

- debate -

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- 6 J Saul and S Gelb, The crisis in South Africa, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1981, p44
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Workers and the Politics of Consumer Boycotts

"Our buying power is going to be the thing that is going to decide the future of our country", Mkhuseleli Jack, leader of the Port Elizabeth Consumer Boycott Committee, on the eve of the recent reintroduction of the consumer boycott in P.E. (New Nation 26.3.86)

Since July 1985 boycotts have proliferated across South Africa. Comments like Jack's are now common among the leaders of township and national anti-apartheid organisations. But the energy being put into organising boycotts has rarely been matched by careful assessment of the boycott as a general tactic, and more specifically of the different ways in which boycotts can be organised.

An early assessment of consumer boycotts in the major metropolitan areas was provided by Obery and Jochelson (WIP 39, October 1985), and more recently White (SALB 11.5, May 1986) has theorised the tactical and especially the strategic objectives of the consumer boycott. But these studies have not explored in detail the variety of forms of the consumer boycott, how these are linked to different objectives, and how they can transform the local as well as

national political terrain. This article explores these themes, and specifically seeks to examine the implications that consumer boycotts have had for workers and unions in South Africa over the last year. Whilst boycotts can potentially be used to advance both the short and the longer-term interests of workers, they can also have a regressive effect.

The consumer boycott mobilises township residents around the issue of spending rather than earning, and organises them primarily in the township rather than in the workplace. The consumer boycott therefore raises many of the questions that ordinarily face workers when considering their role outside of the workplace. The nature of their role in contemporary South Africa is the subject of considerable debate. I do not intend to engage in this debate but to examine the specific problems posed by the consumer boycott.

This is an especially important task at present. Not only are boycotts proliferating in number and in perceived importance, but also the form of some recent boycotts contrasts with their historical antecedents. Although, as has been noted, "the consumer boycott tactic has a long tradition in South African protest politics" (Obery and Jochelson, p9), boycotts in the recent past were generally organised by unions in support of workplace disputes. They have included boycotts of Fatti's and Moni's, Red Meat, Colgate, Simba Quix, Wilson-Rowntree, Spar, and Dairy Maid. More recent boycotts have, however, generally involved blanket boycotts of white businesses, have been primarily organised around non-workplace grievances, and in some cases unions have not been involved.

Consumer boycotts: strategy, tactics, and class alliances

White discusses in detail how the consumer boycott can be employed as both a tactical and a strategic weapon. Tactically, the local state (through pressure on local capital) and even the central state (through the cumulative effect of widespread boycotts) can be pressurised into conceding to certain demands. Strategically, divisions in the ruling bloc can be accentuated, particularly through destroying its ideological cohesiveness and alienating the state from some its constituencies. Also, the boycott can mobilise, politicise, and unite oppressed classes.

Unfortunately, White's discussion of this latter strategic aspect of the boycott fails to identify the importance of the form which consumer boycotts take. The concepts which White uses, including

"mobilisation", "politicisation", and "class alliance", are neither monolithic nor unambiguous. To take a very obvious example, it is crucial whether a Durban worker is mobilised and politicised in terms of his alleged (Zulu) heritage within Inkatha or UWUSA, or in other terms within a COSATU or CUSA union. The content of mobilisation and politicisation, and the terms of class alliances, are often as important as the process itself.

A crucially important question is the alliance of the working-class with the emerging black capitalist shop- and taxi-owners ("lumpen-capitalists"). White argues that these lumpen-capitalists are drawn into support for the boycotts through both "economic" and "ideological" factors. While "it is undoubtedly the case that they stood to make a lot of money from the boycott of white shops", in P.E. at least, "the economic motive has been transformed into a far more ideologically-based commitment to the aims and goals of the progressive movement".

