted—as befits a long-drawn out war—with flexibility and skill, now using one weapon, now another...

In practice, the magnificent local resistance struggles of the women against passes were not built upon nationally, and became confined mainly to the organisation of meetings, petitions and demonstrations. The women's activity was not linked to the task of building and using the organised strength of the workers in production.

With the launching and spread of the bus boycott movement—at the same time as the struggle of women against passes was taking off—the ANC and CP leadership faced an even more serious test. Though Congress had not initiated the struggle, the working people were looking to it for a lead.

Moreover, the government itself threw down a challenge. The boycott, declared Minister of Transport Schoeman,

was not an economic matter, but a political move in which the African National Congress was testing its strength... If the Government capitulated to this political move I dare not think what the future would hold for us. But there will be no capitulation...

The boycott will be broken whether it continues for one month or six months. We are convinced that this is only a beginning. These plans have been plotted for a long time. This is merely the precipitating event and their leaders are preparing themselves for the struggle... If they want a showdown they will get it.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, commented the *Natal Daily News*,

Mr Schoeman did not say so in Parliament but there is good reason to believe that the Cabinet thinks if the boycott were to succeed over bus fares it would become the conventional and invariable weapon against all other increased charges levied on the Bantu, such as house rentals.

As such it would have become the effective political weapon for an unenfranchised majority in other fields as well and would eventually enable the Bantu to challenge the authority of the Government itself.

What was frightening the government—and the whole ruling class—was that the African working class in struggle was beginning to sense its own power.

## Generalise demands

Once launched into action, the working class inevitably begins to generalise its demands beyond the issue which sparked matters off. If fare increases could not be afforded, it was easy to conclude, the cause was inadequate wages. From the heart of the boycott movement the demand for £1 a day emerged—and was pressed on the Congress leadership.

At a week's notice in the midst of the boycott, on 10 February, SACTU convened a National Workers' Conference. It was attended by over 300 delegates representing 24 000 organised workers, as well as unorganised workers from over 100 factories. The demand for £1 a day national minimum wage was unanimously acclaimed, and the conference set a target of organising 20 000 workers on this basis.

Like lightning, around the country, the slogan of the boycott, "*Azikwelwa*" (We will not ride), was joined by the slogan, "*Asinamali*" (We have no money).

The bus boycott was a painful enough weapon through which to press demands for withdrawal of fare increases.



It could not, of course, enforce wider demands, certainly not for £1 a day. Among other reasons, it left the employers in possession of the labour-power of the workers, while progressively tiring out the workers.

Mobilisation at that time by the Congress leadership for a country-wide **24-hour general strike**, linking the fares issue with the demand for £1 a day national minimum wage, and raising the slogan of 'one man one vote', would have been the most effective way to consolidate the whole mass movement and carry forward the offensive.

It would have cemented the unity of the already-organised workers. It could, around the £1 a day demand, have drawn unorganised workers into the unions—probably in far greater numbers than SACTU's 20 000 target. It could have linked together the struggle over fares, wages, passes and all the democratic issues—and directed it **consciously** against the source of the cheap labour system, the capitalists and their state.

## Durban strikes

According to activists of the early 1970s, the strike movement which erupted in Durban in 1973 against rising prices nearly began as a transport boycott. Who can doubt the impact on our history—in terms of the resurgence of the working-class movement—that resulted from the fact that it took the form of a **strike** movement, demonstrating the strength of the working class at the point of production?

The movement in 1973, moreover, emerged out of the darkest ebb of the 1960s, and in the absence of nationwide political or trade union leadership. In 1957 the mass movement was surging forward at a peak of confidence, and looking in one direction—to Congress—for leadership.

These were the very dangers feared by the ruling class. Between the left and right wings of the capitalist class, there occurred a 'division of labour'. While the government camp took its adamant stand against the boycott, the 'progressive' capitalists scurried to find other strategies to restore control over the masses.

This latter section of the ruling class was perceptive enough to see that the movement could not be halted without making some concessions. For them, therefore, the first task was to restrict the issue to the minimum concession which would be acceptable to leaders of the boycott and could be 'sold' to the people.

The problem for these liberals was that the committees controlling the boycott were democratically responsible to mass meetings.

Initial negotiations between PUTCO, the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce and the Alexandra 'Standholders Association' of petty businessmen could hardly impress the working class. It was necessary to 'widen' the negotiations.

A series of intermediaries stepped in, including members of the Liberal Party, Ambrose Reeves (Bishop of Johannesburg), and ex-ANC leaders. The departure point of these elements was an insistence that any settlement should not (in the words of a Liberal Party memorandum on the subject) involve issues "beyond the

preservation of pre-boycott fares".

Proposals for a settlement on these terms were cobbled together by the end of February, and combined with the threat by PUTCO of a "permanent" withdrawal of buses from Alexandra.

Before mass meetings were held to discuss these proposals, the press was already announcing that a settlement had been agreed! On the day when the mass meetings were to take place, the Mayor of Johannesburg issued a call to the boycotters to "preserve the goodwill and sympathy you have received from all quarters", by returning to the buses. He reminded them that, in addition to the proposals for **temporary** reversion to pre-boycott fares, he was promising to "request" the government to "investigate" wages of unskilled workers: "this may result in a wage increase". (*Rand Daily Mail*, 1/3/57.)

Nevertheless, eight weeks into the boycott, the working people remained firm in rejecting these proposals. **The mood was for broadening out the struggle.**

A meeting in Western Native Township on 1 March, for example, greeted with "cheers and thumbs-up signs ... the statement by one woman that promises could not be trusted. 'They say they will raise our wages in three months' time... Let them raise them now' ". (*Rand Daily Mail*, 2/3/57.)

The boycott continued for another month. By then, however, the ruling class was able to impose the same settlement terms on a more exhausted—and by now **divided**—movement.

At the end of March, the proposals were considered by three **separate** mass meetings in Alexandra. Two of these meetings accepted the settlement while the third, the largest, rejected it.

This division was serious enough to break the movement in Alexandra, and the buses began to fill once again. Nevertheless, the **solidarity** boycotts in Moroka and Jabavu continued for a further two weeks. In Lady Selborne in Pretoria, which had not been included in the settlement, the boycott **continued in isolation into 1958!**

Unfortunately, the Congress leadership had a role in producing this dangerous division, which cannot be passed over in silence. From the start they set themselves against any generalising of the movement, in its demands, its scale, or its methods.

In the Eastern Cape, they used their authority to call off the solidarity boycotts that had erupted—in East London after two days, and in PE after two weeks.<sup>33</sup> On the Rand they placed their weight with the liberals who were arguing that the settlement must be confined to the initial issue, and on the Alexandra People's Transport Committee increasingly sided with the conservative Standholders Committee **against** those who were for extending the scope of the struggle.

## Conformity

In their fundamental approach to the struggle, there was complete conformity between the CP and ANC leaders. Indeed, as an ANC member of the APTC subsequently related, it was on the advice of Kotane, general secretary of the Communist Party, that "we gave the



chairmanship (of the APTC) to S. Mahlangu, chairman of the Standholders Association, to convince the people that it was they (!) who were in control, that the boycott was a matter for the whole township, not just an affair of the ANC. He (Kotane) was always thinking about involving wider and wider groups (!) of people in action."<sup>34</sup>

How did the Congress leadership justify their policies? "To put it briefly", recorded Lutuli in his autobiography, the Chamber of Commerce appeared willing to do what the adamant Government refused to do, which was to subsidise the company indirectly rather than place a new burden on poor folk. It was here that Congress leadership came in. The difficulty was that the boycott was such an unqualified success that many people wanted to extend it whether or not the boycotters' demands were met. It seemed to us that if the declared objective could be attained, the boycott should cease. We were very much aware of the hardship of the rank-and-file boycotters, and aware, too, that if opinion became divided the whole boycott might fizzle out and the Government intention ultimately triumph. For these reasons we threw the weight of our argument in on the side of terminating the boycott if the initial demands of the people were met. There is an end to endurance. That is a reality which wise leadership must take into account.<sup>35</sup>

## Leadership

Most certainly there is an end to endurance, and a wise leadership makes a level-headed appraisal of when that end is approaching—so as to use its authority to bring about a tactical turn and preserve the unity of its embattled forces.

Only phrasemongers, barren of understanding or real alternatives to offer, elevate boycotts to a 'principle' and seek to sustain them hopelessly beyond the point of exhaustion.

But the reluctance of **many thousands** in Alexandra and elsewhere to end the boycott (at a time when, taken alone, it could plainly achieve little more) resulted from their readiness to carry forward their resistance in new forms, and their unrewarded thirst for the leadership, strategy and tactics with which to do so.

It was because the Congress and CP leaders would offer no concrete plans, no action programme, no unified conception of how to take the movement forward, that the Alexandra boycott ended in division, with a sterile argument between 'die-hard' boycotters and the leadership who called the boycott off.

More correctly, perhaps, it should be said that this was the result because no strong Marxist tendency existed at the time, able to explain and rally support within Congress for a realistic alternative.

Thus the CP was able to cover its own policy of retreat under a screen of attacks against the die-hard boycotters. CP leader 'Rusty' Bernstein's article in *Fighting Talk* (May 1957) was an especially skilful evasion of the central issue of how precisely to carry the movement forward, and for that reason is worth quoting at some length:

Can this be victory, it is asked, when the people pay the old fare of 4d, but the denomination "5d" appears printed on the ticket? Can this be victory, it is asked, when the

duration of the settlement is dependent upon the Chamber of Commerce's £25 000 fund, with no guarantees for what happens thereafter? The debate can well be left to garrulous old men in wheel-chairs, for whom verbal exercise is all-important and the hard realities of life of no consequence.

*The reality is that the people have returned to the buses, and still pay fourpence... The real issue now is how to use the breathing space provided by the settlement to prepare the people's forces for the second round of struggle which will come to full maturity when the Chamber of Commerce Fund runs out.*

...Only fools can seek to enter into these battles by destroying the people's confidence in the gains with which they have just emerged, by raising their doubts as to whether it was worth while, and by raising their suspicions against those who led. Men who would be generals must understand that substantial gains have been won; and that the confidence in their own strength which the people draw from such gains is the stepping-stone to new and greater gains in the battles that lie ahead. Unity, determination, courage won the gains of yesterday; tomorrow's battle, if it is to be won, must start from the pinnacles of self-confidence and high morale which can grow from such victories, but only if the initiative amongst the people can be taken from the disruptive critics, and returned to those who can understand that even partial, temporary victory becomes a weapon to advance new conquests.

...In many areas "perfectionism" damped the flavour of victory and in some the settlement was, at first, rejected "until a minimum wage of £1 a day is achieved". No doubt the leaders meant well. But they became giddy with their own success, imagining that a boycott could bring not just PUTCO but the whole national body of employers to its knees. Setting the sights this high and raising the people's hopes so unrealistically could only make the settlement seem a let-down. There is a moral in this...(that) political leaders can only lead successfully while their feet are planted firmly on the ground of reality: that a struggle cannot be dragged beyond the limits of the people's strength, understanding and willingness to fight, no matter how radical and militant the slogans advanced by the leaders; *that leadership consists not only in knowing how to go forward, but equally in knowing when and how to stop, or to retreat in good order and in unity.*

There are times—and the thirteenth week of the boycott was surely one—when it is impossible to go forward any longer without a pause to regain lost breath or recover balance; times when one step back is an essential condition for taking two steps forward... When that testing time came in Alexandra, the real leaders revealed their true mettle, while the adventurers cried 'Forward!' even when it was apparent that their bitter-end actions could only result in the whole struggle being frittered away and lost.

It was in this testing hour that the central leadership of the African National Congress showed its quality and its statesmanship. The adventurers now claim that the ANC "sold us out". The barren formalists, even in the ranks of the ANC itself, claim that their leadership should not have intervened to win the people for the boycott settlement, because the boycott was the concern of the united-front People's Transport Committee and not of the ANC... No serious organisation can ever be bound, by the formality of a united-front committee's existence, to sit idly by and watch that committee fritter away the substance of people's victory, and fail to give leadership when leadership is needed...

*The first loyalty of the ANC leadership was to their people, not to the Alexandra boycott committee. Only*



those on the inner leadership of the boycott will know the real, painstaking statesmanship which guided the ANC leadership during this period... If there is credit attaching to the boycott committee for its determined and skilful handling of the boycott in all its earlier period, then much of that credit attaches to the ANC which guided and influenced its direction. And if, in the end, it appeared that the gains of the boycott would be lost by adventurous calls for greater sacrifices than the people were ready to make, it is to the credit of the ANC leadership that it reacted as people's leaders should; that it pocketed its pride in order to recommend careful consideration and acceptance of the settlement.

...And the leadership of the ANC, which intervened directly in the boycott at the eleventh hour, has been vindicated by the people, who considered the settlement offer, used their own good sense to weigh up the possibilities of further resistance, and then accepted it... That the acceptance of the settlement was disorderly and ragged—first Alexandra, later Moroka, and with Pretoria left outside the area of the settlement—is the result not of the ANC intervention, but of the fatal divisions among the boycott leaders themselves, who failed to rise to the historic moment and seize the settlement and victory when both were there to be taken.<sup>36</sup>

All this completely evaded the central issue involved. It was necessary to look beyond the objections of the die-hard boycotters, for the real question was **not** whether the boycott itself should be extended. In fact, in Alexandra itself, pressure was mounting as early as March for the transformation of the boycott into a general strike.

## General strike

General strike action is a question of the utmost seriousness for the working class.

The generalised withdrawal of labour directly challenges the 'right' of the ruling class to command the productive system. It poses the question: 'which class rules society?' To this challenge the ruling class will respond with whatever means it can muster.

Therefore, no leadership calls for general strike action lightly. It must be warranted by the objective situation, the mass mood must be ready for it, and it must be organisationally prepared.

At the same time strike action—of which a general strike is the highest form—is an indispensable weapon for the working class in building its class understanding and confidence. As Trotsky, the great Russian Marxist, put it in the 1930s: "By means of the strike, various strata and groups of the proletariat announce themselves, signal to one another, verify their own strength and the strength of their foe. One layer awakens and infects another... Only through these strikes, with all their mistakes, with all their 'excesses' and 'exaggerations', does the proletariat rise to its feet, assemble itself as a unity, begin to feel and to conceive of itself as a class, as a living historical force."<sup>37</sup>

An **indefinite** general strike puts the question of power itself in issue. Unless the regime or the bosses compromise on the basic issue which has provoked the strike, it can lead only to one of two results for the workers: a tremendous political victory over the forces of the enemy or, ultimately, a severe defeat.

In South Africa, violent confrontation with murderous state forces is obviously inherent in such a situation. While an all-out general strike does not necessarily lead to insurrection, such a strike poses the problems of revolution starkly before the workers. It makes workers see the necessity of taking over the control of the factories, mines, docks, farms, etc., and of establishing its own democratic rule. The strike committees which spring up to organise the strike are themselves the local embryos of workers' rule.

