LIBERATION STRUGGLE

HOW THE C.P. HAS MISLED THE BLACK WORKING CLASS

Since 1973 the confidence and militancy of the black working class of South Africa has grown dramatically, while the other bastions of white supremacy in Southern Africa — Mozambique, Angola, Rhodesia — have fallen or are clearly on the defensive. The strength and weight of the South African black working class indicates that the coming revolution in South Africa can take a clearly working-class character, and its repercussions can profoundly affect the whole of Africa. The apartheid regime, under the leadership of the new prime minister, P W Botha, is desperately manoeuvring to forestall revolution. But what of the necessary political leadership which the struggle against South African capitalism and its apartheid state will require? In this article, ROBERT DUPONT surveys, and finds wanting, the record of the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress.

THE RAPIDLY growing power of African unions has been a crucial feature of the upsurge in working class militancy in South Africa. The mass strikes in Natal in 1973, involving over 100,000 African workers, provided the major spark for this development.

In 1976, the political general strike centring around Soweto involved at least 100,000 Africans. Since 1973, the number of Africans taking part in industrial disputes has never fallen below 30,000 a year; in the previous ten 'quiet' years, the number never went above 10,000.

The struggles that have taken off from the Natal strikes have shattered the myth of apartheid's omnipotence as a weapon against the working class and of the impotence of the workers under the yoke of apartheid repression.

Since 1973, about 26 African unions, with a membership of well over 100,000 workers, and organised support far beyond that figure, have been established. This marks a major revival from the period following the Sharpeville massacre (1960), in which African unions were, with one or two exceptions, either repressed out of existence, driven underground with little organisational base, or brought under the dominance of state controls and a bureaucratic leadership.

The growth of trade unions and industrial militancy reflects the objective strengthening of the African proletariat, as the expansion of South African capital (especially in industry) in the 1960s, fuelled by foreign investment and the rising price of gold, produced, in addition to vast profits and the misery of the dispossessed Africans, its own potential grave-diggers in the African working class. On the subjective side, the industrial upsurge *reflects the striving of African workers to establish their own organisations and their own leadership, freed from dependence on the white and coloured aristocracy of labour and on the black petty bourgeoisie.*

This has meant a search by workers for independence from the dead hand of the Communist Party and of petty bourgeois nationalist movements.

The major union federation organising African workers today is FOSATU (the Federation of South African Trade Unions), which originated as TUACC in 1973 and has organised under its present title since 1978. FOSATU places great emphasis on rank and file organisation of workers round issues of immediate concern to them. It proclaims itself independent from any political alignment and particularly from the Communist Party and associated movements such as the African National Congress. This 'non-political' stance is certainly a serious mistake; but FOSATU is not a right-wing organisation, it does represent a live workers' movement, and an examination of the CP's history shows good reason for FOSATU's wariness. (A future article will examine the potential and the nature of FOSATU).

The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), led by the South African CP, is now certainly much weaker than FOSATU. Yet the ANC (within which the CP is influential) is the strongest organisation of the South African liberation movement. It has a substantial apparatus and well-established international links, especially with the black African states. Although there is controversy over the importance of the ANC's role in the Soweto events of 1976, its powerful influence on black activists in South Africa is not in doubt.

So why, since 1973, have militant black workers been turning away from the leadership of the CP? An examination of three important struggles — the African miners' strike of 1946, the mass strikes after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, and the ANC's turn to armed struggle in 1961 — will show why.

The historic strength of the CP among the workers lay in the fact that it had been one of the principal carriers of the flag of non-racial unionism, when a combination of state legislation, Afrikaaner nationalism, and the protective racism of skilled white workers was consolidating deep racial divisions within the South African working class. In 1925 the CP took over a leading role in the South African Trade Union Congress (SATUC), which organised white and coloured workers on an industrial basis and African workers in 'parallel' unions (in order to evade legal problems: this was immediately after the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act, which reinforced racial divisions by banning pass-bearing Africans from belonging to registered unions).

However, these unions came under tight bureaucratic control. And the CP was not quite alone in supporting non-racial industrial unionism. Solly Sachs, a leftist who was expelled from the CP in 1931, was leader of the Garment Workers' Union, which opposed the racially discriminatory provisions and bureaucratic controls imposed by the Industrial Conciliation Act, and managed for some time to hold on to both its Afrikaaner women workers (often poor women coming straight from the farms) and its African and coloured members. It too attempted to by-pass the law by setting up a 'parallel' union for African workers.

Sachs' union displayed a much higher level of militancy than most SATUC unions, but it largely succumbed in the 1930s, the victim of police repression, of a strident campaign of Afrikaaner nationalism, and of its own isolation within the trade union movement. SATUC survived the period intact. Thus when the upsurge of African workers' industrial militancy came during World War 2, the CP solidly dominated the field of non-racial unionism.

