

THE BLACK REPUBLIC SLOGAN - PART II THE RESPONSE OF THE TROTSKYISTS

Baruch Hirson

[Part I of this article appeared in Searchlight South Africa No.3, July 1989]

The Debate in the 1930s

In the aftermath of the Sixth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1928 propaganda for the Independent Native Republic filled the journals and pamphlets of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Anyone opposed to or half-hearted about the party line, including its founder members, were condemned as counter-revolutionary, vilified and expelled.

In 1929 the Communist Party of South Africa claimed a membership of 3,000. By 1933, after years of fratricidal in-fighting, expulsions and resignations the membership was reduced to a few hundred. Some Africans found a home in the African National Congress (ANC) and a few whites joined the South African Labour Party, but most were shattered by the squabbling, vindictiveness and ostracization by their former comrades. In three known cases, party members loyal to the Comintern, who were in the USSR during the Moscow purges, were arrested and executed (see *Searchlight South Africa* No.2).

The 1928 decision was neither accident nor deviation. The CPSA, like other national communist parties, was manipulated by the new thermidorian leadership of the USSR, intent on destroying all opposition in the USSR and rooting out opposition in the Comintern. In South Africa the results were calamitous. The Black Republic slogan—foisted on the CPSA without any analysis of the political economy of South Africa—provided no viable alternatives for day-to-day activities. Even before the new slogan was formulated the party had turned its attention to the black proletariat and Africans constituted the majority of the party. As S.P. Bunting had claimed: the Black Republic slogan was ideological verbiage and had no theoretical basis. Nonetheless it introduced the two-stage theory which dominated thinking in the CPSA thereafter, leading to its contemporary (and natural) successor: 'Colonialism of a Special Type', which is as spurious today as was the 'Black Republic' slogan in 1928.

The leaders of the CPSA were in a quandary. Whatever they proposed was condemned by the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) as reformist and tinged with white chauvinism. According to Douglas and Molly Walton, who returned from a visit to Moscow in 1929, the CPSA was not revolutionary enough and lagged behind mass discontent. Furthermore, the party erred in supporting petty bourgeois nationalist movements like the Industrial and Commercial Workers of Africa (the ICU). Its task was

to 'strive to organize mass action of the peasants,' linking such actions to the slogan of an Independent Native Republic, and the confiscation of all the land...' It was the Waltons who moved the main organizational resolution at the party conference in December 1930. In a motion that was more conspicuous for its illiteracy than for its practicability they said:

It is the task of the party to take the initiative in preparing strikes and to win the independent leadership of all economic struggles and to convert the local partial struggles increasingly taking place, into wide class battles developing into mass political struggles in which the agrarian demands of the masses of the peasantry are assisted and led by the proletariat against the landowners, the employing class, the Government, for the agrarian revolution as a stage towards a Workers' and Peasants' Government.

Forty years later the official history of the CPSA condemned the conference as ultra-left and sharply intolerant.

A thirty-two page set of notes entitled 'Class Struggle: The Foundation of Socialist Teaching from the Manifesto of 1848 to the 1928 Programme' was used to re-educate party cadres. According to the writer there were four types of 'revolutionary struggle' outside the USSR, varying 'with the degree of proletarianization reached in the particular region.'

- i) Where industry was highly developed, with 'insignificant' small-scale production, there was 'a proper proletarian struggle for dictatorship.'
- ii) In countries of 'only medium development, small-scale industry with many feudal survivals,' the struggle was said to be 'bourgeois democratic,' passing through 'to proletarian revolution.'
- iii) In 'colonial and semi-colonial areas, where feudal and other pre-capitalist forms of production predominate,' the struggle 'takes the form of a peasant agrarian revolution and a struggle for national liberation.'
- iv) In the 'colonies proper' the aim was 'national liberation only.'

The problem for communist parties, according to this document lay only in identifying which one of the four 'types of revolution' applied to their country. The writer of these notes decided that South Africa lay somewhere between the second and third type. The proletariat was still 'inconsiderable,' and the African miners oscillated 'between tribal relations or feudal-squatter (*sic*) relations on the one hand and proletarian relations on the other.' Consequently, Africans were 'principally concerned with ancillary rights and liberties when they enter into proletarian relations—the right to family life, equality of opportunity, education and the franchise. They are increasingly aware of the need for at least Bantu National Unity—a step towards a sense of working-class unity' (pp.28–30).