For all these reasons, a general strike requires thorough organisational and political preparation, for which a **hardened and clear-headed leadership** is a paramount need.

On the other hand, a **limited** general strike—called for 24 hours, for example, or longer—provides a means for the working class and its leadership to test the balance of forces in action. Properly prepared and with the right timing, it gives the working class the opportunity to assess its state of readiness, and gives confidence to the unorganised and helps bring them into the organised movement. It can prepare the way to push the ruling class further onto the retreat.

A limited general strike is therefore a means of mobilising and preparing for **further action**. It needs to be explained to the workers in that light, and linked with a coherent strategy by which the movement, as it gathers strength and disorganises the enemy forces, can move towards bigger-scale confrontations.

By the same token, a limited general strike which reveals weaknesses of organisation, preparation and leadership in the working class can be used to turn the attention of the activists in a concentrated way to correcting these in preparation for other mass mobilisations later.

Thus the strike itself is no panacea: the crucial thing is how the strike tactic is approached, understood and consciously used.

What is absolutely fatal is to repeatedly call 24-hour or other limited general strikes without them leading anywhere, without them forming part of a clear strategic plan. This only frustrates workers, causes them to see such strikes as useless, and so weakens the response to successive strike calls.

The practice of 'stay-at-homes' which has developed over the decades in South Africa has suffered from precisely this defect—because these actions have been unconnected with any overall strategic plan.

Moreover, the lack of a coherent strategy had a lot to do with the **reluctance** of Congress leaders in the 1950s to take up the general strike weapon at all.

## Held off

Strike action was a weapon in the arsenal of the Programme of Action; yet, despite the pressures from activists at times, the Congress leadership had held off from it since 1950-51. Moreover, the one-day strikes in 1950-51 had been essentially **regional** in character—first on the Rand, then in Natal and the Cape, then again in the Cape.

But what existed in the **early months of 1957** was a **nation-wide** movement—symbolised in the response in



Bloemfontein and the Eastern Cape to the Alexandra boycott. The upsurge was both in the major cities and—because of the women's anti-pass campaign and resistance to Bantu Authorities—in the smaller towns and the countryside as well. What was coming into being was the "generalised mass action" that the Planning Council had envisaged for the Defiance Campaign.

But, **because they were under the pressure of the liberal capitalists on whom they counted for support**, the Congress leaders did not seize the opportunity. A huge chance to consolidate and develop the struggle for democracy and workers' power was squandered. The consequences, as they set in, were to be profound.

Disappointment in the leadership produced division among the masses, thus weakening the movement, and providing opportunities for the ruling class to recover the initiative.

It is true that general strike action did take place under the banner of Congress—for one day on 26 June 1957 and again during the election in April 1958. Despite massive mobilisation by the state machine and the bosses against them, these were massively supported by workers around the country.

But in neither case did this result from a clear and unambiguous call by the leadership for strike action. 26 June 1957 was named by Congress as a 'Day of Protest, Prayer and Dedication'—**in which each area was left to decide its own form of demonstration**. In 1958, the original intention was—as suggested by Lutuli in November 1957—that "election day could very well be a day of mass prayer and dedication to the freedom cause." (*New Age*, 7/11/57.)

That these calls became transformed into mobilisation for strike action was the result of the pressure of the working class, which was responded to by worker-activists particularly in SACTU.

## More effective

How much more effective would have been a 24-hour strike call at the height of the mass movement in early 1957. In September that year the secretary of SACTU's Milling Union, remarking how "Our workers have come to look on the £1 a day campaign to end their sufferings and hardships of their low wages", complained that "they feel that work for the campaign is far too slow." (*Workers' Unity*, August/September, 1957.) Strike action at the height of the boycott mood could have transformed the £1 a day campaign overnight into an effective movement for mass unionisation—and put the employers on the defensive, as did the Durban strikes in 1973.

As it was, even with the pressure of the boycott alone, the "adamant" government was forced to rush through Parliament the Native Services Levy Act which made employers pay a subsidy to transport, and to institute Wage Board enquiries (some of which resulted in wage increases). How much more would determined strike action have compelled the employers to make good their 'promises' immediately.

CP leader Bernstein argued, in the passage we have quoted, that the real issue was "how to use the breathing

space provided by the (Alexandra) settlement to prepare the people's forces for the second round of struggle". But the failure to broaden action in January/February meant that the mood of the masses came off the boil—while the ruling class was given a breathing space.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, how did the ANC and CP leadership use this "breathing space" to arm the working class politically and organisationally for renewed struggle? In May 1957, when 40 000 African workers struck in Johannesburg against the pass laws and marched to the City Hall—this action was opposed by senior ANC leaders.

## Appeal

Instead the ANC sent an appeal to government and business leaders, putting forward the demand for £1 a day. Regarding the role of the Mayor of Johannesburg and the President of the Chamber of Commerce in the bus boycott settlement, this memorandum stated:

The ANC wishes to place on record its deep appreciation of the untiring and noble efforts of these two citizens of our country, who, under difficult and trying circumstances, boldly pursued their object of finding some temporary solution to the dispute.

"To find a long-term solution to the problem of higher fares", it continued, "is the concern and responsibility of all of us: the Government, the employers, the workers and the public generally". But how, when the Transvaal Chamber of Industries had already called the £1 a day demand "reckless and irresponsible", could an amiable "long-term solution" be arrived at, reconciling the workers with their exploiters?

By 1958, frustration at the lack of a clear lead to action was producing increasing anger among Congress activists at the leadership, and differences surfaced between SACTU and the ANC.

From late 1957 SACTU began to mobilise for a series of Workers' Conferences in early 1958, around not only the £1 a day campaign, but also around demands for ending job reservation, passes for women, deportations, and the pass laws generally.

Regional conferences in February were followed by a National Workers' Conference in March. Present were 1 637 delegates and 3 000 observers representing, it was claimed, 46 000 workers directly and a further 128 000 indirectly.

The mood at the conference was enthusiastic, determined and militant. During the session on the pass laws the entire meeting rose to its feet and surrounded the Special Branch 'observers' with passes brandished in every hand. The warmest applause was given to those who attacked not merely the NP government but the system of capitalism.

This conference resolved to organise—to begin two days before the elections—"a week of National stay at home, protest and demonstration" in support of demands for £1 a day and the abolition of passes.

Though the initiative for this conference, and for its decisions, came from workers organised in SACTU, the middle-class ANC leadership took over from SACTU the responsibility for the campaign.

Despite the Workers' Conference decision, the ANC immediately shortened the call from a week-long to a



3-day stay-at-home. Then, shortly before it was due to start, Lutuli announced at a press conference on behalf of the ANC "that there would not be a nation-wide strike: the strike would be called only in those areas where success was feasible; in all other areas, local conditions would determine the nature of the demonstrations."<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, despite the atmosphere at the Workers' Conference against the bosses, Lutuli insisted that "the stoppages of work which form part of the demonstrations were not specifically directed against commerce and industry"! (*Rand Daily Mail*, 7/4/58.)

But this did not pacify the bosses. As usual, they showed a far more realistic appreciation of the **class struggle** which was taking place than the foggy-headed middle class. In 1957 the President of the Transvaal Chamber of Industries, in an "urgent confidential" memo to members, called the June 26th day of protest a "test of strength" to be met by Industry with "resolute solidarity",<sup>40</sup> and employers called factory meetings to threaten with dismissal workers who intended striking.

The repression in 1958 was more severe still. Not only were there warnings and threats from the government, from UP leader Graaff, and from employers. All meetings of more than ten people were banned (the ANC was also banned in a number of rural areas). Police leave was cancelled, the army was put on readiness, and convict labour was on call. On the first morning of the strike, squads of police armed with sten guns entered the townships at 2 a.m.

The Mayor of Johannesburg warned workers that an "illegal stoppage" would dissipate the "fast-growing evidence among employer organisations of goodwill and a willingness ... to develop proper means of consultation". (*Rand Daily Mail*, 11/4/58.)

## Workers' response

But workers, on the whole, were neither intimidated by the repression nor taken in by professions of "goodwill". Shamefully, however, five non-SACTU African unions as well as right-wing 'Africanists' in Congress openly opposed the stay-at-home.

On the first day, the strike was at least 50% effective in Port Elizabeth. The mood there was reflected in a statement by one worker: "The bosses are dead scared only when we talk with one voice... If they were not afraid, why bring in the army? Why do they beg us so to come to work if we shall be the ones to go hungry if we do not go to work?" (*New Age*, 24/4/58.)

In Durban the strike was estimated to be 30% effective on the first day—with major participation from African workers there for the first time in the decade. The Durban dockworkers were solid, and won wage increases as a result of their action.

On the Rand on the first day, the response was more disappointing. In 1957 the stay-away in June 1957 had been estimated to be 70-80% effective in Johannesburg and Vereeniging, and 50% effective elsewhere on the Rand. Now, while Sophiatown and Newclare were solid, the stay-away elsewhere was estimated at no more than 10%.

This low response was a reflection of an uncertainty

setting in among many workers as a result of indecisive leadership, the opportunities missed by Congress, and the divisions that were already opening up in the ranks. Had the strike been sustained for three days according to plan, it would have allowed the activists time to convince their fellow workers to follow the example of the areas which had responded best on the first day.

The low first-day response in much of the Rand was thus no reason whatsoever for calling off the action. Yet this is what the ANC leadership did.

In PE and Durban, and on the Rand as well, SACTU activists were furious. As Nimrod Sejake has recalled (*Inqaba* No.12):

*I remember buying a newspaper and seeing the headline: "General Secretary of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, calls off strike."*

I was furious. Because, at that time, we were on bail from the Treason Trial, and one of the conditions was that we did not attend meetings or organise in any way. But, nevertheless, we had risked organising the workers to make the strike a success.

Workers in Sophiatown and Newclare ignored the call-off, and, in bitter battles with the police, continued to strike for the full three days.

## Advantage

The ruling class took full advantage of the decision to call off the strike, seeing it as weakness. In contrast with 1957, punitive reprisals were taken not only against known activists, but against ordinary workers who had participated. In some areas trials were going on a year later. The situation was starkly summed up in a report from the Food and Canning Union in PE to head office: "At one of the factories here one Employer scrawled on the Reference Book of one of his workers when he dismissed him for the 14th April: *ANC supporter*."

SACTU's official history, *Organize or Starve!*, records (p.354):

Whether or not the leadership should have taken the decision to end the protest after the first day became a much-debated issue within the Congress Alliance... The Management Committee of SACTU reacted very strongly to this and the relationship between the ANC and SACTU suffered a temporary but serious strain. The question of SACTU's equality with its partners in the alliance came to the fore, and SACTU leaders realized that many ANC members did not regard SACTU as an important force in the struggle. The decision also pointed to the need for SACTU to take a more independent stand on matters directly affecting the working class...

Indeed, what matters affecting the Congress movement did **not** directly affect the working class? The vital task for the working class was to put its own stamp upon the whole of Congress policy. In this, the workers organised in SACTU could have played a decisive role.

But there was no Marxist tendency in Congress, based in the trade unions and among the youth, which might have given a lead in this.

Instead, sad to say, the magnificent potential aroused in the working class, the fighting and self-sacrificing spirit of the mass of the people, was frustrated by the leadership—and was cut across by growing confusion, division, demoralisation and, eventually, serious defeat.



# The politics of Congress in the late 1950s

Writing in *Liberation* (June 1956), Nelson Mandela stated that the Freedom Charter was “more than a mere list of demands for democratic reforms. It is a revolutionary document precisely because the changes it envisages cannot be won without breaking up the economic and political set-up of present South Africa.”

“To win these demands”, he continued,

calls for the organisation, launching, and development of mass struggles on the widest scale... The most vital task facing the democratic movement in this country is to unleash such struggles and to develop them on the basis of the concrete and immediate demands of the people from area to area... Only in this way will the democratic movement become a vital instrument for the winning of the democratic changes set out in the Charter.

Indeed the programme of the Freedom Charter, challenging the fundamentals of the cheap labour system, did pose a revolutionary challenge to the ruling class. It could be enforced, against the opposition of the ruling class and its state machine, only by building a movement on the scale indicated by Mandela—**led by the organised working class**. Such a movement did not yet exist.

But, rather than consistently building it, Congress leaders continued to believe that this could be short-circuited—by an appeal to the “progressive” capitalists and their supporters to join in an “anti-Nat alliance”—or even by appeals to the “morality” of the Nationalists themselves.

Thus in May 1957 Lutuli wrote to Prime Minister Strijdom:

One of the tragic aspects of the political situation in our country today is the increasing deterioration in race relations, especially in Black-White relations... Rather than outlaw the African National Congress or persecute its members and supporters, the Government, in a statesmanlike manner, should reconsider its “Native policy” with a view to bringing it into conformity with democratic and moral values inherent in any way of life meriting to be described as civilised.

It is the considered view of my Congress that the lack

of effective contact and responsible consultation between the Government and the non-European people is at the root of the growing deterioration in race relations and in the relation between the African people and the Government...

The Government should earnestly address itself to seeking means and ways of establishing some permanent democratic machinery to enable all citizens to participate intelligently and effectively in the government of the country as is done in all truly democratic states.

“(N)o time should be lost”, concluded Lutuli, in making contact with the leadership of organisations and bodies, among them the African National Congress, representative of organised African opinion, with a view not only to discuss the problems and issues such as I have drawn attention to in this letter, but to consider the advisability and possibility of calling a multi-racial convention to seek a solution to our pressing national problems.

Strijdom, needless to say, paid no attention.

In the same vein the CP leader, Michael Harmel, shortly before the 1958 election, called on the United Party to mend its ways if a revolution was to be averted.

The UP was, he argued, “falling down on the job of providing an alternative” to the Nationalists:

(W)hat alternative has the United Party to offer to the people? So far—none at all!... The business and civic leaders in the United Party could recognise clearly enough a year ago the desperate poverty behind the bus boycotts—though they did little more about it than make soothing noises.

If the UP leaders know these things, why don't they say them? Why don't they tell the truth and come before the country with the obvious fact that Verwoerdism, Swartism, brutal repression, is to blame for the nationwide disturbances which are plain for all to see? Why don't they warn the country that to attempt to meet these demonstrations with further force and repression is to invite a calamity: an explosion whose end-effects none can foresee?

**Why don't they come out boldly with the only possible alternative: an undertaking to meet the people's leaders, a recognition of the justice of their demands and grievances, a policy of—at least—concessions?...**

Perhaps because the UP represented **capitalist** interests, concerned to hold the black working class in the chains of wage slavery? Not according to Harmel. No, it was simply on account of “their mean, petty politicians' outlook” which made them afraid to lose votes. But even in that, apparently, they were making a wrong calculation:

Telling the truth now; coming forward with a genuine alternative policy; this will not **lose** the election for the UP. In fact, with things as they are, even at this eleventh hour, it affords the main, probably the only hope of opening the eyes of the voters and defeating the Nats.