The CP (in conjunction with the ANC, which at that time was a petty bourgeois movement with little or no links with the African working class) had also set up the African Mineworkers' Union. During World War 2, the militancy of the African mineworkers reached a fierce peak. Most of them were migrant labourers whose families had to be left behind on the Reserves. The rapid decline in the productive base of the Reserves led to mass starvation of the miners' families, while the wages of the miners themselves were eroded by inflation and were only half the average industrial African wage.

The rank and file miners sought substantial wage increases to ward off starvation, and wanted to strike immediately at the mineowners and the state while they were made vulnerable by the war.

During the war there were over 60 unofficial and illegal strikes.

The CP and ANC leadership, however, persistently suppressed these movements, *putting the national war effort and the demands of 'legality' before the interests and survival of the workers.* For Stalinism, the Second World War was not an imperialist robbers' war, but a war of democracy (the Allies) against fascism (the Axis powers) — and South Africa, despite everything, was on the side of democracy.

It was the spontaneous action of the workers which finally initiated the massive mineworkers' strike of 1946, forcing the CP and ANC leadership to back them half-heartedly and without preparation, two days after the strike began. J B Marks, the president of the African Mineworkers' Union, warned the strikers "emphatically" against the use of violence. Otherwise all he did was to call on the industrial unions in CNETU (Council of Non-European Trade Unions, a reformed version of SATUC) to support the miners, but they, without any prior mobilisation or preparation, were totally incapable of following this call through. The strike was defeated, terribly and bloodily. The last-minute call for a CNETU general strike was a debacle.

South African capitalism was and is based on its own forms of barbaric racism, on the slave-like conditions of migrant workers, on the suppression of democratic rights for the mass of African workers. Strong sympathy for Nazism was expressed within the ruling class, especially among Afrikaaners. But the CP's disastrous 'leadership' of the mineworkers shows what Stalin's words really meant when he dissolved the Comintern in 1943: the dissolution would, he said, "facilitate the organisation of the common onslaught of all freedom-loving nations against the common enemy".

So the CP sought a "common onslaught" with the freedom-loving owners of the South African mines; with the freedom-loving state, whose police, it is estimated, killed 12 and wounded over 1200 strikers, and baton-charged the miners as they staged a sit-down strike underground, driving them up "slope by slope, level by level" to the surface and back to their compounds; and with the freedom-loving courts who put on trial the entire executive of the CP and scores of officials from the ANC, CNETU, and other trade unions. This attempt seriously undermined the independent workers' movement for years afterwards.

The class organisation and mobilisation of the African proletariat, which peaked in 1945-6, soon declined. By 1950 66 African unions had become defunct.

In the wake of the defeat, a much firmer alliance was formed between the ANC and the CP, as the ANC turned from the patient and dignified expression of the grievances of an African elite to a strategy of mass action and passive resistance, on a programme of democratic and nationalist demands. The CP and its worker-militants turned eagerly to this alliance.

In the mid-'50s, the African working class began to recover its momentum. SACTU was formed in 1955, at the initiative of the CP and the ANC, out of some of the remnants of CNETU. It soon gathered strength, on a basis of non-racial industrial unionism and the inseparability of economic and political struggle.

In practice, however, the alliance between the organised workers and their petty bourgeois allies in the ANC meant once again *subordination of the workers' struggles to the limits of the democratic and nationalist programme of the petty bourgeoisie.*

Programmatically, SACTU supported the Freedom Charter, adopted in 1955 by the Congress Alliance, of which the ANC was a key element. The Charter, despite its commitment to transfer the mines, banks and monopoly industry to "ownership of the people as a whole", is a non-socialist document which envisages a South Africa where "the people shall govern".

The ANC theorised the South African revolution as a struggle for national democracy, for national liberation of the oppressed African people and for full democratic rights for the black people of South Africa — *through the 'democratisation' of South Africa, and not through the seizure of power by the working class.* Until the turn to armed struggle in 1961, this 'democratisation' was envisaged as a gradual process of reform.

The 'election strike' of 1958 was an example. From the ranks of SACTU workers the call for a national strike was raised on the basis of demands for £1 a day minimum wage, shorter hours, trade union recognition, and an end to the pass laws (which bound workers to their jobs at the risk of expulsion). Their main slogan was "Asinamali, sifunamali" — we have no money, we want money.