The party member who sought an analysis of the relations of production or the role of finance capital in the opening up of the gold mines, or wanted to understand the dynamics of change in the country, was left with this sterile

categorization — in which the right to a normal family life or the franchise were listed as ‘ancillary’ rights.’ Worse was to follow. South Africa, said the author, lay nearer ‘type two’ and could move towards ‘proletarian revolution’ provided that a force was available to transform the country. Then came the *bon mot* that made nonsense of all that had been previously implied: this force would be found among the Afrikaners whose ‘hostility to Imperialism is an instinctive antagonism to finance capital.’ Unfortunately they had been misled into racial disunity [and consequently]... ‘Finance Capital uses the oppressed African to oust and oppress the Afrikaner, however much it pretends to a contrary policy.’ The task of the CPSA was to overcome this disunity and ‘foster a genuine struggle for independence upon a real democratic basis in which the African is included’ (p.30).

Did the writers really believe this? Were the Africans ‘ousting’ and ‘oppressing’ the Afrikaners? Were the Afrikaners [as a people?] ‘instinctively antagonistic to finance capital’? And in the supposed task of the CPSA (struggling for independence and democracy) what was meant by the assertion that the African was to be ‘included’ with the Afrikaner? There is little meaning in these assertions and it poses the question: *Where did the ‘independent native republic’ fit into this nonsense?*

There was urgent need for a programme based on a critique of the political economy of South Africa and an examination of the dynamics for change in the country. Yet the thesis on colonial countries that emanated from Moscow provided no understanding of the economic structure of the different regions of the colonial world. This was made even more absurd by coupling the situation in South Africa with that of the USA, and the call in both countries for the formation of independent black states — because...because there were blacks in both countries! How either of these fitted into the more general description of the Comintern theoreticians was not clear. Or did it really matter? The communists in the USA never set out to form their ‘independent Negro republic,’ and after a certain amount of drum-thumping the slogan was buried in South Africa. Considering all the events, did Moscow set out deliberately to destroy communist parties in regions where it could not exercise direct control? Whatever the reason, the CPSA was all but destroyed by the imposition of this slogan.

The Debate Inside the Opposition

The agenda for discussion in Trotskyist groups in the early 1930s was set by the Comintern decisions. Their supporters had been involved in the polemics inside the CPSA, disagreeing with the programmatic formulation of the leaders: arguing about events in the USSR or the Comintern, or about policies in South Africa. They had been shaped, and their ideas forged, inside the CPSA, and even after they left (or were expelled) they brought with them echoes of the old debates. Several small groups in Cape Town combined to form the Lenin Club and they attracted academics and students from the

university, providing a forum for the discussion of problems of socialism in South Africa.

Conditions inside the CPSA had been intolerable and the Lenin Club rejected (at least in principle) the undemocratic way in which policy decisions were taken. It also expressed support for the exiled Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the Russian revolution. Members of the Lenin Club restored the lost tradition of debate inside the left but their understanding of the problems of South Africa lagged behind the needs of the time. They argued inside the Club as they had once argued inside the CPSA: about the role of the Afrikaners and their possible allegiance in the event of war, the advisability of working clandestinely or openly as a revolutionary movement, the importance of the 'land question' and the advisability of organizing trade unions.

On two issues they seemed united. They rejected the slogan of an 'independent native republic' and its corollary, the two-stage revolution in South Africa, in which a bourgeois democratic state would abolish racial discrimination prior to a socialist transformation. Yet this agreement concealed many differences. The Black Republic policy had no theoretical underpinning, but rejection of the slogan did not in itself lead to acceptable alternatives. In trying to formulate a new programme the Lenin Club split: one group formed the Workers Party of South Africa (WP), the other became the Communist League and shortly thereafter entered the newly created Socialist Party. Both produced a set of policy documents (or 'theses') and a group in Johannesburg apparently drew up a third set of theses. If they did no copy has yet been found.