(*New Age*, 3/4/58.)

That was the point to which ‘Communism’ had sunk.

## Unmoved

Not surprisingly, the UP leadership was unmoved. Moreover, the Nats won the 1958 election with an increased majority. With the death of Strijdom in August, apartheid's supreme ideologue, Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, became Prime Minister—and at the opening of the following parliamentary session in January 1959 an-



nounced plans for pressing ahead with the divide-and-rule 'Bantustan self-government' scheme.

Yet the Congress leadership retained their faith that the "anti-Nat alliance" was gaining strength among the supporters of capitalism, that the NP government might do a 'U-turn', or at least that it had reached the pinnacle of its power.

Shortly after the 1958 election, Lutuli concluded that "The hope for South Africa is now for the Nationalists to mend their ways... I see a time not far away when the electorate will give the country a progressive government." (*Rand Daily Mail*, 21/4/58.) The National Executive report to the 1958 ANC conference maintained that:

There is today wide realisation among the people of South Africa, that the future of the country lies in their unity. The fighting spirit exists in varying degrees among the anti-Nationalist forces. The United Party itself is under fire from its rank and file and from some of its leaders for its vacillating policy of wanting to out-Nat the Nationalists and its double faced attitude on the question of race relations. The Black Sash and Liberal Party took a firm stand on the question of increase in poll-tax, banning meetings, opposition to pass laws, and the sell-out policy of the City Councillors controlled by the United Party. On the question of high wages they too have shown a great interest. The Trade Union Council (TUCSA) has also made a clear statement in regard to the increase of wages...

A clear demand of unity has been put forward by the editor of the "Rand Daily Mail"...with clarity and foresight... The ANC welcomes the call and will unhesitatingly work for such unity... The unity of the potential progressive forces is the key to the overthrow of the Nationalist regime.

Likewise, to the December 1959 ANC conference, Lutuli stated:

It is no mere rhetoric to say that apartheid is proving to be a Frankenstein... oppression in any guise cannot pay any country dividends... Industry and Commerce are beginning to squeal... We are not without strength. White South Africa is vulnerable.

## "Zenith"

At this conference—held just four months before the ANC was banned—the NEC report elaborated on the same theme:

However stubborn they might appear to be the Nationalists are not invincible. In fact they have reached the zenith of their strength and can be weakened and smashed... The sharp criticisms and doubts of the intellectuals, particularly certain professors and members of SABRA, although it was not on fundamental issues, was some indication that all was not as well as might be thought within the Nationalist camp, and that even amongst Nationalists the thaw was setting it...

We welcome the formation of the Progressive Party... The idea of a broad anti-Nationalist alliance of the organisations opposed to the Nationalists is becoming popular. It is such an alliance capable of using parliamentary and extra-parliamentary methods that can ultimately defeat the Nationalist Party.

During the year 14 organisations, including the Black Sash, Liberal Party, Labour Party and Congresses met

under the Chairmanship of the Right Rev. Bishop Reeves of Johannesburg to discuss matters of common concern to fight against Nationalist tyranny. We wish to congratulate these organisations on their role in exposing the wickedness of Nationalist rule.

Indeed, even after the ANC and PAC were banned in April 1960, even as the mass movement crumbled under the effects of its own division and the intense repression of the early 1960s, the Congress leadership continued to insist that the regime was on its last legs. Only after the Rivonia arrests of 1964 was there the first admission that serious setbacks had been suffered.

## Failure to understand

What underlay these (now almost incredible) mistakes of perspective? It was their failure to ground their approach in a **class** understanding of society; their failure, in consequence, to base the entire struggle on the working class.

It was the acceptance by the Congress and CP leadership of the 'liberal' argument that the apartheid policies of the NP government were against the fundamental interests of the big employers in expanding the economy. Goaded by pressure, the 'progressive' capitalists (they believed) would bring about the defeat of the NP.

In an influential article in the pages of the pro-Congress *Africa South* (January-March 1959)—contributing to a discussion on whether or not revolution was "round the corner" in South Africa—leading CP theoretician Michael Harmel asserted:

...the Congress movement, the national liberation movement of SA, has found its direction and goal, and is steadily winning the allegiance of the vast majority of the people.

And herein lies the certainty of the defeat of the present form of Government and the victory of the South African revolution. For no minority Government can endure, however rigid its repression or seemingly powerful its forces, once the great majority of the people have taken the path of resolute resistance and organization against it.

But revolution need not involve violence. There have been plenty of examples in history where a combination of factors have been compelling enough to **make a ruling class give way for urgent and overdue changes**, without dragging the people through the agony of civil war. We can only hope that this may also be the case in South Africa. We cannot tell what exact form the changes will take, how exactly or when they will come.

(Our emphasis)

While, on the one hand, this perspective failed to comprehend that the mass movement was already seriously affected by a crisis of division, on the other hand it showed a complete misunderstanding of the **class realities** of the struggle against apartheid.

It is true that the policies of apartheid imposed certain 'costs' on the employers. It was true that the pressures exerted by the mass movement produced intense questioning among the bosses and their supporters as to whether these costs were necessary or worth it. For these reasons the UP, during the 1950s, was plagued by increasing divisions—between those who wished to try and "out-Nat the Nats" and those pushing in the direction of a policy of "reform".



It was these factors which led, by 1959, to the formation of the Progressive Party with Harry Oppenheimer, SA's leading monopoly capitalist, as its principal financial backer.

But the fact remained that even the most 'progressive' capitalists, when it came down to it, could not break fundamentally with the existing oppressive system. Their material interests remained diametrically opposed to those of the working masses.

## 'Costs'

The 'costs' of apartheid were infinitely preferable still to the 'costs' that would be opened up by a genuinely democratic government, committed to provide decent wages, homes, jobs, education and health for all.

To sustain their profit system the capitalist class relied ultimately on the power of their state machine. This had been built, and maintained its relative stability, on the basis of the support of a privileged white middle class and working class. No section of the capitalists could afford seriously to attack and weaken the base of their state—and, while 'white minority rule' existed, they could not expect to get electoral support for major reforms.

Thus only a revolution could force the necessary change of society—not by pressurising the ruling class to reform, but by overthrowing it and taking power into the hands of the working class. That should have been the ABC for any Marxist.

What the 'progressive' capitalists were really concerned with was to safeguard the fundamentals of their system against potential pressures mounting from below—for ways to divert the struggle of the working people for a genuinely democratic government into safer channels.

The policies of the NP government were a danger to the liberal bosses only in so far as these policies had the effect of stoking the revolutionary fires. Thus, Harry Oppenheimer explained his worries that Nationalist policies were discouraging foreign capitalists from investing in South Africa. The hesitation of investors, he stated,

is caused by their apprehension that a continuation of the policies of this government is incompatible with white leadership in SA. The policies that this government is adopting will result in the ending of white domination in SA."

(Quoted in *New Age*, 27/6/57.)

Yet the Congress and CP leadership persisted in trying to 'square the circle'—to find through discussions a meeting point between the interests of the capitalist class and those of the masses.

In such discussions the main concern of the capitalist class and its representatives was to dilute and moderate the demands of the mass movement—to put pressure on the movement's leaders to accept more 'reasonable' policies.

In July 1957 a call was issued for the holding of a "multi-racial conference" over signatures which included Lutuli (of the ANC) and Dadoo (of the Indian Congress—later CP chairman), as well Hepple (Labour Party), Paton (Liberal Party) and Bishop Reeves.

The aim of the conference would, it stated, be to discuss a resolution passed at the inter-denominational

gathering of church leaders in 1956 calling for "the abolition of discriminatory laws and the extension of full citizenship rights to all". The aim was to discuss whether this resolution should be "adopted, amended, or replaced by another resolution" and "to discuss the practical implication of this or other similar resolution."

"To give the Conference status (*sic*) the first step was to invite responsible people to sponsor it"!

Invitations were sent to about a thousand "leaders", including leading members of all churches, all political parties, employers' and workers' organisations, teachers' and student bodies, and the press.

The Report of the conference disclosed that members of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Nationalist Party and the United Party generally ignored the invitation. A few individuals from these organisations did attend as observers, however.

Chambers of Commerce and Industry and White trade unions were poorly represented, while few, if any, delegates or observers came from the Afrikaans universities and student bodies.

All other bodies gave strong support, particularly the churches. The English-speaking Universities' staff and students, the Congress movements, the Labour and Liberal parties, the Black Sash, the Institute of Race Relations all had members participating or watching as observers. In addition, there were many individuals not connected with any of these groups."

**In other words, apart from the Congress movement itself, there was nothing here that would be of any significant weight when it came to action.**

Yet this conference, and the fact that it resolved that "only universal adult suffrage on a common roll can meet the needs and aspirations of the people of this country", were acclaimed as "historic" by the Congress and CP leadership.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, agents of the ruling class were there in sufficient voice to insert—without open dissent by the Congress leadership—qualifications on the demands for democracy. The conference "appreciates", stated a resolution, "that there is disagreement as to the ways and means of achieving the transition from white supremacy to a non-racial democracy in which these franchise rights may be exercised."

## "Perpetual consultations"

From this time on, as a Congress activist of the period recalled later, the leadership were "perpetually involved in discussions and high level consultations with liberals, with bishops, visiting academics, and embassy people."<sup>42</sup> Many of these discussions involved the question of what diluted version of the demand for democracy would be acceptable.

Between December 1958 and February 1959, for example, a series of "hush-hush" meetings were going on between SABRA academics and such leaders as Lutuli, Tambo, Mandela and Nokwe. As Lutuli subsequently related, he told the SABRA academics that he would initially accept a very limited African franchise.<sup>43</sup>

In August 1959, too, after the 'Progressives' had split from the UP, Helen Suzman held discussions with the



ANC prior to the first Progressive Party conference. Her impression was that:

although the ANC publicly demanded universal franchise, it might be willing to accept less if it could be truly convinced of the sincerity and good faith of the Whites. This belief was borne out when subsequently the ANC issued a statement in which it applauded the bold stand taken by the Progressive Party, acknowledging that the Progressives' philosophy differed fundamentally from that of the United Party and taking this to be a clear indication that the birth of the Progressives was of great significance to South Africa.

(*A Cricket in a Thorn Tree*, p.169.)

## Spelled out

What the leadership was prepared to accept was, in fact, spelled out in some detail by Nelson Mandela during the Treason Trial. Asked by the prosecution how Congress would respond to the immediate concession of the qualified franchise to Africans, and further concessions "over a period of ten or twenty years", Mandela replied:

Congress, as far as I know, has never sat down to discuss the question... We demand universal adult franchise and we are prepared to exert economic pressure to attain our demands, and we will launch defiance campaigns, stay at homes, either singly or together, until the Government should say, "Gentlemen, we cannot have this state of affairs, laws being defied, and this whole situation created by stay at homes. Let's talk." In my own view I would say Yes, let us talk and the Government would say, "We think that the Europeans at present are not ready for a type of government where there might be domination by non-Europeans. We think we should give you 60 seats. The African population to elect 60 Africans to represent them in Parliament. We will leave the matter over for five years and we will review it at the end of five years." **In my view, that would be a victory, my lords; we would have taken a significant step towards the attainment of universal adult suffrage for Africans, and we would then for the five years say, we will suspend civil disobedience; we won't have any stay at homes**, and we will then devote the intervening period for the purpose of educating the country, the Europeans to see that these changes can be brought about and that it would bring about better racial understanding, better racial harmony in the country. I'd say we should accept it, but, of course, I would not abandon the demands for the extension of the universal franchise to all Africans... Then at the end of the five-year period we will have discussions and if the Government says, "We will give you again 40 more seats", I might say that that is quite sufficient. Let's accept it, and still demand that the franchise should be extended, but for the agreed period we should suspend civil disobedience, no stay at homes. In that way we would eventually be able to get everything that we want...

(Our emphasis)<sup>44</sup>

But the scenario sketched out by Mandela showed how little the revolutionary class-dynamic of the struggle for democracy was appreciated. While, on the one hand, the step-by-step approach fell far short of what the mass movement was demanding, on the other hand it would have been electoral suicide for any white governing party. Moreover, if the mass movement had built up the power

to compel the ruling class to introduce the 'first' of the 'steps'—then why stop there? Lifting the pressure could only encourage the ruling class to stall, and move to revoke the concessions when it had the situation once more in hand and the balance of forces swung again to the right.

Most important of all, how could anyone imagine that the Congress leaders would have the power to "call off" the mass movement for years at a time? The working class struggles not according to the requirements of its leadership but under the terrible pressure of poverty, hardship and assaults by the capitalist state. Could some seats in parliament have changed the reality of the working people's lives?

Yet it was in the pursuit of such illusory goals of step-by-step reform in alliance with the 'progressive' capitalists that Congress issued its rallying calls to the movement. Neither in the stay-at-homes of 26 June 1957, nor that of April 1958, did the demand of the Freedom Charter for majority rule appear. Instead, the main political slogan of the June 1957 action was "Forward to a Multi-Racial Conference". And in April 1958 it was "Defeat the Nats".

As was pointed out by SACTU leader Dan Tloome—reflecting a widespread feeling among activists—this slogan sowed illusions among the people:

the slogan: DEFEAT THE NATS was wrong and misleading. It is highly probably that, taken at its face value, the slogan led a considerable section of the people to believe that the Congresses were in favour of the United Party coming to power, as a party capable of solving our problems in SA.<sup>45</sup>

## Afterwards

After calling off the three-day stay-at-home in April 1958 after the first day, Congress launched no further nation-wide campaigns of mass action during 1958 and 1959.<sup>46</sup> Not that there was any lack of opportunities for mobilising struggle. Fresh layers of working people, in town and countryside, were still moving into action and looking for a lead.

In October 1958, for example, the government tried for the first time to issue women's passes in a city—Johannesburg. Local ANC women activists organised huge marches of Sophiatown and Alexandra women on the Johannesburg pass offices, where they courted arrest. (To march outside the townships was illegal.) At least 1 200 women were jailed, 170 with babies.

Under pressure from below, the Federation of SA Women called for an enlargement of the campaign, and for 20 000 volunteers to defy, refusing to pay fines or bail. This was over-ruled by the ANC Executive. After that, there were no further major organised protests against the issuing of passes to women.

The Secretary of the Transvaal ANC Youth League stated to the provincial conference of the League in October 1958:

I must say that I am disappointed as regards our struggle on passes. The struggle is rather haphazard as far as I can see it and slowly the number of women carrying passes is increasing... I would appeal to the ANC to set



out a definite pattern of how our purpose would be achieved.