White briefly refers to the terms of this class alliance. "While one of the great strengths of the consumer boycott is that it has given impetus to a deepening of a class-alliance with black traders, it is crucial that in order to minimise any ambiguity or opportunism the democratic movement forges such alliances on its own terms". Obery and Jochelson also pay some attention to this problem. Derrick Swartz of the Eastern Cape UDF expresses a critical concern over this class alliance. "We should never misunderstand [traders'] motives for supporting the boycott. Their role remains determined by their class position." (Obery and Jochelson, p11)

The relationship between the working-class and lumpen-capitalists must be examined, as Swartz says, in terms of their respective interests. Defining a "working-class politics" is certainly no easy task (see Jochelson et al, WIP 41), but it is clear that working-class interests involve not only reducing workplace exploitation, and reducing rents and consumer costs, but also increasing in both the short and long term working-class control over both their work- and living-place in order to end oppression. Any form of protest has implications for questions of control. The involvement of lumpen-capitalists in the class alliances generated through consumer boycotts should not be understood simply through reference to immediate profit levels and a vague "ideologically-based commitment", as White does, but also in terms of control and organisation. This is especially important as the growth and coherence of the class of lumpen-capitalists is underestimated.

Emerging township capital, grass roots organisation
and consumer boycotts

Lumpen-capitalists have interests in certain forms of consumer boycotts beyond making high immediate profits. These can be divided into questions of the demands posed and the form of organisation.

Lumpen-capitalists can be expected to favour national level demands. In so far as there are constraints on the opportunities for accumulation, these are primarily determined at a national rather than local level, so requiring national rather than local pressure. Secondly, an emphasis on national and political rather than local demands distracts protesters' attention from specifically local grievances and concerns. Thirdly, national demands generally require a more nationally-orientated organisation, which can militate against the growth of grassroots democratic structures. One reason for this is that national and explicitly political demands are often beyond the control of local capital and the local state. The pursuit of local demands would generally lead to negotiations with these groups. Whilst negotiations lead to the construction of democratic structures, and the involvement of the local state can ensure the space to do so (through a reduction in levels of repression), an un-negotiable strategy based on protest alone without the close possibility of negotiation can weaken rather than strengthen structures.

On this question of organisation, it is clear that progressive organisations at national and regional levels are campaigning in the interests of the working-class in their demands concerning repression, education, and political rights. But, as is widely acknowledged, national and regional organisation should be constructed from strong grass-roots organisation. The practice of the consumer boycott is, in many areas, constructed on such a base. This base comprises "peoples power" structures of street and area committees, which represent the extension into the living-place of the kind of democratic workplace structures developed by the independent trade union movement from the 1970s. However, there is a temptation to organise boycotts even in areas where people's power is at most an idea. If this happens, the construction of people's power can be retarded as organisational energies are not directed to the grassroots but to a higher level.

The arguments presented by White would seem to suggest that the mobilisation and politicisation generated through boycotts provides

the impetus to grassroots organisation. But this need not be the case. As White notes at the start of his paper, boycotts emerged in many areas because state repression precluded other forms of protest. But the boycott "is relatively impervious to brute repression" precisely because it requires little organisation, and because of this it need not generate any organisation either.

Thus whilst there might not be a clash of material interests at the time, the structures that have been set up can militate against the emergence of democratic structures at a later date. This should be of particular concern to workers.

Consumer boycotts also necessarily bring organisers and township capitalists into relations of increased mutual dependence. The former require the latter to make boycotts viable, and more especially require them to lower their prices in order to ensure that price differentials between town and township do not provoke unnecessary hostility to the boycott. Capitalists in turn depend on organisers for the maintenance of sales levels as well as to promote their explicit demands and implicit interests. The more mutually dependent they become, the more responsive they become to each others "needs" or interests. Whilst this means that traders become more supportive of progressive positions, it also means that progressive organisations can become more tolerant of the position of traders.

What evidence is there concerning the involvement of lumpen-capitalists? Unfortunately some of the evidence there is is ambiguous. For example, police have harassed township traders in several areas. In parts of the Eastern Cape, traders have been detained and their businesses closed. In Mamelodi, three leading township residents detained in connection with the consumer boycott in December 1985 owned at least one chemist's and two supermarkets between them (Star 18.12.85). But is this harassment aimed at boycott organisers, who might include traders, or is it an attempt to intimidate traders and prevent them supplying township consumers? In Daveyton, police prevented delivery trucks from supplying township stores to force consumers to buy at white shops. The precise role of traders in each area can only be identified through a detailed study of locally specific patterns of politics.