Veteran members of the Lenin Club, interviewed in the mid-1970s, ascribed the splits to a number of differences that ranged from the issues of 'entryism' in France – an issue that might have had some relevance in Cape Town where there were possibilities of entering the newly formed Socialist Party – as well as some of the issues mentioned above. But it was the atmosphere inside the left at the time that created conditions in which every difference, small or large, became a point of conflict. Forty years after the event one old-timer still ascribed the differences to conflicts between the 'hard' and the 'soft', with his side most obviously that of the 'hards'.

I am in no position to decide whether the groups were 'hard' or 'soft'. Nor does this seem important today. What does need attention is the set of ideas espoused by the groups and in this the land question looms large.

The Alpha and the Omega of the revolution?

One of the WP papers is devoted exclusively to the land question and it is this document, entitled the 'Native Question' that has remained as the main legacy of those early debates. In their opposition to the Comintern the members of the WP proposed that the programme of a revolutionary party must start with the problem of the dispossession of Africans from the land.

A tiny minority of whites, they said, owned 92 per cent of the land divided into 95,000 registered farms. Yet 87 per cent of Africans lived on the land, half in the Reserves where land possession was permitted and a further third lived in 'virtual serfdom' as farm labourers (500,000), seasonal farm labourers (700,000), or squatters (500,000). These were described loosely in the thesis as 'landless peasantry'. The figures, said the WP, concealed the level of concentration in land holdings. Eleven per cent of the white farmers (11,000) with holdings between 2,000 and 10,000 morgan each, owned more than half the total land. Under these conditions there was no possibility of land reform.

The thesis then went on to consider the land question in terms of the needs of capital. The men in the Reserves were required as workers and they were 'burdened with heavy taxes, polltax, hut tax, quitrent, squatter's tax...[and in that way] forced to find work in the mines or on the farms.' On the mines and farms, the WP said, Africans produced the wealth of South Africa, subject to 'intense exploitation':

The main characteristic of the South African economic system...is the exceptionally low level of the wages of the unskilled and semi-skilled workers. There are very few countries in the world where capitalism is able to extract such tremendous profits out of the meanest type of exploitation.

Although African workers were the producers of the immense wealth accruing to the mineowners and the state, they received one-tenth the wages paid to whites who they outnumbered by 9.3 to 1 on the gold mines and 16.88 to 1 on the coal mines. The wages of the whites, the WP said, would be dragged down to the level of the unskilled workers, unless the entire working class organized to narrow the wage gap. That is, the WP, like the CPSA, failed to see that the division of the working class and the wage differential across the racial divide, was built into the method of political control. The preference given to white workers in the mines and in industry, the reservation of jobs and the higher wages, the segregation in housing and social amenities, all provided the mechanism by which the working class was atomized and split. It also created a privileged group in the working class that would jealously protect its own position and consequently act as a praetorian guard for capital. Their call for a united working class movement to fight for the emancipation of labour from capital was in the best tradition of socialism. However, in calling on the white workers to take their place in the fight 'for the removal of all repressive legislation against the Natives and all the other workers,' they gave undue prominence to the potential role of the whites, and underestimated the revolutionary potential of the black workers. Yet it was the black workers that had to take the lead in the struggle against discrimination.

The WP was aware of the forces at work in South Africa. The group was conscious of the threat of fascism and the danger of losing the few remaining democratic rights. They called on Marxists to find a link between the

'emancipation of the working class and the liberation of the oppressed races, [to throw]...off the yoke and chains of Capitalism and Imperialism.' Racial oppression would only be removed when the revolutionary movement grasped the national struggle – but without obscuring the class struggle and without pandering to petty bourgeois black nationalism. There could be no competition with the ANC in nationalist slogans to win the masses – national liberation could only be achieved through proletarian revolution.

At this stage the WP surrendered its independent thinking to the Comintern and retreated from the position upheld by Bunting (see *Searchlight South Africa*, No.3). Proletarian revolution was apparently the task of the white workers alone. The motive force for Africans, they said, would be the demand for land and this would be followed by the call for national emancipation. This central programmatic point was encapsulated in a phrase that gained currency (or notoriety) in sections of the left: '*Only the revolution can solve the agrarian question, which is the axis, the alpha and the omega of the revolution*' (my stress). This transformation would only be effected by the revolutionary working class together with the 'potentially great revolutionary reservoir' of African peasants. However, even this was in doubt. The WP was far from sanguine about the possibility of unifying the workers or of organizing the black rural population, as yet 'untouched by revolutionary propaganda, revolutionary ideas, revolutionary outlook.'