In Natal in 1959-60 there was a mass upsurge of resistance by women, which began in Cato Manor in protest against deportations and intensified liquor raids, and spread into the rural areas as resistance to cattle-dipping.

As Durban's Town Clerk wailed,

The natives of Cato Manor have overthrown European authority. This has lasted for six weeks. They have maintained their success. The only things we have been able to do are the things the natives have allowed us to do.<sup>47</sup>

In the course of the Cato Manor resistance, thousands of stick-carrying women engaged in mass confrontations with the police. Asked why they were carrying them, one woman commented, "it is true that African women never carried sticks before. But then, they never carried passes before either."<sup>48</sup>

The opportunity was there to link this tremendous

movement of working-class women with the organisation of workers in the factories, the mines, and the other nerve-centres of production. But the clear direction necessary to consolidate and develop the movement in this way was lacking. Having no way forward to offer, Congress leaders in fact offered to the authorities "to go into Cato Manor to pacify the women"—offers which were rejected.<sup>49</sup>

In reality it appeared that—though not even one 'step' in any conceivable programme of ruling-class reforms had been implemented—the middle-class leaders were already anxious to 'suspend' the mass movement.

Here again, if a strong, conscious Marxist tendency had existed among Congress activists it could have transformed the situation.

But, in the absence of such a tendency, the dissatisfaction and confusion among the rank-and-file was played upon by radical nationalists, with no real alternative to offer. This opened up a debilitating split.

## Division weakens the movement

During the 1950s Congress activists had built, if not strong workplace organisation, at least strong bases in many townships. But, as one such activist reflected later,

What was disquieting in the closing years of the 50's was that even in these townships active support for the movement was slipping away. A magnificent bus boycott, which made a national impact, was carried out in Alexandra township itself, but taken as a whole the urban scene was not encouraging. Within the Congress Alliance there was a growing recognition that the masses were expecting a more militant lead than had been provided in the past.<sup>50</sup>

In Alexandra itself, previously an uncontested Congress stronghold, the ANC (according to one boycott leader, Dan Mokonyane) was unable to hold mass meetings for nine months after the ending of the boycott. In the Pretoria townships (excluded from the settlement terms, and continuing the boycott in isolation), in Evaton,

and elsewhere, there was also a slipping away of support from Congress.

In the absence of a Marxist alternative, discontented young activists were drawn towards the radical nationalist "Africanist" tendency in Congress.

The reformism of the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s had produced its reaction in the radical nationalism of the 1940s ANC Youth League. Now, to the extent that former Youth League leaders had become absorbed into the reformism of the Congress/CP leadership, a new generation of young intellectuals sought to replace them.

For much of the 1950s the Africanists were mainly small intellectual circles of carping critics. They represented no more serious an alternative for working people than did the armchair "Trotskyists" (in fact a million miles removed from the ideas and method of Trotsky) of the Non-European Unity Movement.

From 1957 onwards, however, the Africanists began to gain a certain echo in the townships (particularly on the Rand) and in the ranks of Congress activists. They did so precisely by throwing a spotlight on the dilution of Congress policies and practice under the pressure of the liberals.

"The Africans are asked, through their spineless leaders," wrote Robert Sobukwe in *The Africanist* (December 1957),

not to 'embarrass' their 'friends' and 'allies'... (and) to 'water-down' their demands in order to accommodate all the Anti-Nat elements in the country; in short, we are asked to 'grin and bear it' so that our 'friends' can continue 'to plead for us'. And we are told that in that way we shall achieve freedom. What rubbish!

"The Charterist movement", wrote another Africanist leader, Peter Raboroko, "represents the interests of both the ruling class and the subject classes, and finds itself, therefore, neither fish, flesh, fowl nor good red herring."<sup>51</sup>

Potlako Leballo offered a more extended analysis of the programme of the 'Anti-Nat alliance':

The Congress leadership, because it interprets the strug-



gle as one for democracy and therefore a political struggle, designed to remove legal restrictions, recognises the foe as the present Nationalist government and accepts and treats everybody opposed to the Nationalist government, whatever his motives or beliefs, as an ally. The Congress leadership, therefore, if we are to judge by its actions and utterances, recognises the Nationalist government as the rightful government of the country whose policies, however, it is not in agreement with. The leadership, therefore, conceives of Congress as an Opposition party, with an alternative policy to which the people of SA are to be persuaded to subscribe. The difference between the United Party and Congress (as conceived by the leadership) lies in the policies they advocate and in their composition... But both the United Party and the Congress leadership accept the Nats as the rightful government of the country whose policies, however, are disastrous to the country. And both believe that the essential thing to do is to oust the Nats. Both believe that the way to do so is by appealing to the people of South Africa for support for their policies. That is why a certain "African leader" in an issue of *Liberation* could state that "we (i.e. Congress) should water down our demands in order that we should muster the broadest support against the Nats."

...It is believed by our leaders that the number of Whites subscribing to the Kliptown Charter will increase so that one day a White party committed to the Kliptown Charter will form the government and implement the hopes and wishes expressed in that document!

But the AFRICANISTS who are committed to the overthrow of white domination, club together all who stand for the maintenance of the status quo and can find no common ground with the United & Labour Parties. The AFRICANISTS are aware, too, that when danger threatens the interests of the rulers, they modify their policies in order to gain support of the oppressed. That is what happened during the dark days of the last war. But as soon as the danger is past, the rulers return to their old policies with more ruthlessness in order to crush any awakened hopes. The Nationalist government has trodden on the corns of many groups and many people are prepared to go a very long way to get rid of this government. But this does not mean that they subscribe to a thoroughly democratic constitution. Many, in fact, hate the Nats, because they are threatening the status quo. We are familiar with the diversionary role of the Liberals...<sup>22</sup>

But—if Leballo and the Africanists identified a ruling class divided under the pressure from below while nevertheless united for the "maintenance of the status quo"—at the same time the Africanists failed to identify the real nature of the "status quo", namely **capitalism**.

## PAC analysis

The PAC based its analysis of society around the conquest of the country by foreigners who thereby had dispossessed the indigenous African people of 'the land', of the country in other words. This was indeed the case. The African people, the majority, were and are denied political rights in the country of their birth. The overwhelming majority had been deprived of access to the land as a productive resource, and turned into a working class.

But what this analysis glided over was that, in the meantime, the labour of the African working class had

not only fructified the land of the big farms (under capitalist ownership), but built the factories, mines, towns, docks, etc.—the main productive resources of modern SA society. Economically, 'the return of the land' could have no meaning unless it meant the establishment of public ownership and working-class control over these commanding heights of the economy, presently under white capitalist private ownership.

Moreover, to protect capitalist ownership, a formidable capitalist state, resting on the support of the white minority, had come into being.

The United Party upheld the constitution of the SA state (and recognised the NP government as the 'rightful' government) because they were a **capitalist** party supporting a **capitalist** state. The leadership of the Liberal and Labour parties upheld the state, and therefore in fact the system of white domination, because they refused to break with capitalism.

The political system—of white domination and national oppression of the African majority—had been imposed by foreign conquest and by imperialism. But its rigidity, its resistance to reform, was rooted in the inability of the capitalist system to satisfy the material demands of the working class that would be the consequence of extending democracy.

Therefore the task for the leadership of the liberation movement, in order to end white domination and achieve genuine democracy, was to organise the working class to lead a struggle to overthrow the existing capitalist state machine and replace it by a democratic workers' state.

## Blind

But the Africanists were as blind as the Congress leadership to these **class realities**.

To their way of thinking, the solution to the 'watering down' of the struggle lay not in organising the African working class to lead all the oppressed on a revolutionary programme, but in purging the movement of "white" and "non-African" influences—in establishing an exclusively African leadership.

It was true that the structures of the Congress Alliance gave non-Africans an entirely disproportionate influence in the inner planning circles of the leadership. In concrete terms, this non-African influence was wielded chiefly by members of the CP. Hence the often-repeated charge that the movement was being held back by 'white Communists'.

But to understand the essence of the problem it was necessary to look deeper than the ethnic categories, and get down to the **class roots**. The reformism of the Congress leadership stemmed from its middle-class outlook, and its failure to ground its whole approach in the working-class movement and in the scientific method of Marxism. In due course, the Africanist section of the middle class were to show themselves equally capable of vacillating, when they stood at the head of a mass movement and thus encountered the concerted pressure of the capitalist class.

While correctly pointing to the reformist influence of the 'Communist' Party leadership, the Africanists sought to discredit a class understanding of society by identify-



ing the CP's wholly unMarxist policies as a class approach.

"Those of the ANC who are its active policy-makers", stated Sobukwe,

maintain, in the face of all the hard facts of the SA situation, that ours is a class struggle. We are, according to them, oppressed as WORKERS, both white and black. But it is significant that they make *no attempt* whatsoever to organise white workers. Their white allies are all of them bourgeois!

(*The Africanist*, January 1959.)

"**Their white allies are all of them bourgeois!**" Here Sobukwe cleverly put his finger on the weak spot of the so-called Communists—their class-collaboration with the liberal capitalists. But the Africanists refused to accept the necessity of building the liberation struggle on African **working-class** foundations, on mobilising consciously the only class force capable of overthrowing the racist state and the bourgeoisie.

## Abandoned

Even more than the policies of the Congress/CP leadership, the nationalist policies of the Africanists abandoned the white working class to the capitalist class—thus leaving them as a tremendous obstacle in the way of a victorious struggle.

The main thrust of PAC analysis was to pre-determine all whites as inevitably in the camp of the enemy—a position which would most certainly ensure that they remained there.

Sobukwe—like some BCM leaders in the 1970s—added a 'safety-clause' by stating that "everybody who owes his only loyalty to Afrika and who is prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority" qualified as an African. This was an implied concession to the reality that the majority of whites were no longer 'foreigners' but rooted in South Africa as their only home.

But no more than the ANC position could this position attract more than a few radical whites, since it did not link the struggle for majority rule with the struggle to end the power of the bosses and free all sections of society from the nightmare of greed, competition, poverty, privilege, division and all-pervasive insecurity which capitalism means.

Real class politics in SA consists in mobilising the African majority of the working class, at the head of all the oppressed—on a programme able to offer a democratic socialist future to the white workers and middle class too—in order thus to weaken and eventually break the power of the capitalist enemy.

But the middle-class Africanists were as resistant as were the leaders of Congress to the assertion by the black working class of its leading role. They showed their hostile attitude to the independent class movement of the workers in many ways.

Explaining why the Africanists had called for scabbing on the April 1958 stay-at-home, Peter Raboroko complained that the SACTU National Workers' Committee was an "*ad hoc* body ... openly sabotaging the ANC by deliberately by-passing it and openly usurping its func-

tion." He went on:

In that campaign the ANC was to be relegated to the role of supporting the workers ... the South African Congress of Trade Unions, a multi-racial body representing a handful of trade unions which exist largely on paper, convened the Workers' Conference to launch this political strike and to stampede the majority of trade unions which were non-SACTU and the National Working Committee of the ANC into supporting the workers. In this way the struggle would assume a working-class character.

(*Africa South*, April-June 1960.)

Trade unionism among African workers was still weak. Nevertheless the SACTU Workers' Conferences drew together the cream of the active workers: they were the most representative gatherings of workers held during the decade. The "non-SACTU" trade unions to which Raboroko referred had been under an 'apolitical' class-collaborationist leadership oriented to TUCSA. They had then fallen under Africanist influence—which hardly transformed them.

Moreover, Raboroko's comments revealed the blinkered vision of the middle class. Every action campaign launched by the ANC during the decade had, in terms of those participating, a "working-class character". The stay-at-home call was at least a partial recognition of the need for the power of the working class to be exerted. Very little **additional** leverage could be exerted against the state and the bosses by those who were not working class. Surely it was precisely necessary for the ANC to be **raised** (not "relegated"! ) into an effective instrument of the workers' struggle, in the interests of all oppressed people?

## Paralysing influence

From 1957, the differences between the mainstream Congress leadership and the Africanists began to exert a paralysing influence on Congress gatherings. The effects were magnified by the increasingly bureaucratic methods of the leadership—and the hooligan tactics adopted by the Africanists in response.

Defending policies which were becoming more out of touch with the mood of the people, Congress leaders increasingly sought to protect their positions by suppressing debate and criticism. What emerged were—as even the CP's Brian Bunting admits—"arbitrary methods of work and control, refusal to deal with the rank and file, or account for funds, etc."<sup>53</sup>

At the Transvaal ANC conference in October 1957, the provincial executive insisted that it be re-elected en bloc, with no opposing candidates. Many activists were highly dissatisfied, feeling that the decision had been unconstitutionally rigged. Similar issues were arising in the Cape ANC.

At the national ANC conference in December the Africanists moved a vote of no-confidence in the Transvaal executive. "We have witnessed during 1957 a desire for unity and solidarity among the masses and a tendency towards crippling and contemptuous bureaucracy on the part of our leaders", stated an



editorial in the December *Africanist*.

Though the resolution was lost, the ANC leadership was forced to concede to the rank and file by calling an emergency conference in the Cape and Transvaal in February 1958 to try to sort out the grievances. But, disastrously, nothing was solved.

## Chaos

In Johannesburg, states Bunting, the conference "ended in chaos". The Africanists claimed that a vote of no-confidence had been passed in the provincial leadership, the constitution suspended, and the way cleared for the installation of the Africanists in the leadership. But the chairman, the acting President-General of the ANC, declared the conference closed before it completed its business.

Afterwards, continues Bunting, "a Congress car was confiscated and the driver was stabbed. On the Monday morning a raiding party of Sophiatown 'volunteers' led by Segale, leader of one of the opposition branches, invaded the ANC office and removed all the Congress records and property." The ANC NEC then dismissed the Transvaal executive and assumed emergency powers.

In Cape Town "a group of Africanists dressed in black shirts and wielding knives and batons" tried to smash up the conference. "Hardly had the first paragraph of the executive report been read than they started to fight."<sup>54</sup> Here, disgusted with this thuggery, the majority ejected the Africanists from the conference. Nevertheless, in the Cape, rival "executives"—one loyalist and one Africanist—continued to squabble for the remainder of the year.

"Congress is not replying as loudly and as vigorously as it should", stated an editorial in *Liberation* (March 1958). "The reason must be sought in the difficulties that have arisen within the organisation... It is tragic that ... in the two biggest provincial organisations of the ANC—the Cape and the Transvaal—disunity and confusion still prevail."

The November 1958 Transvaal ANC conference brought matters to a head. After a day of heated debate between loyalists and Africanists, a battle over credentials broke out. On the second day a crowd of ANC 'volunteers' assembled behind the conference hall, and a crowd of Africanist supporters in front. Each group was armed with sticks and lengths of iron and numbered at least 100 men. The loyalists assumed control of the doors of the hall, and began to 'screen' delegates. The Africanists withdrew, and reached a decision to split from the ANC. Within months the Pan Africanist Congress was formed.