The case of bus boycotts provides some ominous lessons for progressive organisers. The divergent interests of the lumpen-capitalists and worker-commuters on a crudely material level is indicated

in the outcome of the Empangeni bus boycott in Natal. The burden of the boycott was shouldered by the commuters, and officials of the locally dominant union, Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), provided the initial organisation through the boycott committee. MAWU organisers recognised that one way of lowering fares was to break Empangeni Transport's monopoly, creating opportunities for small-scale transporters. The emerging black capitalists in the area are represented in Inkatha, which secured representation on the boycott committee. Finally, the Inkatha representatives were able to negotiate an end to the boycott on the basis of breaking the monopoly, with no necessary provisos for reducing fares. (McCarthy and Swilling 1985; McCarthy 1985)

Consumer boycotts have not been the preserve of progressive organisations. The position of NAFCOC (National African Federated Chamber of Commerce) leaders on boycotts provides a warning. They have consistently supported calls for boycotts since the 1970s when the calls came from Black Consciousness leaders. In late 1983 NAFCOC themselves called for a boycott of Afrimet stores. Gatsha Buthelezi and Lebowa's Cedric Phatudi have both threatened to use blanket consumer boycotts. Phatudi clearly envisaged that they could be used to strengthen the bantustan system. There is nothing inherently progressive about the consumer boycott, despite it being based on mass black action.

Other organisational problems with boycotts: the youth

Different groups of residents are clearly differentially involved in and affected by consumer boycotts. This raises potential organisational problems. The youth - meaning both the young unemployed and students - have played a major role in the organisation of many boycotts, and women, as consumers, have been especially affected.

The role of the youth has, unsurprisingly, been emphasised in the media. White cites a survey done in Grahamstown and suggests that the media has consistently exaggerated the level of coercion involved in boycotts. Two comments need to be made. First, the level of coercion needed is inversely proportional to the support for boycotts in the township, and therefore reflects on the organisation of the boycott. Secondly, in some areas the enforcement of boycotts by the youth has provoked violent conflict.

The general relationship between youth and the working-class is

- debate -

problematic. Unemployed workers can easily be considered members of the working-class. Education, especially in South Africa, can be seen as a process of socialisation for labour, making students future workers (or, increasingly, unemployed members of the working class). But education can also be seen as a route leading to opportunities for capital accumulation. Whether students and workers have either compatible or contradictory material interests remains unclear.

But it is the case that the political and especially organisational practices used by youth in many areas until recently contrast with those that further working-class interests. For example, some youth congresses are organisations of active (young) residents only, whilst civics (and some unions in the workplace) are organisations embracing both active and more passive residents.

But youth have also played a major role in advancing working-class interests in many areas. In the Eastern Cape, the construction of people's power can be attributed in large part to the efforts of youth, both in destroying earlier state structures and in building popular and democratic alternatives. I discuss this further below.

Consumer boycotts can unite township residents. They can also divide. Dissatisfaction with the way in which consumer boycotts were organised and conducted in Crossroads was one of the key factors behind the violent conflict that broke out in January 1986. Groups known locally as "amadoda" (men) or "otata" (older men) fought and forced into hiding many "magabane" (comrades), "some but not all of whom [were] linked to community organisations with a political orientation."

Residents interviewed said that "there had been increasing dissatisfaction on the part of many residents with the way in which the "magabane" had "monitored" the consumer boycott. They gave an example of how domestic workers... were forced to throw away groceries they had been given by their employers as it was assumed that the goods had been bought at "white" shops. Others in the community had been forced to eat raw meat, detergent etc...It seems that the failure of the "magabane" to explain the nature of these campaigns led to a conservative reaction on the part of some sections within the community." The police, unsurprisingly, encouraged and supported this conservative reaction. Nonetheless, it seems that the "fathers" cannot be considered police puppets, but rather emerged out of divisions in squatter camps, divisions which

US Solidarity for South Africa

A boycott of Shell products recently announced in the United States has the potential for the most widespread local organising and education on South African apartheid yet conducted within the American labour movement. The boycott until Royal Dutch/Shell and its subsidiaries withdraw from South Africa was announced in January, and is now being organised at the local level in cities throughout the US.