The assertion that the people of the rural areas were peasants was false. They were little more than a labour reserve for the mines, the farms and the burgeoning industries. A quarter million African labourers worked on the mines, and a million Africans were townsmen, and the boom that followed South Africa's departure from the gold standard in 1932 would bring more to the towns. This was the proletariat that had to be organized in the coming period, separately from the white workers if necessary.

The demand by Africans for land could not stop the process of proletarianization, and to suggest otherwise was to ignore the dynamics of change in South Africa. Nevertheless the revolutionary movement had to be sensitive to the agitation for land, and the incipient revolts in the countryside. This was a period of extensive unrest among farm labourers and in some of the Reserves, some recorded in the organs of the CPSA, others noted by Edward Roux in January 1928 in *Labour Monthly*. Under the title 'Agrarian Revolt in South Africa' he wrote of rising discontent in the northern Free State, the eastern Transvaal and Natal. Being in Cambridge (as a post-graduate student) Roux underestimated the extent of the disturbances, but his understanding outstripped that of his contemporaries in the CPSA: the silence on these events in WP publications is inexplicable. The land issue was highlighted again in 1935 when the 'Native Bills' were presented to parliament. The 'final apportionment' of land to the African peoples was demarcated in the Native Trust and Land Act and the restricted Cape African vote was removed under the Native Representation Act. African bodies responded by convening a new body, the All African Convention, to contest the disenfranchisement and the restrictions on land purchase. Under these

circumstances no serious political organization could ignore the major issues—land and the vote—that caused concern throughout the country.

The legislation was attacked, and socialists demanded that restrictions on land purchase be abolished and the right to the vote extended to all. Socialists also had to explain that it was the nature of capitalism, and its need for an ever increasing proletariat, that lay behind the land question and the forced move to the mines and the towns. This was irreversible, and there was no possibility of returning to the supposed 'golden age' of tribal land regulation. The old order had been disrupted and the process was painful, but the birth of the working class had created the possibility of building a new society that could break out of the bounds of capitalism. The WP wrote about the new Bills in *Spark*, and linked the land question with the needs of the mines and industry, but did not change their basic position. Land was 'the axis, the alpha and the omega of the revolution.' Consequently they concluded an article on the Bills in October 1935 by saying:

If the All-Bantu Convention or the African Congress are prepared to wage a real revolutionary struggle for national liberation, for democratic rights, for equal franchise in all Provinces for Bantu, White, Coloured, etc., and for land for the Natives, all revolutionary workers in South Africa will support them and will join hands for the combined struggle against oppression and exploitation.

The formulation was flawed. The struggle for land and against 'oppression and exploitation' could only be achieved by the working class in its own struggle for socialism. Precisely what was meant by 'national liberation' was not defined, but presumably incorporated the demand for 'democratic rights'. The WP, usually so far ahead of other groups in their understanding of the problems faced by socialists in South Africa had failed to provide the analysis that would inform the revolutionary cadre of the future.

Peasants and the Working Class

The two groups that emerged from the Lenin Club differed on the slogans to be used in South Africa when war came. Both agreed with the revolutionary anti-war stand of the left opposition, but the Communist League believed that an appeal to Afrikaner nationalists (who would also oppose the coming war) could win many of them to the socialist movement. This was a reversion to the position of the CPSA (as see the quotations above) and was patently absurd. Yet their thesis on the War Question, which at that time was taken as unexceptional by the international left opposition, provides a much more rounded position on many questions, including a lengthy discussion of South Africa's economy. This was overlooked then, and was subsequently forgotten, although it contained invaluable insights on the country's political economy.

Except for agriculture, said the writer, the South African economy was subordinated to Britain. The mines, sugar, secondary industries, transport,

the banks and the national debt were controlled by British finance capital. The control of the gold industry by finance capital determined the ultimate behaviour of the government: its search for higher and more stable profits, its need to secure 'a settlement of the Native Question, that is...securing the supply of cheap and yet cheaper labour...'