The split in the movement, and the methods by which it came about, served the interests only of the regime and the bosses. They were the inevitable product, however, of the vacillating policies of the Congress leadership and the absence of an organised working-class alternative within Congress.

Mistaken as their ideas were, the Africanists had a democratic right to put them forward within Congress,

provided they agreed to abide in action by the decisions reached by a majority. They should have struggled for this right—not by the methods of thuggery, but by a political campaign, oriented to the rank and file of Congress. Their decision to form a rival organisation only weakened the movement.

The Congress leadership were suffering the consequences of their history of political uncertainty and compromise, and were now defending their policies by indefensible methods—of bureaucracy and thuggery also. If the Congress leadership had broken with the liberal capitalists—if they had put forward clear policies for uniting working people in organised actions directed against the racial oppression and exploitation by the whole ruling class—they would have cut away the support which the Africanists were able to gain.

Many worker activists in SACTU, the ANC and the CP were expressing dissatisfaction with the policies of the leadership. For them the Africanist position had no appeal. They wanted a class lead.

A Marxist tendency in Congress, based on the organised workers, could have explained the inadequacies of the programmes both of the Congress leadership and of the Africanists, and sought to maintain a fighting unity in action against the regime and the bosses. Even expulsions would not have deterred such a tendency from its task, or from its orientation to Congress, to reach the ear of the masses without causing an unnecessary split.

## Still looking

Against the continued attacks of the NP government and the employers, working people were still looking for a lead in struggle. In February 1959, around the time of the formation of the PAC, SACTU held a series of regional Workers' Conferences. "The response throughout the country", states SACTU's official history, "was one of the greatest ever to a SACTU campaign for an end to poverty wages and political oppression."

In Durban, a record attendance of 4 000 people gathered for two days, demanding general strike action, boycotts, and political defiance. In Pietermaritzburg, meetings drew 3 000. The Port Elizabeth Local Committee reported "one of the most successful meetings ever held in our area" and Pretoria drew 600 workers "which is outstanding for this area." Two meetings in the Transvaal attracted 2 000 workers, and another in Cape Town was equally successful.

In Natal, along with the mass upsurge of working-class women in 1959-60, 13 500 new workers were recruited into SACTU unions. It was a sign of what could be achieved. As SACTU's 1960 conference stated, organisation of workers was giving "a jolt to the Government and capitalists of South Africa".<sup>55</sup>

But this organising work by SACTU activists under the Congress banner was given no concrete campaigning lead by the Congress or CP leadership. In March 1960, the political initiative was grabbed by the PAC.



# Sharpeville and its aftermath

In the early months of 1960 the PAC leadership launched a campaign against the pass laws. The aim was for a mass turning-in of passes at police stations, beginning on 21 March, to be supported by a stay-at-home, until the pass laws were abolished.

The campaign was hastily called, ill-organised, and was probably intended to forestall an ANC "Anti-pass Day" (involving no definite action programme) set for 31 March.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless the desperate thirst of black working people for a lead in action produced a response—at least in the Vereeniging and Cape Town townships.

The state responded with the most brutal repression of the decade. 69 demonstrators were shot dead at Sharpeville, and 2 in Langa on 21 March.

The state response sparked off the most determined demonstration of workers' power in the decade. In Cape Town African workers launched, in the face of massive police action, a general strike from 21 March to 10 April—which remained solid for over two weeks. Heavy industry in Vereeniging was brought to a halt from 21-31 March.

Rather than merely "staying at home", workers moved on the city centres. On 25 March some 5 000 Africans demonstrated at Caledon Square police headquarters in Cape Town, and on 30 March 30 000 marched from the Cape Town townships to the police headquarters. On the following two days there were similar marches in Durban from Cato Manor to the city centre.

This display of working-class militancy shook the ruling class. On 25 March, the government **suspended pass arrests**. Leading capitalists, including NP supporters such as Anton Rupert and the Chairman of the Wool Board, called on the government to amend its policies. Open division became manifest even within the Cabinet itself.

Brian Bunting of the CP subsequently analysed the situation in this way:

Once again it had been demonstrated that the intensification of black resistance, far from strengthening the unity of the white supremacists, on the contrary immediately led to division in their ranks as the more enlightened groups sought to reach accommodation with black power. It had happened after the Defiance Campaign of 1952, which led to the birth of the Liberal Party. It happened again at the time of the bus boycotts, the treason trial

and the agitation over the destruction of the Coloured vote, when the Progressives broke away from the United Party. It happened again in the 1960 emergency.<sup>57</sup>

But this was only one side of the situation. In the meantime the government also introduced into parliament new legislation to enable it to ban the ANC and PAC. After days of hesitation it declared a state of emergency and began to prepare for decisive action to immobilise the leadership and crush the upsurge.

**The course of events now depended on the organised power which could be mobilised by the leadership of the mass movement.**

A SACTU statement during the emergency correctly said: "We must constantly guard against the danger of getting small reforms for the price of our freedom. And, on the other hand, **we now have the opportunity of taking advantage of the fight among the bosses to drive home our demands.**"<sup>58</sup>

The ANC leadership was now under tremendous pressure to respond to the mass mood, or be bypassed entirely. On 23 March Lutuli called for a one day stay-at-home in mourning for the dead at Sharpeville and Langa. On Saturday 26th he publicly burnt his pass. Mass support swung once again behind Congress.

The Monday stay-at-home was overwhelmingly successful. Workers on most of the Rand, in PE, in Durban, in the smaller Cape towns, joined those already striking in Cape Town and Vereeniging. The time was ripe for stepping up the pressure nation-wide.

On 1st April an Emergency Committee of the ANC issued a leaflet calling for an end to the state of emergency, release of imprisoned leaders, abolition of the pass laws, a national minimum wage of £1 a day, and the repeal of repressive legislation.

While reaffirming the demand for full citizenship, the leaflet also stated that "The first essential towards resolving the crisis is that the Verwoerd administration must make way for one less completely unacceptable to the people of all races, for a Government which sets out to take the path, rejected by Verwoerd, of conciliation, concessions and negotiation." It called for "a new National Convention, representing all the people on a fully democratic basis ... to lay the foundations of a ... non-racial democracy."

This was issued two days after police had entered Langa for the first time to try and beat workers back to work, and two days after a round-up of the Congress leadership by the police had begun. It was these police actions which had provoked the march of 30 000 Africans to Cape Town police headquarters.

## Strike called?

An activist in Congress at the time recalls that on that day—Wednesday 30 March—hearing of the march and impending arrests, he rushed to the SACTU offices to hear if a national strike was to be called. Leaflets had been printed, he was told, but the authorisation of the Congress leadership was required before they were issued.

But the authorisation never came, and the April 1st leaflet made no definite strike call. Yet, on the morning



of Thursday 31 March, workers in the Johannesburg townships waited at the bus and train stations, expecting a call to strike action. Only when they heard nothing did they proceed to work. In Durban the workers were waiting impatiently to follow a strike lead from workers on the Rand. (As it was, SACTU activists in Natal still attempted to organise a ten-day strike from 1 April onwards.)

Thus the ruling class was able to step up its repression unchallenged by the escalation of working-class action. Raids and arrests of leaders continued.

## Armed cordon

By 2 a.m. on Thursday 31 March, troops flown from Pretoria had drawn an armed cordon around Langa. On Friday all commandos, the Permanent Force Reserve, the Citizen Force Reserve and the Reserve of Officers were mobilised "for service in the prevention or suppression of internal disorder in the Union." On Saturday troops were flown from the Rand to Durban. On Sunday, Nyanga in Cape Town was sealed off.

The inaction of the Congress leadership made it easier for the state to regain the initiative, and deploy its forces to isolate and crush the remaining centres of resistance. On 8 April the ANC and PAC were banned under the new legislation, and by the following day the strike had been crushed in Nyanga as well as Langa.

"(A)ll the signs were", reflected Bunting subsequently, that, had the internal and external pressures been stronger, the whole apartheid edifice might have been brought crashing to the ground, or at least irreparably fractured... But black pressure could not be maintained; Verwoerd from his sick bed, where he was recovering from an assassination attempt, issued a rallying call to the volk; the ranks of the faithful closed again—and the emergency was over."<sup>59</sup>

But where lay the authority in the eyes of the masses to maintain and intensify "black pressure" if not with the Congress leadership? And how else than through the revolutionary pressure of the black working class can the "closing of the ranks" of the whites be prevented and the "rallying calls" of NP leaders be rendered ineffective?

The fact is that neither then nor since have the ANC or CP leaders been willing to make a serious analysis of how their own policies had prepared the way for this defeat.

At the same time, the PAC leadership were equally responsible for it. They too were blind to the class realities of the struggle. Confronting these class realities in practice, the Congress leadership had backed off from mass mobilisation, and appealed to the 'enlightenment' of sections of the ruling class. In reaction to this, the PAC leadership issued calls to militant action—but with no clear strategy and with mindless disregard of the consequences.

For the PAC leadership, the problem with Congress had been its failure to consistently implement the 1949 Programme of Action. "The Nats are carrying out their programme and if we are going to do nothing but oppose, we will never get anywhere," wrote Leballo in 1957,

for every year will bring forth, as every year has brought forth, new oppressive laws, on top of the ones we are op-

posing. Thus while we are fighting Bantu Education, Passes for Women come along. While we are organising against that, Universities and Nurses Apartheid come along. Our sacred duty is to carry out our OUR PROGRAMME, irrespective of what Verwoerd is doing. Let us take the offensive and pursue the Nation-Building Programme of 1949, relentlessly and honestly. And white domination will collapse. Whenever any item of that Programme has been implemented, no matter how emasculated, it has drawn overwhelming and enthusiastic support from the masses and has sent the conqueror shaking in his boots. I am thinking particularly of the Defiance Campaign, the One Day Stoppage of Work, the Economic and Bus Boycotts. If these had been honestly and relentlessly pursued in the spirit of true African Nationalism, we would be discussing PRODUCTION today and not oppression.<sup>60</sup>

In the campaign launched in March 1960, the call was "NOBODY GOES TO WORK" until the pass laws were abolished! "And," said the 'instructions' issued by Sobukwe, "once we score that victory, there will be nothing else we will not be able to tackle. But we must know quite clearly, NOW, that our struggle is an unfolding one, one campaign leading to another in a NEVER-ENDING STREAM—until independence is won."<sup>61</sup>

The response of a Johannesburg PAC leader to the ANC's one day stay-at-home call for 28 March was: "We are not opposed to Lutuli's strike call. We go further. We say the people must stay away for ever."<sup>62</sup>

PAC leaders talked of the Programme of Action in complete abstraction, as if it could be organised for in complete disregard of the actual struggle that was proceeding between black working people on the one hand and their employers and the state on the other. The enthusiastic response to campaigns based around the Programme of Action—and the upsurge of mass struggle even when there were no campaigning calls from the leadership—showed the vital need to concentrate all energies and resources on systematically building **working-class organisation**.

If each year was bringing forth new oppressive laws, this was because the workers, and the mass movement as a whole, were not yet sufficiently organised to turn the tide in the other direction. But the recovery of the initiative by the masses was not going to be achieved by demagogic rhetoric, nor by calls to impossible forms of action—like "staying away for ever".

## Short cut

The PAC leaders hoped by a short cut to avoid the necessary and arduous work of organising the working class, developing its self-confidence first in those limited struggles it had the capacity to tackle, preparing it for the eventual struggle for power and the establishment of workers' democracy.

Calling for a general strike until the pass laws were abolished in 1960, the PAC leaders were encouraging the African working class to embark on a test of strength with the state which the class was not yet strong enough to carry through to the end. With the working class weakly



organised, even in the trade unions, with the Congress leaders retaining the allegiance of the majority of workers, it was a divisive move which courted a big defeat.

Moreover, faced with real tests of leadership in action, without a scientific theory or strategy, PAC leaders themselves buckled under the pressures. Indeed, being less experienced than the Congress leadership, they buckled more dramatically.

## Despite rhetoric

In Cape Town, the leadership of the strike had come into the hands of the young PAC activist Philip Kgosana. Despite the vehement rhetoric against the moderating role of 'white liberalism' which was a foundation-stone of Africanist and PAC policy, Kgosana turned for his principal advice to... Patrick Duncan and other white members of the Liberal Party!

Even an academic historian, Tom Lodge, in a recent study, has pointed out clearly the role which these elements played:

It could be argued that although the *Contact* group wanted the PAC strong, and that some of their actions helped towards strengthening it (the food deliveries, Duncan's part in persuading Terblanche to suspend pass laws), their advice lost the strong negotiating position which the Cape Town PAC had temporarily won... Liberals had, by contributing to the creation of an 'understanding' between the PAC leaders and the police chief, strengthened the impression that the police were to be trusted, and that Terblanche would act in good faith. All along they had sought to eliminate tension, to remove any possibility of violence. Duncan was even prepared to defend the forces of law and order:

"Today (*he wrote in his diary—Editor*) a State of Emergency was declared. In my view the Government was compelled to do this, and I defended their moderation (up to date) in dealing with the Cape Town situation."

Moreover the *Contact* group had contributed to Kgosana's isolation from his followers. They had seen him as the key man, as the young messiah. Kgosana did have a hold on his followers, but, when he should have been with them, sharing their feelings, assessing their strength, working out a strategy of resistance, sensing the extent of their will to resist, he was elsewhere being interviewed and advised by well-intentioned whites.<sup>63</sup>

On 30 March, Kgosana was recognised leader of the march of 30 000 to the Cape Town police headquarters. He agreed with the police to send the marchers home, provided a later appointment was arranged for him with the Minister of Justice. When he subsequently turned up for the appointment without his mass support, he was promptly arrested.

The banning of the PAC, and the almost total crushing of the mass movement by the mid-1960s, meant that the ideas and policies of radical nationalism were never fully tested in the practical class struggle, or their contradictions fully exposed.

Thus as the working class recovered from the defeat, and the mass movement revived in the 1970s, it was these ideas which came first to the fore again among students and youth in the Black Consciousness Movement, as they searched for a revolutionary road.

More decisively than the 1950s, however, the last ten years have shown that the real power to take on the regime and the bosses lies in the hands of the working class. Under the banner of Black Consciousness the youth—working-class youth in the main—launched into heroic struggles in 1976. The practical lesson of these battles also was that the movement, to go forward, must be clearly based on the social struggle between the working class and its exploiters. The struggle for national liberation and the struggle to overthrow capitalism must be bound together in a class-conscious movement led by the organised workers.

In action, in the working-class movement, radical nationalism has now had more opportunity to show its limitations. At least for the present, it has been overshadowed by a struggle for workers' organisation and unity.