National organisations endorsing the boycott include:

- * The United Mine Workers of America, an independent union which has increased its links with the South African National Union of Mineworkers in recent months and which recently concluded a bitter 15-month strike against AT Massey Coal Co., a Shell subsidiary.
- * The AFL-CIO, which said it was responding to requests by black unions in South Africa to boycott companies which are involved in the energy sector as well as companies which do not respect trade union rights.
- * The Free South Africa Movement, a loose grouping of civil rights activists who led the protests at the South African embassy in 1985 and who now are targeting the role of multi-national corporations in South Africa.
- * The National Organisation for Women, perhaps the leading feminist group in the US.

Except in the case of the United Mine Workers, the national endorsements do not appear to mean a substantial commitment of funds for local organising. They do, however, create a national umbrella under which local organising can take place.

Already, local coalitions are asking consumers not to buy gasoline or other products from Royal Dutch/Shell's American subsidiary, Shell Oil Co., to turn in their shell credit cards, and to pressure businesses and government agencies not to use Shell products.

The local organising campaigns could prove interesting for a number of reasons. First, boycott supporters are making a conscious effort

The exigencies of organisation under the dual conditions of repression and poorly developed grass-roots organisation that characterise most townships outside of the Eastern Cape, militate against women's organisational involvement. Boycotts will generally be organised by representatives of the different township organisations, which are generally based on specific constituencies, for example, youth, students, and workers at particular factories. Women are possibly the least organised group of township residents, despite (indeed because of) the fact that they face specific problems, stemming from the sexual division of labour and their "triple oppression", as women, as workers and as blacks. Women are therefore likely to be under-represented in all township organisations except for specifically women's organisations, such as the Zakheni Women's Club, based on a sexually-defined constituency. As a result women will be poorly represented on consumer boycott committees.

Does this matter? I would suggest that it does. I would hope that the objective of a democratic post-apartheid society must embrace women as equally as men. More immediately, women's support for boycotts is essential if the boycott is not to be based on violence. Democratic grass-roots structures involving and mobilising women are, I believe, a necessary condition for the unambiguous advancement of the interests of the South African working class as a whole.

Boycotts in practice

In many townships the lumpen-capitalist class have either secured partial control only or have in fact been subordinated to representatives of the working-class. But, especially in larger townships outside of the Eastern Cape, the form of boycott organisation may not involve the full subordination of lumpen-capitalists' interests. The effect of these boycotts remains ambiguous.

The available literature on consumer boycotts includes examples of both of these scenarios. The best examples in the first group lie in the Eastern Cape. Another example would seem to be the boycott in Pietermaritzburg. This was organised around local demands, concerning the re-instatement of workers and a union recognition agreement, and the initiative for the boycott came, unsurprisingly, from FOSATU (LMG Natal 1985; Carrim 1985).

The larger the township, the more difficult it becomes for consumer boycotts to be organised in the full interests of the working-class. This follows from (i) the relative heterogeneity of classes

in the large townships, especially Soweto, Mamelodi, and Kagiso; and (ii) the problems of constructing democratic grass-roots structures which generate working-class oriented boycotts. Boycotts in these larger townships have been characterised by increased importance being attached to national demands, with national or regional political leadership (drawn from unions as well as civic organisations). Unfortunately these boycotts attract disproportionate attention as their leaders have the best contacts with journalists and researchers alike.

The importance of the form of the consumer boycott is best demonstrated through more detailed case-studies, suggesting how tensions in the form have been resolved in practice. Examples drawn from outside of the Eastern Cape reveal possible pitfalls in the form of boycotts when they are not based on mass participatory and democratic grass-roots structures.

Boycotts in a small town: Tumahole

In Tumahole, outside Parys in the northern Free State, two total consumer boycotts have been held. Both involved primarily local grievances. Both were organised by township-based organisations reflecting the close relationship between workplace and living space that informs organisations in many small towns.

Class relations in Tumahole have been shaped by the deployment of the (selective) boycott weapon, and the threat thereof, against township lumpen-capitalists. In July 1984, the Mayor's supermarket and butchery were boycotted, with the demands that he oppose the planned massive rent increase, and resign from the community council. The call for a boycott came from members of the Tumahole Students Organisation (TSO). The boycott was "supervised" by youths, but it seems that intimidation was unnecessary, as the Mayor's role in rent increases had earned him widespread hostility. The Mayor resigned after the combination of the boycott, police violence at a previously peaceful protest march, and the death of a youth in police custody. Later in 1984 residents boycotted the taxi of another councillor, who also resigned. Other township traders have since been threatened with boycotts. In each case, they have acceded to the demands made of them.

