

# PAUL ROBESON AND AFRICA

by Alex La Guma

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Honoured Chairman, friends, allow me to express my sincere thanks for the invitation to be present here, to you and the organisers of this symposium on Paul Robeson and on the struggle of the Afro-American people.

We can well understand the sentiments which stimulated this gathering. The cause of Afro-Asian solidarity, solidarity with the Afro-American people, and in fact with all oppressed and persecuted people throughout the world, is a characteristic of the German Democratic Republic. Since its inception, the GDR has done many things which have vindicated the honour of progressive Germany. Your people have risen like the phoenix from the ashes of Nazism; and you have shown time and again that the spirit of Thaelmann, Beimler, the Spartacists, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels did not die as a result of the Hitlerite depredations.

The present demonstration of your solidarity with the Afro-American people whose suffering and heroism is today epitomised by Angela Davis, is certainly close to the hearts of the African people as well.

The forefathers of the Afro-American people were brought from my continent during the seventeenth century. The black people of the USA are there today because their ancestors were brought there against their will, chained and bound in the dark holds of slave ships. Since then, from free man to second-class citizen, the struggles of our peoples have always been towards the same objective: complete freedom.

The newly-captured Africans who leaped from the slave ships to their deaths; the young Afro-Americans today facing the might of white supremacy on the streets of the United States; the heroism of Angela Davis, are all common factors in the long and bloody history of the black man's constant efforts to free himself from the yoke of slavery.

## **Common Enemy**

The struggle of the Afro-American parallels in many ways the struggles of colonial peoples all over the world to rid

themselves of exploiters and slave-masters. Dr. Martin Luther King was murdered in Tennessee for the same reasons Patrice Lumumba was murdered in the Congo: and by the same forces. The African black man and the American black man are fighting the common enemy, international imperialism, whether in the form of Portuguese and South African racist troops in Southern Africa or the police forces of the United States. In Vietnam and Indo-China the same struggle goes on against the same enemy for the same reasons.

While we wage our present-day struggle, we must recall at some time or other the struggles of the past as well. We Africans who today confront the forces of fascism and racist oppression call all the time on the international progressive community for unity and support for our cause. The international alliance of solidarity with oppressed Africa has a history in which the contribution of progressive America has a place. Not only is Paul Robeson close to us because of his ancestral origins, but because he stands great in the long struggle of the American people, both black and white, for justice both in his homeland and outside it.

Although of African descent, Paul Robeson did not come in contact with the cause of African freedom until the end of the 1920s. It was in 1928 that he placed the song "Ole Man River" on the musical map of the world. He had come to London then to appear in "Show Boat". It is perhaps typical of a man from an oppressed community to feel more at home among others in the same plight, rather than in the company of the celebrities who feted him in London. So Paul Robeson felt much easier when in the company of British dockworkers and Welsh miners, and the many Africans whom he met. Many of the Africans in London then were students and political workers, and from these Paul Robeson found a revival of Africa within himself. Among the Africans he must have met in London then were several who were to become noteworthy afterwards - men like Jomo Kenyatta, Nkrumah and others.

### **Cheap Labour**

It might be of interest to take a quick glance at what was happening in Africa at that time. It was a period when more and more efforts were being made by the colonialists to extract the maximum of wealth from Africa in order to bolster up their tottering economy. Law upon law, regulation on regulation were introduced in the regions of East and West Africa to ensure the maximum cheap labour and the highest production of raw materials and other wealth.

In Tanganyika for example, an unwarranted departure from work was considered a criminal offence; in Uganda regulations enforced every adult African to work for 30 days a year without wages on road construction. Peasants were allowed to sell their crops only within a fixed time in restricted zones and for set prices. The

policies of the imperialists transformed the countries of Africa into hell for the Africans and paradise for all foreign exploiters.

Increased exploitation coincided with social and political awareness among Africans and they were inevitably drawn into the anti-imperialist movement. In 1920 the Kikuyu of Kenya set up their first organisation; in Tanganyika the establishment of mass peasants' and workers' organisations was a sign of the growing awareness of the working people; in Dahomey in West Africa railway workers launched a significant strike, the first of its kind; likewise workers took action in Senegal, Guinea, and on the Ivory Coast. These were the first efforts of the modern working-class and political movements in Africa.

The Kikuyu Central Association sent their secretary-general, Jomo Kenyatta, to Britain where he carried on intensive work on behalf of the African population of Kenya. It is under these circumstances that Paul Robeson had the opportunity of coming in contact with the African situation. Through these contacts, through the inevitable discussions, Robeson became aware of the continent of his ancestors who had been taken from it in chains.

In what was then the Union of South Africa, a rapid consciousness of the importance of the national liberation struggle of the African people was also developing at that time. Together with the demands of the oppressed black people for emancipation, a class-consciousness was also taking deep root. African workers saw themselves not only oppressed as black people, but also exploited as workers. Inevitably the ideas of socialism caught the interest of more and more Africans.