## Tendency remains

Yet radical black nationalism remains present as a tendency among sections especially of the middle class and youth, but also some workers. It waits, as it were, in the wings—to capitalise on any setbacks suffered by the mass movement as a result of reformist policies of Congress.

Attacking the PAC in the late 1950s, Walter Sisulu wrote:

there are men and women among them who genuinely believe that the salvation of our people lies in a fanatical African racialism and denunciation of everything that is not African. And such a policy is not without its potential mass appeal.

It would be unrealistic to pretend that a policy of extreme nationalism must, in the nature of things, always be unpopular. The people are quick to detect the insincerity of the mere demagogue, and they have confidence in the courage and wisdom of their tried and trusted leaders. But in a country like South Africa, where the Whites dominate everything, and where ruthless laws are ruthlessly administered and enforced, the natural tendency is one of growing hostility towards Europeans.

In certain circumstances, an emotional mass-appeal to destructive and exclusive nationalism can be a dynamic and irresistible force in history.<sup>64</sup>

In fact, this became a "natural tendency" in the late 1950s only because of the lack of strong working-class leadership in Congress, in the struggle against national oppression. The answer to this lay not (as Sisulu believed) in the "broad non-racial humanism" put forward by Congress, but in the active quest of the black working class for non-racial **workers' unity and workers' power.**



# SACTU in the Congress Alliance

Despite the isolation and consequent defeat of the March/April 1960 Cape Town and Vereeniging strikes, despite the banning of the political organisations looked to by the mass of the workers—the working-class movement had not yet suffered a defeat that was crushing or conclusive.

The trade unions built by SACTU and oriented to Congress, weak as they still were, remained in existence. Indeed, with a growing movement to base them on factory committees, with the beginnings of break-throughs into new crucial sectors, with the establishment of general workers' unions where factory bases were still weak, SACTU was growing rather than declining in strength.

For fear not only of the local reaction of workers, but also of international worker reaction, the NP government was much more cautious in its attitude to African trade unionism than to the ANC and PAC.

The power still able to be mobilised by the working class through SACTU was demonstrated in the stay-at-homes called for three days in May 1961 against the government's declaration of a Republic.

The regime's mobilisation against this action was the most intensive of the decade: nightly police raids in the townships, 10 000 arrests without charges, a twelve-day detention law, road blocks, and the deployment of troops, tanks, armoured cars and helicopters. Nevertheless, as Bunting states, it was "the greatest national political strike ever witnessed in South Africa."<sup>65</sup>

In Johannesburg, Durban, PE and Cape Town there was a big response from workers—with coloured workers in the Cape participating on a large scale for the first time. Workers in many smaller towns also participated.

SACTU activists played the major role in mobilising for the action, and the organised workers were in the vanguard. As an assessment of the strike concluded, "wherever workers were organised into trade unions there was a favourable response to the strike call."<sup>66</sup>

The leadership of the strike, however, was not in the hands of organised workers, but lay with a National Action Council, headed by Mandela. (As in 1958, the PAC opposed the stay-at-home.)

The demand raised was for the government, instead of proclaiming a Republic, to call a National Convention with sovereign powers, of elected representatives of all adults on an equal basis irrespective of race, colour, creed or any other limitation.

Should the demand be ignored, the National Action Council called on "all Africans not to co-operate or collaborate in any way with the proposed South African Republic or any other form of government which rests on force to perpetuate the tyranny of a minority, and to organise and unite in town and country to carry out constant actions to oppose oppression and win freedom"—and called on Indians, coloureds and 'democratic Europeans' to join this struggle.

This was strong rhetoric indeed, calculated to recover for Congress the ground that had been lost to the PAC 'fire-balls'. But what were these "constant actions" by which oppression would be opposed and freedom won? What was the method, the strategy by which the mobilisation taking place around the strike could be consolidated into organisation and carried forward? On this, the National Action Council was silent.

In fact Mandela—as the ANC leadership had done in 1958—called off the strike on the second day. Later, relates Bunting, Mandela

admitted that he had been misled by the initial radio and press reports which falsely claimed the people had ignored the strike call. In a statement issued from the underground offices of the ANC in SA and the United Front abroad, Mandela stated: 'In the light of the conditions that prevailed both before and during the three-day strike, the response from our people was magnificent indeed.'<sup>67</sup>

Once again, the workers had mobilised only to be disappointed.

Through the 1950s, the fundamental driving force in Congress was its working-class support. Increasingly, as Ben Turok recalled later, the **activist core** of Congress was constituted by working-class militants:

The Congress movement ... became more progressive and more proletarian. As things got more difficult it was those with the least to lose and the least illusions that came to the top. Working-class comrades became more involved and people with class ideology came to the fore because they were more militant and more committed, which is not to say that there were no committed petty bourgeois.<sup>68</sup>

Overwhelmingly, these worker-militants were SACTU members, building the trade unions, and Congress along with them. Some also joined the CP, expecting there to find the ideas and methods to take forward the struggle for national liberation, democracy and socialism on a class basis.

But the CP leadership used its authority—in SACTU, in the various Congress organisations, and in the Party itself—to prevent the transformation of the movement on proletarian lines. The effect of the 'two-stage' policy of Stalinism was to paralyse the best endeavours of the worker militants.

Turok (then a CP local leader, active in Congress) revealed how this policy operated, when he stated later:

in the weight of the thing, the pressure of the proletarian elements were stronger and sometimes one in fact had to be careful that this tendency did not become hegemonic (*i.e., dominant—Editor*). Yes, one had to be aware of the fact that the policy was that there should be an alliance and not a single party struggle and a single class struggle. This was always recognised. Care was taken not to frighten off the petty bourgeois elements.<sup>69</sup>

This was the argument put also in the *African Communist* (April 1960). In what was intended as a critique of those who felt that the Party was tailing behind the 'national movement', it warned against the "error" of



trying to "impose exclusively working-class leadership and programmes on the national movement". To do so was described as an error of "sectarianism, which undermines the unity of the various classes and is bound to create internal conflicts thus diverting the attention of the people from their common enemy—imperialism."

To the CP leaders, the 'leading role of the working class' was to be confined to ceremonial speeches and paper declarations. In practice, supposedly to avoid "frightening off" the middle class, the workers had to limit their struggle and demands to what was assumed to be 'acceptable' to this vacillating stratum.

Actually this policy served merely as a cover for efforts to hold back the workers' struggle within the framework of the compromises which middle-class leadership was always seeking to reach **with the liberal bourgeoisie**.

For the CP leaders, hardened in Stalinism, the power of the working-class movement was not the important thing. What was important was "the unity of the various classes" (which classes precisely?)—an incredible position for so-called 'Marxists' to proclaim.

Indeed, any challenge to middle-class dominance over Congress, any assertion of leadership and programme by the organised workers, **potentially** a force millions strong, was contemptuously denounced as "sectarianism"—as an assertion of a narrow, selfish, sectional interest!

## Lectured

Thus, too, when the SACTU-organised National Workers' Conference threatened to seize the initiative in the organisation and programme for the 1958 stay-at-home, Lutuli lectured the workers that Congress was not "exclusively" a workers' organisation, but had in its ranks businessmen, professionals, housewives, etc. Organisational work for the stay-at-home must not be confined to the factories, but carried out in the townships "where we are strong".<sup>70</sup>

But the overwhelming majority of those in the townships, just as in the factories—or on the farms and in the reserves—were working-class people. They had every interest in pursuing the struggle until all their burdens—of racism and capitalism alike—were lifted. They had most to gain from success in action, and most to lose by its failure.

And, in reality, determined struggle by the working class was in the interests, too, of the bulk of the black middle class—even though their leaders failed to appreciate the fact. Teachers, nurses, small traders, etc., **are themselves oppressed by both racialism and capitalism, but with no power to get rid of either on their own account**. They would not have been "frightened off", but attracted to, a Congress movement organised on a programme to win national liberation and democracy, based on workers' power.

This was the task which presented itself for the working class in the 1950s, and which could have been spearheaded by the worker militants who were at the core of building the trade unions and Congress. That is still the task today.

Unfortunately, in the 1950s, such militants had no access to the ideas, methods and perspectives of Marxism

which form an indispensable guide—in fact, they were frustrated in the search for genuine Marxism by the misleading influence of the CP.

As a result, although SACTU had promised to pursue an "Independent policy in the interests of the workers" in the Congress movement, it in fact became subordinated to the dictates of the middle class.

Because the mass of the working class was looking to Congress for leadership, it was entirely correct for the organised workers to enter—with the force of their unions—into the Congress ranks. **But, to uphold an independent policy, it was essential to establish working-class leadership and a working-class programme as predominant over the whole movement**. This was not done—and thus there could be not be any "independent policy" on the part of SACTU either.

It is wrong to say, as some do today, that SACTU could not have provided a base for working-class political organisation, and for the transformation of the Congress movement, in the 1950s. The basis was there in workplace organisation, and in the tremendous **activity** of the working class which made it the overwhelming force in every struggle against the regime.

If the necessary clarity and understanding, the necessary conscious political leadership, had existed in the 1950s, the task could have been undertaken. The subsequent fate of SACTU itself—and indeed of the Congress movement—could have been significantly different.

There are many today who argue, in the light of what happened in the 1950s, that the organised workers should not enter Congress (or the UDF), but instead aim to build a "workers' party" outside the ambit of any middle-class-led movement.

What these comrades forget is the enormous weight of historical tradition in the movement of the working class—and the way this affects previously unorganised workers who take to the road of struggle in their hundreds of thousands when a revolutionary period opens up.

The tradition of the Congress movement, established in the 1950s, as the focal point for the political mass movement in the past, will assert itself vigorously again in future.

Initially, it will not be the mistakes or failures of leadership which stand out in the minds of black working-class people, but the finest and most heroic traditions of Congress, which its leaders—imprisoned and exiled—will be seen to embody.

Here what happened in the 1950s is relevant also. While, towards the end of that decade, the activists became angered and embittered by the policies of the leadership, and sections of the masses turned to the PAC, nevertheless even then fresh layers of the working class moving into struggle turned first to the Congress banner.

Even the PAC, with no real alternative to offer, gained the support that it did precisely because its leaders emerged **out of Congress**.

In future, the re-emergence of the ANC openly in South Africa, with its now exiled or imprisoned leadership, will be an enormous attraction for millions of those as yet unorganised. This force will carry in its flood also the ranks of the trade unions. Even if a separate "workers' party" existed at that time, linked to the unions—something that would be exceptionally difficult, in any event, to create and sustain under present repressive conditions—it would most likely be compell-



ed to turn to Congress or be bypassed by the mass movement.

On the other hand, by orienting clearly towards Congress now, by turning organised workers without delay to the task of building and changing the UDF into a consciously working-class movement, under a workers' leadership and programme, the way can be prepared for the ANC itself to be transformed. Then, for the first time, a real mass workers' party will have come into existence in South Africa, capable of drawing all the oppressed behind it, and mounting a revolutionary challenge for power.

But the foundation for all this must obviously be the systematic extension and strengthening of the independent, democratic trade union organisations of the workers at the point of production.

That task, magnificently carried forward in South Africa since the early 1970s, was the main task identified by worker activists in Congress at the end of the 1950s.

Analysing the 1961 stay-at-home—and what it reflected

about the state of organisation of the class—Harry Gwala wrote:

When it comes to the actual stay away by the workers it must be boldly admitted that the working class did not come up to our expectations. What was the cause? With the only trade union co-ordinating body—SACTU—enjoying only a membership of 55 000, and **no political party of their own** in the Congress alliance, we must confess that on the working class front we are still very weak. The basic economy of the country—the mines and agriculture—have not yet been seriously tackled. To achieve the next successful national stoppage of work we shall have to assist SACTU to build up powerful trade unions and treble its present membership.

(*Fighting Talk*, August 1961. Our emphasis.)

But the possibility for building powerful trade unions was again cut across—not simply by intensified state repression, but by the decision of the Congress and CP leaders to turn to futile policies of sabotage and guerilla warfare.

## Blind alley of guerillaism

After the May 1961 stay-at-home, Mandela wrote:

Of all the observations made on the strike, none has brought so much heat and emotion as the stress and emphasis we put on non-violence. Our most loyal supporters, whose courage and devotion has never been doubted, unanimously and strenuously disagreed with this approach...<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, in fact, on the question of force and violence there was a fundamental difference between the working-class supporters of Congress and the Congress leadership.

Viewing apartheid as an 'irrationality' which the ruling class could be persuaded to drop in favour of democracy—not seeing the racist system as part and parcel of the structure of **capitalism**—Congress leaders believed that "reasonableness" and "moderation" could induce a similar "moderation" from the forces of the state.

"We can assure the world that it is our intention to keep on the non-violent plane," stated Lutuli in 1953. "We would earnestly request the powers that be to make it possible for us to keep our people in this mood."<sup>2</sup>

The PAC leadership, despite claims to greater radicalism, had in practice taken the same approach. "I have appealed to the African people to make sure that this campaign is conducted in a spirit of absolute non-violence," stated Sobukwe at the start of the March 1960 anti-pass campaign. "I now wish to direct the same call to the police. If the intention of the police is to 'maintain law and order', I say, you can best do so by eschewing violence."

Black working people knew or sensed from generations

of bitter experience that no reliance could be placed on such appeals. The only means of defence against police violence was effective counter-organisation and the collective mobilisation of counter-force as and when possible.

At the same time, however, mass 'violence' alone—unorganised, sporadic, isolated in one area or another, an expression of frustration directed to no clear goal—could produce no lasting advance. It was just as likely to result in savage state reprisals, and even demoralisation and defeat, if it did not form part either of deliberate defensive tactics or a concerted revolutionary onslaught by the working class against the state when the ground for that had been prepared.

In the 1950s, as today, a correct approach to the preparation and use of physical force in the struggle was impossible without a correct political theory, perspective and strategy for revolution.

Already, at the beginning of the 1950s, workers were showing their readiness to fight back against the forces of the state. "Five times in the last six months", reported *The Guardian* (16/2/50), "bloody clashes between Africans and police have taken place on the Rand. Many Africans have lost their lives and many police have been injured in these clashes which have at times developed into running gun fights in which whole communities have been involved."

In the Defiance Campaign, in the struggle against forced removals, in the struggle of women against passes, in the struggles of women in Natal in 1959-60, in the resistance to Bantu Authorities which erupted in many of the reserves, working people confronted the forces of the state with the force of **mass organisation**—not shrinking from using whatever weapons they could lay hands on and use in the circumstances without courting unnecessary reprisals.

What they needed from the Congress leadership was a lead in building and strengthening mass organisation—particularly in the workplaces—and help in providing means for the defence of this organisation.

The complaints from activists referred to by Mandela in 1961 were precisely about the ways in which an abstract



insistence on “non-violence” had inhibited the strengthening of working-class organisation in action.