Selective boycotts were important in Tumahole for three reasons. First, they have been a major factor in the subordination of lumpen-capitalists to the township organisations. Secondly, they

- debate -

accustomed residents to the boycott as a potentially non-violent and successful weapon. Thirdly, they were initially deployed in circumstances where they gave expression to very widespread grievances. These factors help explain the success of the first total boycott of white businesses in Parys, in August 1985.

On August 1, residents stayed away from work for the funeral of three youths killed by the police after an earlier funeral. A number of workers were dismissed for failing to turn up to work. Five dismissed by Vaal Glass (glass merchants) and two by the local Riviera Hotel, reported this to members of the Tumahole Youth Congress (TUYCO).

The TUYCO Consumers Sub-Committee, chaired by a former CWIU (Chemical Workers Industrial Union) shop steward from Secunda (dismissed after the November 1984 stay-away), proposed a boycott. The chairman's Secunda organising experience was of crucial importance. A Co-ordinating Committee was established, with representatives from the Tumahole Civic, TUYCO, the Womens Organisation, COSAS, the Parents Committee, and local trade unions (including CUSA and FOSATU unions and CCAWUSA). There were even some non-unionised domestic workers. Besides providing a forum for broad participation in the organisation of the boycott, the Co-ordinating Committee was also formed "so as to make the police lose trace of what organisation is doing what", as one member put it. The Committee was chaired by the former CWIU shop steward.

The Committee wrote to Vaal Glass and the Riviera Hotel, warning them that a consumer boycott would be implemented unless the sacked workers were reinstated. Neither employer even replied. The Committee also wrote to all the Parys retailers to get them to pressurise Vaal Glass and the Riviera Hotel.

Township shopkeepers were asked to lower their prices. This would lower the temptation to break the boycott, and so lower the likelihood of youths being shot at or prosecuted for "supervising" the boycott. The shopkeepers were also asked not to serve policemen and their families, and to stock up (so as to avoid shortages if police stopped delivery vans entering the township).

But shopkeepers were not involved in organising the boycott. According to one of the boycott organisers, "we didn't trust them". Finally, pamphlets were distributed, listing the demands, primarily the reinstatement of the dismissed workers, but also reduced

rents and other local demands.

The boycott commenced on Monday August 12. In the first few days, it was enforced by the "14s" (teams of youths), who confiscated some groceries. Although there appears to have been a substantial solidarity behind the boycott, organisers acknowledge that "some people didn't buy in town as they were afraid". The organisers were unable to mobilise the people from nearby farms, who continued to shop in town. The (black) NGK minister, who opposed the boycott, organised the bussing of pensioners into town after they collected their quarterly pensions, and a SAP escort back into the township. Nonetheless, the boycott had a substantial effect. For example, Checkers were forced to reduce their prices to encourage custom, and later to dump large quantities of fresh food.

In the township, some shopkeepers did lower their prices. Others were intimidated by the police or were just plain greedy, and kept their prices up, losing some custom. One shopkeeper refused to sell cigarettes to some policemen. The SAP captain came and told him if he didn't serve the police, his shop would be promptly closed and his license wouldn't be renewed. The shopkeeper consulted with the boycott organisers, and decided to continue to refuse the police. Nothing happened to him.

In the third week of the boycott, Vaal Glass sent the police to tell his former employees to return to work. Other employers who had sacked workers, in several cases unknown to the boycott organisers, also re-instated them. The boycott was therefore called off, and residents were told in the taxi-ranks and the buses. The organisers were reluctant to issue pamphlets lest the police copy them in a future boycott, and were unable to hold a mass meeting because of a ban on meetings. The organisers clearly demonstrated the end of the boycott by buying groceries in town themselves.

The township shopkeepers made large profits because of the boycott. They subsequently offered to contribute at funerals, and for transport, bail money, and so on. Even two former councillors cooperated.

In November 1985 TUYCO activists proposed another consumer boycott. Although all of the demands were local, specifically an end to the arrests of rent defaulters, the release of detainees, the dropping of public violence charges against students, and reduced rent, the call for a boycott was undoubtedly influenced by the nation-wide call for a "Black Christmas. Unfortunately, some of the leading

organisers of the earlier boycott had been forced into hiding by local vigilantes.