Little that appeared in this document was new. Some of the statements can be traced back to Hobson's writings at the turn of the century, updated to take in the effects of going off the gold standard in 1932. However, by failing to link this discussion with their paper on the 'Native Question' the WP got the equation wrong. The land question was inseparable from the labour question. The African workers had come to stay, some on the mines and others in the industrial towns. They had not all been removed from the land – partly because they resisted proletarianization, partly because it was found convenient to retain a large reserve army of labour in the rural areas. In the years to come the African's demand for land would merge with, and be overtaken by, the cry for better living conditions in the towns.

It is perhaps easier to see this with hindsight. In the early 1930s two occupations predominated: that of farm labour and domestic service. The other occupations in which large numbers of men were employed were in transport (the railways and harbours) and on the mines and these were not the industries in which the modern proletariat was formed. One characteristic was common to most African workers: the majority were still tied by family and kinship to the land. The journey to the mines and towns was still largely confined to men, and was considered a sojourn away from home. This body of workers, illiterate and unskilled, was not conceived of by socialists as the class that could take control of the state.

The Communist League took issue with the Workers Party over the land issue. In *Workers Voice* (February 1936), they said that the 'main need' of Africans was not for land and that 'a mere cry for land by the Native does not constitute an agrarian problem.' The main problem, said the writer, was the taxes that forced Africans to sell their labour power to the Chamber of Mines. Consequently, 'their chief need is relief from taxation. Their chief enemy is British Imperialism which extorts their very life blood by means of sweated labour.' The writer went further. He said that it was contradictory for the WP to claim that the land question was the central issue and then reject (even if correctly) the Native Republic slogan: 'The Workers Party appeals to the peasant with a slogan for more land. But the peasant is the Native, and so their correct slogan in these circumstances should be the "Native Republic".' He also added, in obvious ignorance of the rural struggles of the time, that the peasants were notoriously backward politically and 'had not once succeeded in offering resistance to the cruel oppression of the white slave-owners.'

To give the Africans more land would be useless, he said. If that was done taxes would be raised still further to secure the required work force. From this the article went on to more secure ground, albeit with information that was not always accurate. There were a million Africans in the towns (out of

a total of six million) and they would take the leadership in the event of a revolution.

Trotsky on the Black Republic

Leon Trotsky, in exile, received copies of the WP draft theses, but not those of the Communist League. He replied, saying he was 'too insufficiently acquainted with the conditions in South Africa' to offer opinions on several practical questions. However, he had to voice disagreement on certain aspects of the draft theses – particularly those which arose from polemical *exaggerations* in the struggle with the 'national policy of Stalinism.'

Unaware as he was of the specific conditions in South Africa, Trotsky was being unnecessarily modest. He had already arrived at his own conclusions on the 'Negro Question' and, meeting with supporters from the USA in Prinkipo in 1933, he discussed the Comintern's resolution on the 'Negro question' in the USA. This instructed communists to agitate for an independent Black state in the Southern states of America. Trotsky had met with black American delegates when he was a leading member of the Comintern and explored the nature of their oppression: in Prinkipo the question was raised again. He declared that the Blacks (of America and Africa) were a race but in Africa they were becoming a nation. The American blacks were at a higher cultural level and would provide leaders for Africa. Discussing the relation between socialists and the American blacks he said that it was for blacks to decide whether they wished to become a nation. But, he insisted, if they wanted self-determination they should get full support. If there was class fraternization between white and black workers, then perhaps it would be wrong to propagate this position. However, at the moment, Trotsky wrote:

...the white workers in relation to the Negroes are the oppressors, scoundrels, who persecute the black and the yellow, hold them in contempt, and lynch them

Asked whether such a slogan would lead to an alliance with the black petty bourgeoisie, Trotsky agreed, but said the latter would be by-passed by the militant black proletariat who, recognizing that white communists fight for black demands, would advance through their own struggle to the proletarian revolution.

In concluding the meeting Trotsky referred to the struggles in Africa. In this case the central problem was with the workers in Europe who held the key to 'real' colonial liberation:

Without their liberation real colonial liberation is not possible. If the white workers performs the role of the oppressor he cannot liberate himself much less the colonial peoples. The right of self determination of the colonial peoples can in certain periods lead to different results;

in the final instance, however, it will lead to the struggle against imperialism and to the liberation of the colonial people.