### **The New Jerusalem**

It is not coincidental that the visit to the USSR by Paul Robeson in 1934 had the same effect on him as it did on the South African leader Gumede. Paul Robeson on visiting the USSR said that he had seen whole nations of so-called "primitive peoples" now building highly-developed socialist republics, working and building countless new factories, schools, universities, all within twenty years. To him this proved the falsity of the colonialist claim that black people would not be able to rule themselves for thousands of years.

Similarly, Gumede, a leader of the African National Congress, told a mass meeting of Africans when he returned from the USSR: "I have seen the new world to come, where it has already begun. I have been to the new Jerusalem." He claimed that he had brought the key which would unlock the door to freedom.

Paul Robeson the singer, since those days placed his voice and his talent at the service of the struggle for emancipation of the black oppressed, and at the service of all progressive mankind.

He was an artist who did not see art in isolation from the problems which beset society, the whole world, the whole of humanity. Becoming more and more aware of the problems of the Afro-American and African people, he was endowed with the wisdom to see the link between black oppression and the rest of the world's problems. It was therefore inevitable that he was drawn into the world-wide anti-fascist struggle of the thirties and subsequent years.

Caught in the whirlpool of the fight to destroy fascism, a fight that was both dramatic and horrible, it was at this time that he saw clearly that he as an artist, a singer, a man of talent, could not possibly stand aloof from the furor of humanity. He saw that the artist who was honest could never belong in an ivory tower while mankind was engaged in one of the titanic struggles of its history.

I think that his outlook as an artist is significantly illustrated by a speech made in the Albert Hall London at a rally in support of the Spanish republic, and reported in the South African anti-imperialist magazine, *The Liberator*, in 1937. Paul Robeson said then:

*"Every artist, every scientist, must decide now where he stands. He has no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict on Olympian heights. . . The battlefield is everywhere, there is no sheltered rear. . . . Fascism fights to destroy the culture which Society has created; created through pain and suffering, through desperate toil, but with unconquerable will and lofty vision . . - What matters a man's profession or vocation? Fascism is no respecter of persons. It makes no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. . . The artist must take sides; he must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I have no alternative. The history of the capitalist era is characterised by the degradation of my people; despoiled of their lands, their women ravished, their culture destroyed. . . I say the true artist cannot hold himself aloof. The legacy of culture from our predecessors is in danger. It is the foundation upon which we build a still more lofty edifice. It belongs not only to us, not only to the present generation - it belongs to posterity and must be defended to the death."*

These words of Paul Robeson hold good today as they did then.

#### **Council on African Affairs**

It was in 1937 that he also helped to found the Council for African Affairs of which he became chairman. This American organisation had two main aims: to support the cause of African freedom, collecting funds for various African causes, and also to tell Americans the truth about affairs and events in Africa,

Under the first of the Council's objectives, the people of South Africa remember the assistance provided during a severe famine in the eastern part of our country shortly after the Second World War. However, the other aims of the Council provided the opportunity for many Americans to learn the truth about our country. Until then I believe that most Americans thought in terms of Edgar Rice Burroughs' stories of *Tarzan of the Apes*, whenever they heard the continent of Africa mentioned.

The South African people also remember with appreciation and affection Paul Robeson's first task when he was released from the USA after the McCarthy persecutions. In 1958, just arrived in Europe from the United States, he sang in a special service in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, in aid of the fund for the defence of South African political prisoners.

As a South African I believe I can say with truth that Paul Robeson had a special spot within himself for my country. We recall that in 1950 when workers were shot down by the fascist police at a May Day demonstration, Paul Robeson addressed a meeting of the National Labour Conference for Negro Rights, telling his audience:

*"Twelve South African workers now lie dead, shot in a peaceful demonstration by Malan's fascist police; as silent testimony to the fact that... it is later than they (the oppressors) think in the procession of history, and that rich land must one day return to Africans on whose backs the proud skyscrapers of the Johannesburg rich were built..."*

Today the South African people stand on the threshold of the final struggle for the liberation of the black majority and the other oppressed communities. In 1961 the armed struggle for the overthrow of fascism in South Africa was begun; for the overthrow of white supremacy, of injustice, of racial hatred and the exploitation of our hard-pressed people. In 1967 the first battalions of our partisan fighters met the racist troops of South Africa and Rhodesia. Our people have died there in the beautiful Zambesi valley, since they have said that they no longer wish to lay down their lives defencelessly. I do not think that the South African movement today claims wholesale success or that victory will come soon. But we have reached the turning point in our history, and we have no doubt that victory will be ours.

### **Nixon's lie**

Very recently Nixon, President of the USA, in his so-called "World Report", claimed that he and his government are against apartheid and racism in South Africa. This is a lie. In the first place the ruling class of the USA cannot be against racism in South Africa and at the same time condone and encourage it in the United States. Secondly, the United States of America is the

second biggest foreign investor in South Africa and millions of dollars in profits are being sucked from the marrow and blood of African exploitation in South Africa.

We South Africans know full well who are our friends and allies in the United States. They are people like Paul Robeson who has raised his voice in song and worked in the interest of solidarity with the South African people. They are people like the late Martin Luther King, W.E.B. DuBois, and today Angela Davis and all the Afro-Americans and genuine democrats fighting for the cause of justice, freedom and humanity in their country.