This second boycott was unevenly supported with a correspondingly reduced effect. It was inadequately organised, and could not count on any wave of indignation or common resolve among residents as in August. Furthermore, the boycott was planned for a set length, rather than until demands were met, which reduced residents' sense of control. In the event, none of the demands were met. There was inadequate consultation with township shopkeepers. Leaflets announcing the boycott were mistakenly distributed early. The "14s" again tried to enforce the boycott, but, despite some intimidatory "punishment" of shoppers, they were unable to compel compliance.

Local capital in Parys devised novel boycott-breaking tactics. ARWA, the second largest local employer, gave their employees vouchers entitling them to buy groceries at half price at Checkers. Apparently, some people used these vouchers.

The organisational structures underlying the boycotts were the same. In each case, TUYCO activists were the organisers. There were no grass-roots structures in the township. But in December the call for action did not originate from the residents as in August. In this situation, organisers were unable to ensure the boycott's success either in tactical or strategic terms. Demands were not met, local capital was, if anything, made more confident of its power to break boycotts, and residents were not politicised along constructive lines, but were possibly even slightly alienated from organising and protesting. Specific organisational mistakes compounded the problem.

The boycott tactic has constituted a class alliance with the lumpen-capitalist class very much subordinated to representatives of workers and the unemployed. The demands have been concerned with worker or student grievances, rather than non-local demands with populist rhetoric. It can hardly be said of the Tumahole boycott organisers that they either "see it as merely a more developed form of protest action designed to make big business aware of its political responsibilities,... [or] as a direct challenge to the country's economy" (Obery and Jochelson, p9). But, despite all this, the second boycott cannot be considered a significant success.

Boycotts and people's power

poverty of organisation can itself serve to advance the interests of the lumpen-capitalists, and so, in the long term, disadvantage the working-class. This can even be the case where lumpen-capitalists are formally subordinated to the representatives of the working-class, as in Tumahole.

In many areas, until recently, unions have had greater organising power than township-based organisations. 1985, however, saw the construction of "people's power" in many townships in the Eastern Cape, and during 1986 democratic and mass-participatory structures are being established in townships in the Transvaal. Now, township-based organisations frequently marshall much greater democratic organising power than unions.

"People's power" is the key to avoiding the potential pitfalls involved in consumer boycotts. Not only is it possible to ensure that the material interests of lumpen-capitalists are subordinated to the needs of the working-class, but more fundamentally control over the form of protest is vested in the working-class - including, one hopes, women.

Consumer boycotts are once again proliferating throughout South Africa. The Port Elizabeth consumer boycott was reintroduced on April 1. The East London consumer boycott was indefinitely reintroduced on March 3. Mamelodi's boycott was resumed in April, although it is due to be called off soon, and a widespread boycott is taking effect in the Northern Transvaal. Comments like Jack's above are frequently expressed.

Boycotts have undoubtedly brought major successes. In Alexandra boycotts, in conjunction with rising and sustained levels of protest, led to the resignation of the remaining councillors.

Efforts have been made to achieve national coordination in the pursuit of primarily national demands and objectives. National issues are not unimportant. After all, unions have increasingly grouped together into CUSA, FOSATU, AZACTU, and now COSATU, the biggest federation ever in South African history. National legislation, especially the legislation prompted by the Wiehahn Commission and national-level court decisions, have brought major gains to workers. And workers are of course subject to many of the same restraints - that can only be corrected at a national

- debate -

level - as other township residents. But the pitfalls involved in employing the consumer boycott tactic remain and workers and their unions need to ensure that the structures, practices, demands, and objectives, are in the long-term interests of the working-class.

The consumer boycott should not be abandoned. On the contrary, it is a powerful weapon. But the direct and indirect implications need to be fully considered and necessary precautions taken.

The experience of the Eastern Cape demonstrates the potential power of the consumer boycott weapon. But the strength of the weapon does not inherently lie in the weapon itself, but rather is the result of the level of organisation underpinning the boycotts. "Buying power" is not going to determine how South Africa is reconstructed out of the debris of apartheid. Rather, it is the mass mobilisation of the working-class in democratic grass-roots organisations, ie. people's power, that is going to determine victory in the struggle.

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