Two years later Trotsky received the theses from the WP. He commented almost exclusively on the document that dealt with the Black Republic and the land issue, and of this he said:

Three quarters of the population of South Africa...is composed of Non-Europeans. A victorious revolution is unthinkable without the awakening of the native masses; in its turn it will give them what they are so lacking today, confidence in their strength, a heightened personal consciousness, a personal growth. Under these conditions the South African Republic will emerge first of all as a 'Black' Republic: this does not exclude, of course, either full equality for whites or brotherly relations between the two races (which depends entirely upon the conduct of the whites). But it is entirely obvious that the predominant majority of the population, liberated from slavish dependence, will put a certain imprint on the state.

All struggles had to be seen in the context of imperialist rivalries, and Trotsky linked the issues in South Africa with the necessary overthrow of British imperialism. This could only be achieved through the class struggle, both in South Africa and in Britain:

The South African possessions of Great Britain form a Dominion only from the point of view of the white minority. From the point of view of the black majority South Africa is a Slave Colony.

In describing South Africa as a slave colony, for any part of the population, Trotsky lent credence to a variant of pluralism which ignored the very point that the WP had made in their thesis on the war question: namely, the centrality of gold in the South African economy, with the creation of a vast army of workers to satisfy the financial and commercial needs of the world's economy. The formation of this proletariat, exploited and oppressed, was the feature that had to be stressed by a Marxist theoretician – and not ringing metaphors that ignored economic reality. Consequently, the entire history of Trotskyism in South Africa was directed into a quagmire from which it has had difficulty in extricating itself. Such was the inevitable consequences of a Comintern directive that almost destroyed the CPSA and tarnished the groups that tried to establish a new and healthier Marxist tradition.

However, there was a tension in Trotsky's formulation, and repeating his formulation of 1933 he said that a proletarian party, using the methods of class struggle would affect a social revolution which also had a national character. 'We have not the slightest reason to close our eyes to this side of the question or to diminish its significance.'

Trotsky raised two further points on which he said the WP thesis was deficient, both tactical rather than substantive. Firstly, he called on the

revolutionary party, despite their strictures, to defend the ANC against attacks by the 'white oppressors and their chauvinistic agents in the ranks of the workers' organizations.' It was not incorrect, he said, to enter into episodic agreements with the ANC, while exposing its inability to achieve even its own demands. At all times however the revolutionary movement had to retain organizational independence and freedom of political criticism.

Secondly, while agreeing that the national and agrarian questions 'coincided on their bases', and that these questions could only be solved in revolutionary ways, he disagreed with the WP contention that agrarian and not national demands be put first. The struggle for land (an essential ingredient of the struggle for socialism) had to be related to the necessary political and national demands. The failure by Africans to link the demand for land with that of liberation only reflected political backwardness. The problem for the revolutionary movement was to transform the demand for land into a demand for both land and liberty. The agrarian problem had to be made political if there was to be change in the country. For reasons that were mainly tactical, in view of the smallness of the revolutionary party, said Trotsky, the message had to be taken into the rural areas 'mainly if not exclusively through the medium of the advanced workers.'

Trotsky also pinpointed one of the problems that would face the revolutionary movement in the 1930s, and on to the 1970s. The proletariat of South Africa, he wrote, consisted of 'backward black pariahs and a privileged arrogant caste of whites.' These white workers would have to be confronted with the alternative: 'either with British Imperialism and with the white bourgeoisie of South Africa, or, with the black workers and peasants.' The WP could not confront the white workers and therein lay the difficulty facing the left: if advanced workers had not yet emerged from the ranks of the black labour force, who was to take the message to the peasants? In fact, for practical and theoretical reasons the small set of intellectuals, isolated from the urban workers and lacking contact with the rural population had to concentrate their efforts on building a base among the working class. The WP did not attempt this task, nor did the Communist League (which acknowledged the need for working in the unions) ever establish itself in the working class organization. It was only in the Transvaal that members of the left opposition made a serious effort to organize a black trade union movement. Through the 1930s a number of Trotskyists including W. Thibedi, Murry Gow Purdy, Ralph Lee and then Max Gordon established the first viable black trade unions. These efforts received no support from the Cape Town groups and received no mention in their journals.