It was argued, said Mandela, “that it is wrong and indefensible for a political organization to repudiate picketing, which is used the world over as a legitimate form of pressure to prevent scabbing.”<sup>73</sup>

In 1961 the factory organisation built under the banner of Congress, weak as it was in comparison with workers’ organisation today, was still relatively intact. The task, as Harry Gwala pointed out, was concentrated effort to strengthen this—on the basis of campaigns winning the broadest support from the working class because they were based on struggling for their daily needs.

Within these factory fortresses the ANC, though banned, could have been maintained underground, and built to re-emerge openly once the organisation of the working class was strong enough for this.

But that was not the course taken. Instead, in the hope of circumventing the difficulties of worker organisation in a climate of harsh repression, a new organisation was formed. Thus arose Umkhonto we Sizwe, as a separate “military wing” of the struggle.

It soon became clear that the real hopes of the leadership were pinned, no longer on political mass organisation, but on ‘MK’. In fact, Congress expressly stated that **political** organisation should be turned to the service of **military** activity—military activity by an organisation ultimately responsible only to itself.

“Political agitation is the only way of creating the atmosphere in which military action can most effectively operate,” stated an ANC NEC circular in April 1963. “The political front gives sustenance to the military operations.”

What did the leadership hope would be gained by this turn?

The initial propaganda of MK still based itself on the conception that the ‘progressive’ capitalists were on the point of ousting the NP government and taking to the path of concessions. The actions of MK would “assist” in this process.

This, too, was the position of the CP. While, in 1959, Michael Harmel had written that a democratic revolution in South Africa “need not involve violence”,<sup>74</sup> he turned in 1961 (under the pen-name ‘A. Lerumo’) to a different view.

Violence was now necessary because: “before the racist oppressors can be made to listen to reason their ears must be opened by speaking to them in the only language they understand.”<sup>75</sup>

Kotane also said at the time, “When a man takes no notice of what you say, sometimes you have to twist his arm to make him listen to you.”<sup>76</sup>

## Revolutionary act

Workers know full well that, when the boss refuses to listen, it is necessary to “twist his arm”—for example, by strike action. But the more organised and experienced workers are, the more clearly they appreciate also that the **taking up of arms** in South Africa is a **revolutionary act**. It must be used not to “twist the arm” of the enemy, but to **break** his arm, to overthrow his state power.

That is why, as a conscious strategy, the taking up of arms by the working class is appropriate not to the first stages of organisation and mobilisation, but to the stage when the class is moving towards a confrontation with its rulers in an armed insurrection.

How could it be imagined that a rash of sabotage actions could win concessions from the ruling class when it was still able to contain the far more powerful force of the mass movement?

In their own ranks, the MK and Communist Party leadership justified these tactics as the “first stage” of a supposedly accelerating struggle for power. As one ex-Congress activist (presently living in Natal) has recalled:

There was much wild talking at that time. The idea was that there should be isolated sabotage acts in the beginning. These would move rapidly into greater and greater acts of sabotage until large centres would be involved in sabotage and then these would finally end up in the masses moving en masse to sabotage, general strike, and the taking over of the country.

This was the “plan” proposed in ‘Operation Mayibuye’, a document captured by the police in the Rivonia arrests. Though not officially adopted at the time, the strategy in it is no different from anything which has subsequently been published by the ANC leadership to justify a strategy of guerilla struggle.

There were, recalls the same ex-Congress activist, two reasons for the decision:

one was the success of Castro in Cuba and the other was the Pondo uprising which made a number of SACP leaders feel that the time was now ripe for the violent overthrow of the Government. If Castro could do it in two years why couldn’t they do it? It was a false analogy. As far as the Pondo rising was concerned, by the time they took the decision the Pondo’s themselves had decided to take the question of violence no further and were looking forward to other methods of struggle.

It was, he continues,

a complete misunderstanding of the situation and a completely wrong analysis of the forces at work... It was a very very grave mistake which had terrible effects on the growth of the mass movement in South Africa. To my mind certain of the leaders were always dissatisfied with taking things over a long term. They were keen to get things settled as quickly as possible... It seemed such a novel, one may say, easy way to solve the problems... It was this simplistic attitude that was entirely wrong. There was a sense of complete euphoria about this... They did not take into account the strength of the state.

Some CP leaders bitterly opposed the new turn. Bram Fischer, on trial in March 1966, stated that Operation Mayibuye was “an entirely unrealistic brainchild of some youthful and adventurous imagination... If there was ever a plan which a Marxist could not approve in the then prevailing circumstances, this was such a one... if any part of it at all could be put into operation, it could achieve nothing but disaster.”<sup>77</sup>

The advocates of guerillaism believed that a revolutionary situation was coming into existence in SA in the early 1960s—or could be brought about by a guerilla struggle. This, as Fischer and others recognised, was an entirely false perspective.

The realities of South Africa were (and are) completely different from such countries of the colonial world as pre-revolutionary Cuba, Vietnam, etc. There capitalism was rotting internally, and held up by a weakly-based state machine—even without the leadership of the work-



ing class, it was possible for a mass struggle of peasants, organised through a guerilla army, to overthrow the regime, and even to end capitalism.<sup>78</sup>

South Africa, by comparison, was already highly industrialised—and this had enabled the capitalist class to construct a formidable state machine, based on the support of millions of privileged whites.

A revolutionary situation can only unfold in SA as this state machine becomes paralysed in its ability to defend the rule of the capitalist class. Writing in *Africa South* (October-December 1958), a pro-Congress liberal, Julius Lewin, had argued that revolution was clearly not “round the corner” in South Africa. He quoted an American historian’s statement that

“no government has ever fallen before revolutionists until it has lost control over its armed forces or lost the ability to use them effectively; and, conversely, no revolutionists have ever succeeded until they have got a predominance of effective armed force on their side.”<sup>79</sup>

None of the Congress leaders who replied to this article addressed themselves to answering this critical question. Nor was it answered by the turn to sabotage or to guerilla struggle.

## Political issue

For at the root of this question was not a military but a political issue: how **politically** the ruling class could be paralysed—what **social force** could be exerted to tear open divisions in the ruling class and separate from it the middle layers of society on whose support it depends.

The key to the question of revolution in SA was, and remains, the potential power of the black working class. That is the only force which will be capable, once massively organised and roused consciously to the task, of dividing the whites, of arming itself for power, and leading all the oppressed people to the overthrow of apartheid and capitalism.

Today, it is the resurgence of a working-class movement mightier by far than in the 1950s that has begun to re-open the splits in the ruling class and among its supporters. Even under this pressure, however, SA is only at the start of what is likely to be a prolonged period of pre-revolutionary upheavals.

In the 1950s the pressure of the working class had also begun to intensify divisions in the ruling class and among its supporters. But this was far from the existence of a revolutionary situation. In fact, largely as a result of the policies of compromise with the liberal capitalists which the ANC leaders had pursued, the mass movement had become divided and confused. By the early 1960s the ruling class had taken advantage of these circumstances to inflict defeats on the working class and force the movement on the retreat.

As another argument for the ‘turn to armed struggle’, Mandela argued that

unless responsible leadership was given to canalize and control the feelings of our people, there would be outbreaks of terrorism which would produce an intensity of bitterness and hostility between the various races of this country which is not produced even by war.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, particularly among the unorganised youth, but even penetrating into the ranks of the organised, there

was by the early 1960s an increasing mood of frustration. This mood took on its most desperate and hopeless form in the random terrorism of ‘Poqo’.

But to respond to this mood by leading those gripped by it into the blind alley of sabotage and guerillaism, was a disastrous step for the whole mass movement.

Far from widening the divisions in the ruling class (let alone bringing them to “reason”)—far from splitting away their supporters—it unwittingly gave the ruling class a greater opportunity to reconsolidate itself and its support on the basis of vicious repression.

Mass arrests, indefinite detention without trial, the systematic use of torture—these the regime had not had the confidence to introduce through the whole of the 1950s. But now the mass movement was itself torn by crisis. After December 1961, the launching of the sabotage campaign gave the regime the pretext it was looking for.

The ruling class used viciously repressive legislation not only to break the sabotage campaign, but to smash the remaining forms of workers’ organisation. The Sabotage Act of 1962 not only introduced 90-day detention, but defined strikes as acts of sabotage.

In 1965 the Commissioner of Prisons stated that there were 8 500 political prisoners in SA jails. Between 1960 and 1966, 160 SACTU officials were arrested, and many convicted on sabotage charges. Between 1963 and 1971 at least twenty prisoners died in the hands of the security police. Some leading worker militants were executed.

In the last conference it was able to hold, SACTU stated: “We are carrying on in the face of such difficulties that it is like trying to swim against a tidal wave.”

**By encouraging the cream of SACTU’s worker militants to leave their organising work in the factories, join MK and leave South Africa, the ‘turn to armed struggle’ contributed to a devastating rout of workers’ organisation.**

By these policies, and by the savagery of state repression, a generation of worker activists embodying the most advanced experience of the SA working class was (politically speaking) wiped out. The thread of the labour movement tradition was broken for a whole period, as dark reaction settled over South Africa.

Throughout the remainder of the 1960s and into the 1970s, the whole of the black working class, and with them all the oppressed, were virtually defenceless against the unchecked attacks of the bosses and the state.

The bosses could amass greater profits by stepping up exploitation in the factories. The state could step up its programme of forced removals and “Bantustanisation”.

The increased repression of the state drove far beyond an attack on political activists. In 1948 in South Africa there were 37 executions: between 1960 and 1969 there were, on average, 95 a year. In 1961 the number of persons sentenced to prison was 289 000—in 1968 it was 486 000.

Facing a more ruthlessly organised and armed state machine, the working class—with its leadership killed, in prison, banned, or in exile—had to find its own means to regroup and reorganise underground.

At a great cost, this is what the working class had begun to do by the early 1970s. The tremendous achievements of the last ten years confirm that it is the only force capable of leading a struggle against apartheid and capitalism.



# Conclusion

The philosopher George Santayana wrote: "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Just as the defeat of the movement of the 1950s was not inevitable, so the victory of our movement today will not be inevitable either. It will depend mainly on the ability of the active, advanced layer of the working class, now building organisation among the youth, in the communities, and above all in the democratic trade unions, to unite and guide the struggle by a means of a scientific understanding.

The 1950s was a period rich in lessons for today—lessons that can be found in every phase and facet of it: in the tremendous energy and force of the mass movement; in the heroism and self-sacrifice of the many thousands who rose to confront the bosses and the state; in the hard-fought advances of the movement as well as in its eventual crippling and defeat.

These lessons, we believe, have a common connecting thread. They reveal that the struggle for national liberation and democracy involves, if it is to triumph, a struggle to overthrow the capitalist system itself.

They reveal that every real step forward in this struggle depends on the mobilisation and organisation of the working class. They show that this class, and no other, has the potential force to drive the ruling class into retreat, to weaken and divide the ranks of its supporters, to unite all the black oppressed and draw to their side exploited sections of whites, and ultimately to overwhelm the state.

The central lesson of the 1950s is surely this: that our revolutionary movement, struggling for national liberation and democracy, must be firmly and deliberately built as a class-conscious movement of the working class for socialism.

Every significant defeat of the 1950s, every wrong step with serious consequences for the people, resulted from the failure of the leadership of the movement at that time

to grasp this reality and use it as the basis for perspectives, strategy and tactics.

The unwillingness to mobilise and concentrate the full power of the mass movement in nation-wide action; the failure to build systematically the working-class organisations necessary to sustain it and defend it against repression; the repeated confusion and demoralisation in the movement, and its eventual splitting between rival organisations and leaderships; the disarming of the working class by the futile turn to an "armed struggle" by guerillas—all these had a common root.

They stemmed from the mistaken belief of a middle-class leadership—reinforced in this by the 'Communist' Party—that democratic concessions could be won through the support of the liberal or 'progressive' capitalists.

It was upon these hopes, and not upon the power of the working class, that the leadership in the final analysis relied.

Hence it sought again and again, in tireless futility, to accommodate the demands and aspirations of the working class within limits acceptable to the capitalists—and it ended up, in consequence, paralysing its own real forces, frustrating its own democratic aims, and going down to defeat with the workers.

Only if there had existed in the 1950s a strong, conscious Marxist tendency within the ranks of the Congress movement, based especially among the organised workers in the trade unions, could that tragic course of events have been averted. Such a tendency did not exist. Today, however, at least the first beginning has been made to try to fill that need.

The defeat of the movement was suffered at a tremendous cost to the working class. Yet that cost will not have been wasted if the working-class movement in the 1980s can draw to the full the lessons from it, and so prepare the way to victory.

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## Footnotes

1. This figure exceeded the 100 000 members claimed by the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union at its peak in 1927—and the ICU was a general union which never organised along industrial lines. The CNETU figure, if correct, would have represented 40% of the 390 000 African workers in commerce and manufacturing at the time. However, in contrast to independent trade unions in SA today, these membership claims do not reflect the same degree of **organisation**, of firmly-rooted factory committees, democratic structures, etc.

2. *Hansard*, 14/4/47, c.2664.

3. In common with other police (and military-police) dictatorships, the NP regime did resort increasingly to fascist methods. But this did not involve organisation of private gangs of storm-troopers or 'death squads'; rather the use of these methods against the black working class through the state machine itself. Those who greeted each new repressive measure of the NP government in the 1950s with the cry that "Fascism has arriv-

ed" were wrong. Before the methods of fascism could be used by the state unchecked, it was first necessary for the working-class movement to be politically defeated. Only from the 1960s, with the systematic use of torture, with mass removals at gunpoint, did these methods flourish unchecked.

4. Nelson Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, New York, 1965, p.90.

5. Quoted in A. Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years*, London, 1971, p.138.

6. In his Presidential address to the December 1951 ANC Conference, Dr. J.S. Moroka stated: "I appeal to them (the white people of this country) to reconsider their attitude towards us. Give us democratic rights in this land of our birth."

7. *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, p.83.



8. Report of the Joint Planning Council of the ANC and the SA Indian Congress, November 8, 1951.

Despite the success of the 1950-51 one-day strikes, the Planning Council was nervously ambiguous about the role that would be played in the Defiance Campaign by the exercise of workers' industrial muscle:

"We cannot fail to recognise that industrial action is second to none, the best and most important weapon in the struggle of the people for the repeal of the unjust Laws and that it is inevitable that this method of struggle has to be undertaken, at one time or another during the course of the struggle... We are nevertheless of the opinion that in this next phase of our campaign lawful industrial action should not be resorted to immediately, but that it should be resorted to at a later stage in the struggle. In this new phase of the campaign a sustained form of mass action will be necessary which will gradually embrace larger groups of people, permeate both the urban and the rural areas and make it possible for us to organise, discipline and lead the people in a planned manner... It should be noted, however, that our recommendations do not preclude the use of lawful industrial action during the first stage provided that conditions make its use possible on a local, regional, provincial or national scale."