Ever mindful of the international dimensions of the working class struggle Trotsky concluded his discussion by looking optimistically to the advantages that would come from co-operation between a Soviet Britain and a socialist South Africa. He also looked forward to the influence that a Soviet South Africa would exercise over the rest of Africa. That was fifty years ago and the working class suffered serious defeats during that time. But the vision still remains. Only a socialist South Africa can revive hope for an altered southern

Africa – in Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana and Zimbabwe, as well as Mozambique and Malawi – in which blacks can unite to build a better society.

Echoes of the Past

Shortly after the theses were dispatched to Trotsky the 'Native Bills' (referred to above) were placed before Parliament. The CPSA, still shattered by the expulsions and defections that followed adoption of the Black Republic slogan, turned their attention elsewhere. Following new Comintern directives the slogan was dropped and the CPSA became involved in building a 'popular front' with the white trade unions, the Labour Party, and white liberals. It was only pressure from their remaining black members that led to their participation in the new organization that was called into being under the name of the All African Convention.

The WP, with its focus on land, concentrated its propaganda against the Bills and, despite its scepticism, sent delegates to the AAC conferences. The WP was scathing in its reports of the conferences and Ralph Bunche (at the time associated with Paul Robeson) who visited South Africa in 1937, wrote of a left caucus at the AAC which was in constant conflict with the conservative leadership. Nonetheless, the premise upon which the AAC was formed was not challenged in the WP journal. Although the party never accepted the Black Republic slogan its member immersed themselves in work inside the national-liberation movement. The WP ceased to function openly in the months preceding the outbreak of war in 1939 but several of their leading members assumed a leading role in a revived AAC in 1943, in the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department (Anti-CAD) and in the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) which acted as an umbrella organization. Although accused by their opponents with being 'Trotskyists', they vigorously denied any such connection. Intent on proving their nationalist 'credentials' they denounced left critics who called for a socialist programme or pointed to the working class as the vanguard of the struggle.

The former members of the Workers Party defended the land thesis resolutely, and their successors in the NEUM made this a central plank of their programme. This persisted through 1958 when the NEUM split over disagreements on the interpretation of their land programme. In a struggle that was acrimonious former members of the WP disagreed: the leaders of the AAC proclaiming the right to private land ownership and those of the Anti-CAD opposing this position.

I.B. Tabata, veteran member of the Workers Party, and leading theoretician of the AAC, has recently reaffirmed the 'correctness' of the WP thesis – and its central place in the programme of the AAC. An issue which should have been scrapped decades ago has the full support of the revived Unity Movement, has a central place in the programme of the Pan Africanist Congress and is, of course, the central plank of every 'Homelands' leader.

The Black Republic slogan has appeared in a number of guises but in different packagings. There is no doubt among socialists that majority rule means black leadership – this was stated as far back as 1919 when Ivon Jones stood trial in Pietermaritzburg for distributing leaflets in support of Bolshevism. But those working inside the AAC, the ANC or the PAC denied the class base of the struggle and accorded the working class a secondary position in the struggle. Indeed, they stayed with or resurrected the stage theory. The CP produced its own revamped stage theory when it adopted the idea of ‘internal colonialism’ – now refurbished as ‘Colonialism of a Special Type.’ It has become mandatory for all supporters of the ANC/SACP to accept this designation. Twist as they may as they try to justify their line, this requires support for a bourgeois democracy in which the black majority will have no redress for the exploitation to which they are subjected, and no substantial change in land allocation.

REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

Featuring a wide range of articles from the revolutionary Marxist movement which have been unattainable for many years or have appeared before in English translation.

Vol.2, No.3, Autumn 1989: The German Left: 1919-35

Subscription (Vol.2, 4 issues)

Back copies available

Surface Mail

UK £12, Rest of World £15.50

Air Mail

North Africa and the Middle East £ 21; USA and Latin America, South Africa, Canada and India £ 23; Australia, New Zealand and Japan £ 25

International Money Order or UK Cheques to Socialist Platform Ltd,
c/o Barry Buitekant, 111 Riverside Close, Mount Pleasant Hill, London E5.