9. *Drum*, February 1955, p.17. (Quoted in Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945*, London, 1983, p.105.)

10. Quoted in *From Protest to Challenge, A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964*, edited by Karis and Carter, Stanford, 1977, vol.3, p.26-7.

11. From "Circular Letter to All Congress Branches of the Province", December 1952.

12. *The Road to Freedom is Via the Cross*, published by the ANC, London (undated), p.9 and p.17.

13. *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.2, p.426.

14. *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.3, p.298.

15. *Guardian*, 27/12/1951; quoted in *Strategic Problems in South Africa's Liberation Struggle: A Critical Analysis*, by Ben Turok, LSM, 1974, p.24.

16. Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane, South African Revolutionary*, London, 1975, p.165.)

17. *Ibid.*, p.175.

18. *Ibid.*, p.230-1.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Quoted in *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.3, p.59.

22. Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize or Starve!, The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions*, London, 1980, p.337.

23. See *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.3, p.195-6.

24. See sources quoted in Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa*, California, 1978, p.95, and *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.3, p.195-6.

25. See *Liberation*, June 1956.

26. From his statement to the court, dated 20 April, 1964. It should be noted that Mandela used the trial to make as clear

as possible a public statement of his political beliefs, and made no attempt to conceal his views in the hope of leniency. Courageously facing his accusers, he proclaimed his ideal of a "democratic and free society" as one "which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

27. See *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.3, p.63.

28. Giving a list of "anti-Nationalist forces" which included some of the UP leaders, the Black Sash, the Liberal Party, TUC-SA, and the editor of the Rand Daily Mail, the ANC National Executive in its 1958 report admitted: "Unfortunately the Liberation movement has not found an appropriate method to bring about the necessary co-operation of all these forces."

29. Quoted in Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, Penguin, p.578.

30. *Fighting Talk*, April 1955.

31. See the account by R. Lambert in *SA Labour Bulletin*, June 1983.

32. *Rand Daily Mail*, 25/1/57; 6/2/57.

33. In Port Elizabeth, three days after the Congress leaders called off the solidarity boycott there, black dockworkers began a go-slow and were joined by railway workers. They decided to start work one hour later, stop one hour earlier, and not to work overtime or at weekends. The dockworkers were demanding a wage increase from 11/6 a day to 25/-; the railway workers an increase from £4/10/0 a month to £7.

This strike was the fruit of SACTU organising work; success would have been a critical breakthrough in the tough transport sector.

Against the strikers not simply police but troops were brought in and placed on standby. To work on the weekend of 2-3 March, stevedores were shipped in from Cape Town and East London, having been told the lie that a transport boycott in PE was preventing stevedores from getting to work. At the same time the state placed convict labour on call, and began to recruit 'endorsed out' workers in the Ciskei and Transkei and place them under guard in tents at the docks.

On Monday 4 March, the PE dockworkers and railway workers were told to drop their demands unconditionally, or be locked out. They refused to budge, and were locked out and replaced by the convict labour.

Immediate protest from the international labour movement forced the government to withdraw the prison labour. Nevertheless the workers, fearing replacement by the Transkei/Ciskei labour, agreed to return to work on 7 March.

The railway workers who participated in the action were fired; the stevedores had their wages cut.

In the context of nation-wide mobilisation for even a 24-hour general strike, this defeat might well have been avoided. The state would not have been able to concentrate its efforts and resources at this one site of struggle, and would have found much more difficulty finding workers from other areas to break the strike.

34. Quoted in *Moses Kotane*, p.231-2.

35. *Let My People Go*, Fontana edition, p.157-8.

36. *Fighting Talk*, May 1957.

37. "The Role of Strikes in a Revolution", in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, Pathfinder Press, p.159.

38. In the months after the settlement of the Alexandra bus boycott, the ruling class used the "breathing space" with which



it had been provided... to launch attacks on the factory strongholds of SACTU's largest unions.

In 1957 bosses at Advance and Rand Steam Laundries, the Laundry Union's key Transvaal bases, withdrew stop-order facilities. These were employers whom SACTU had regarded as "reasonably cordial". (*Organize or Starve!*, p.216-7.)

In June 1957 workers struck at Philip Frame's Consolidated Textile Mills in Durban. Though they won their demands, Frame used the negotiations to withdraw stop-order facilities from the union, and take the medical benefit fund out of its hands. Soon afterwards he began dismissing Textile Union activists.

In 1957, also, the Food and Canning Workers Union had stop-order facilities cut off for its African section by the two biggest food-canning monopolies, LKB and H.Jones. It also suffered a severe setback in losing a strike at Spekenham in Cape Town, where it was attempting to break through from fruit-canning to other sections of canning.

In February 1958 a strike at Amato Textiles in Benoni was viciously broken by the police. This had been the fortress of the Textile Workers Union in the Transvaal. In the wake of the strike, not only were hundreds of workers dismissed, but they were black-listed from employment elsewhere in Benoni, and many were deported off the Rand. "Although the workers' militant spirit had not been crushed by these repressive measures, the mass strike action characteristic of Amato workers ceased to exist for some time." (*Ibid.*, p.287.)

Even SACTU's biggest victory of the year later turned sour. Workers in the Milling Union won 12,5% wage increases at 6 Johannesburg flour mills in November 1957 as a result of strike action. *New Age* commented that it was "the most successful African strike for a long time". But within a few months, "Union officials had been arrested and shop stewards were being prevented from collecting subs from workers". (*Ibid.*, p.223-4.)

The confidence with which the employers and the state conspired together to inflict these blows stemmed from their sense of the vacillation and uncertainty of the Congress leadership, and the division and confusion this was producing among the working class.

39. Stanley Uys, writing in *Africa South*, July-September 1958, p.47.

40. Quoted in *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.3, p.278.

41. See, e.g., *Moses Kotane*, p.228. Closing the conference, Bishop Reeves said: "This Conference may well go down in history as the turning of the tide in South Africa."

42. Ben Turok, in a 1977 interview.

43. See *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.3, p.305. Even this, replied Professor Olivier, could not be conceded by the government because it would lead to civil war! This reply "shocked" Lutuli, but did not cause him, or the rest of the leadership, to rethink their policy of seeking compromise on these lines.

44. Testimony in 1960. See Nelson Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*, IDAF, London, 1978, p.87-8.

45. "Lessons of the Stay-Away", published 14/7/58.

46. Under the pressure of the activists, the Congress leadership declared 1959 as "Anti-Pass Year"—but did not organise any national campaign of action against passes.

The Anti-Pass Planning Council which was established based its proposals on the "fundamental fact ... that the struggle against the pass system is in fact a struggle against the very roots of the entire system of cheap labour, exploitation and oppression of the African people, against which there can be no short cut to victory."

This was a correct assessment; and it should have underlin-

ed the priority to be placed on the organisation of the workers, as the only means of mobilising the force capable of leading the struggle against the capitalist cheap labour system. Yet these were not the conclusions drawn.

Early in 1959 a report by the Federation of SA Women spoke of the "impatience" with which "the active entry of men into the campaign" against the passes was awaited by their members. (Quoted in *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p.146.) At a national ANC conference in May there was strong rank-and-file pressure for a call for the mass burning of passes.

The Anti-Pass Planning Council opposed the call for destruction of passes. Though, at the May conference, it had argued that "strikes and go slow strikes" were more effective, it made no concrete proposals for action along these lines either—and proposed instead the use of the weapon of economic boycott.

The thinking underlying this was partially spelled out by the Council in the NEC report to the December 1959 ANC conference:

"(a) Some people thought that the only way of fighting against the pass laws is by destroying the passes. This in the view of the Planning Council is not the only way of struggling against the pass system nor is it necessarily the most effective way.

"(b) In the history of our struggle against the passes there are instances when the resentment of the Africans against the passes has been so high that they discarded them or burnt them, but sooner or later the passes have been re-imposed and disillusionment followed.

"(c) It is not the document itself towards which we must exclusively direct our attention and devise a form of struggle but the role of the document in the whole structure of our country. In order to end the pass laws which are the root of our oppression we require, COURAGE, ENDURANCE AND DETERMINATION AND THE skilful use of the power (that) is AVAILABLE TO US TO DEFEAT THE GOVERNMENT.

"(d) The economic boycott in South Africa has unlimited potentialities. When our local purchasing power is combined with that of sympathetic organizations overseas we wield a devastating weapon.

"In (the) view of the Council the economic boycott weapon can be used effectively in our struggle against the pass laws. The boycott has the additional merit that it is not a defensive weapon. We are on the offensive and we are fighting on a battlefield chosen by ourselves, based on our own strength."

Even leaving aside the open retreat from any programme of mass action which this document discloses, it reveals a complete misunderstanding of the question of economic boycott.

It is true that a consumer boycott can be a useful auxiliary weapon for the working class in some struggles against employers who produce goods for mass consumption. It has been used in this way in the past decade, as a means of strike support, and has proved temporarily effective while control over it has remained in the hands of workers' organisations, and while the strike action itself has remained firm as the focal point of the action.

Likewise in the 1950s, consumer boycott with a **limited concrete aim** could achieve some gains. The one concrete decision of the May 1959 ANC conference was to launch a potato boycott—directed against the appalling slave-like conditions to which pass offenders were being subjected when handed over by the prisons to work for Eastern Transvaal potato farmers.

As a result of this boycott the government suspended the farm prison labour system for a year. But the potato boycott was soon called off by the Congress leadership. From 26 June 1959 they launched instead a consumer boycott, inside and outside South Africa, of the products of all Nationalist-owned firms.

The ending of the potato boycott itself dismayed many activists. As the NEC admitted at the end of the year, it had been "a resounding success to an extent that it was a difficult task to convince the people about the desirability of switching off from the potato boycott to the boycott of the Nationalist products. Clearly the calling off was unpopular..."

The reason that the potato boycott was called off, (states



Barney Ngakane, then an ANC activist) was that "We were supported at the time by some of the shopkeepers and ... their shop businesses were suffering and we did not want to alienate them." (*Rand Daily Mail*, 12/8/83.)

Relaxing the concrete and effective pressure being exerted on the Eastern Transvaal farmers because of the complaints of a few shopkeepers—the Congress leadership called instead on working people to embark on the ludicrously utopian scheme of indefinitely boycotting the products of **all** Nationalist-owned firms!

And this, claimed the Anti-Pass Planning Council, would build the forces to defeat the government and end the passes!

It hardly requires much serious thought to realise that an **effective**, nation-wide consumer boycott is a much more difficult campaign to organise and sustain than is workers' action at the point of production, or even a general strike. At the same time, its real political impact can only be a fraction of the latter's.

In reality, the generalised consumer boycott did **nothing** to build the organisation of the working class. Moreover, by directing attention only to NP employers, it fostered the illusion that "non-Nat" employers were somehow "better"—that they were not guilty of exploiting and oppressing the working people.

In that sense it formed part of the whole illusory strategy of hoping for an "alliance" with the "progressive" wing of the ruling class. As what they called a "second front" of the anti-pass struggle, the Planning Council proposed that "a pamphlet should be written specifically for the European public and that certain leading personalities amongst the Europeans should be approached to raise and discuss the pass issue with various institutions and to lead deputations to government and local authorities."

This was, they explained, because "it is essential that the European public should be given a systematic and thorough education about the evils of the pass laws. It is evident that many are ignorant of these evils and not sufficient work has been done to educate them. Many sympathetic Europeans cannot imagine what the country would look like without the pass laws and in particular without influx control." (SAIRR Papers, AD 1189, ANC 111, Anti-Pass Planning Council Plan, 1959.)

But the employers, both Nat and non-Nat, knew very well that without the pass laws and influx control the whole system of cheap labour on which their profits depended would be fundamentally threatened. An economic boycott of Nationalist employers, combined with a "systematic and thorough education" of non-Nationalist employers, was not going to change their minds!

Significantly, when the South African Foundation was established in 1959 to combat the international extension of the economic boycott, it was joined by **every** section of the employers, including the 'progressive' Harry Oppenheimer.

47. *Notes on the meeting of a Durban City Council Deputation with the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development*, 3/8/59.

48. *Drum*, July 1959.

49. *Africa South*, October-December 1959, p.16.

50. Ben Turok, *Strategic Problems in South Africa's Liberation Struggle*, p.38. For voicing mild criticisms of this nature, Turok was expelled from the CP in the 1970s.

51. *Africa South*, April-June 1960.

52. *The Africanist*, December 1957.

53. *Moses Kotane*, p.235.

54. *Ibid.*, p.236.

55. *Organize or Starve!*, p.411-2.

56. The Report of the ANC NEC, December 1959, said: "After many years of bitter struggle against the pass laws it has become necessary to choose a particular day historically linked with the anti-pass struggle, such day to be known as Anti-pass day. The 31st March stands out as the most suitable date to commemorate the anti-pass struggle for it was on that date in 1919 that the ANC made a serious attempt to stage a systematic demonstration when thousands of passes were collected in Johannesburg and taken to the pass office."

57. *Moses Kotane*, p.257.

58. Quoted in *Organize or Starve!*, p.438.

59. *Moses Kotane*, p.257.

60. *The Africanist*, December 1957.

61. See *From Protest to Challenge*, vol.3, p.570.

62. Quoted in *New Age*, 31/3/60.

63. *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p.222-3.

64. *Africa South*, July-September 1959.

65. *Moses Kotane*, p.263.

66. Report by the National Action Council, quoted in *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p.197.

67. *Moses Kotane*, p.263.

68. 1977 interview.

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Organize or Starve!*, p.350.

71. *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, p.105.

72. *The Road to Freedom is Via the Cross*, p.20.

73. *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, p.105.

74. *Africa South*, January-March 1959.

75. *African Communist*, April-May 1962.

76. *Moses Kotane*, p.273.

77. United Nations Office of Public Information, *Apartheid and the Treatment of Prisoners in South Africa: Statements and Affidavits*, New York, 1967, p.41. This part of Fischer's trial statement was omitted from the version published by the ANC: *What I Did Was Right*, by Bram Fischer, Mayibuye Publications, London (undated).

78. Even in that case, however, the result could never be a transition to a genuinely **socialist** society, which requires the conscious democratic control and management of production and the state by the working class. The ending of capitalism after the victory of a guerilla army—where that has been the result—has invariably led to a regime of bureaucratic dictatorship on Stalinist lines.

79. From Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*. This was no original discovery of a bourgeois historian!—it was, in fact, a key element in the conclusions drawn by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky on revolution and the state.

80. *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, p.164.



# LESSONS OF THE 1950s

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There is no theoretical Supplement accompanying this special pamphlet-issue of *Inqaba*. We will resume publication of the Supplement with the next issue, which will be in the usual format.

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