The response of the SACTU leadership and of the CP was to channel this militancy into mass action for the coming elections on behalf of the United Party — the official opposition party, solidly bourgeois, solidly white-supremacist, differing from the ruling Nationalists only in secondary matters arising from the fact that the UP drew support more from the English-speaking whites while the Nationalists were primarily based on the Afrikaaners. The stay-at-home was scheduled for election day, with the slogan 'Nats must go'. The CP's leading underground theorist, Michael Harmel, called on the United Party to "meet the people's leaders" and to recognise "the justice of their demands", the necessity of a "democratic revolution", and the "anachronism" of the "traditional type of despotism".

The General Election became the focus of the campaign; demands for £1 a day and the abolition of pass laws were submerged. Not surprisingly, the response of the workers was poor, despite their industrial militancy, though in areas where there was local organisation based around demands for higher wages (such as the Durban docks), mass action

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did effectively take place.

After one day, Oliver Tambo, secretary of the ANC, called off the stay-at-home, declaring that "the purpose of the protest had been achieved" and that "the country was engaged in the serious question of choosing a government".

The ruling Nationalist Party increased their majority, the United Party did not shift an inch, Luthuli (the head of the ANC) called on the Nationalists to "mend their ways", and they responded by increasing their armoury of repressive legislation.

Although SACTU had pushed, against the ANC leadership, in favour of economic strikes, it was dragged, with CP backing, into impotent protest campaigns.

The next wave of working class mobilisation came in 1960 in the aftermath of the police massacre of Africans protesting against the pass laws at Sharpeville and elsewhere. In Cape Town, for example, strikes spread in the following weeks from one factory to the next, until practically the whole of the city's docks and industries was crippled. The workers, often armed with sticks and other weapons, took to the streets in huge numbers.

This momentum towards a general strike was diverted by the liberal wing of the ANC (Chief Luthuli) into a call for a day of "solemn mourning" for the dead. He stressed that this was not to be a strike, and asked the government to "allow" African leaders to meet, lest a "further deterioration in race relations" should occur. The nationalist, Christian ethics of Luthuli were not capable of taking the largely spontaneous actions of the workers — pass-burning, strikes and demonstrations — forward. But neither were the CP or SACTU; they supported the day of mourning.

The workers, however, pursued the struggle way beyond the plans of their leaders. The stay-at-home spread over the whole country. In Cape Town alone, over 60,000 workers were on strike, and, despite the arrest of 12,000 people by the police, something like 30,000 workers marched to the city centre — at that time, a maze of narrow streets — and for a short time it was practically in their hands.

The inexperience of their student leader, Philip Kgosana, defused the action, when he instructed the workers to go home in return for the promise of an interview with the Justice Minister and an assurance that the police would stop using force. He was arrested a few hours later.

It was inevitable that the strike would be broken; it was ill-prepared, and the ANC, the CP and SACTU gave no adequate leadership. They were incapable of raising the perspective of seizing political power, rather than just demanding concessions.

A week later, the leaders of the ANC were in gaol, the workers were exhausted and demoralised in the face of an onslaught of police repression, and the pass-burning demonstrations had now turned into queues for reference books. At this point of downturn, the ANC called hopelessly for a general strike, a call the workers were by now incapable of meeting.

The political leadership of the CP and ANC, and their organ of working-class organisation, SACTU, had proved incapable of building on the spontaneous upsurge in class consciousness and militancy, and of leading it forward to a perspective based on the independent power of the workers, that is, towards a general strike and towards bolder and bolder demands based on the logic of the workers' struggle. A revolutionary orientation would start out with democratic demands, but with democratic demands linked to a revolutionary perspective of overthrowing the white racist regime, a regime organically incapable of serious democratic reforms; and it would see democratic demands as only the first stage in the workers' mobilisation, understanding that the development of that mobilisation towards socialist demands and towards workers' power would be necessary to really win the democratic demands. In short, the revolutionary perspective would be the one outlined by Trotsky: "On the basis of the revolutionary democratic programme, it is necessary to oppose the workers to the 'national' bourgeoisie. Then, at a certain stage in the mobilisation of the masses under the slogans of revolutionary democracy, soviets can and should arise... Sooner or later, the soviets should overthrow bourgeois democracy".

In fact, such an orientation was passively but systematically blocked by the CP/ANC leadership, at the cost of a terrible hammering for the working class as the forces of repression duly reacted.

In the official histories, the turn to armed struggle after Sharpeville appears as the major step in the development of a revolutionary stance by the liberation movement, as it finally broke the bounds of legalism and non-violent protest.

After Sharpeville the ANC as well as the CP had been driven underground, and many militants were in gaol. SACTU, though not formally banned, faced intense repression. As a leading ANC theorist, Ben Turok, put it:

"The shootings at Sharpeville marked a turning point... [*They*] broke the belief that a non-violent solution was possible... and they destroyed any hope that the legal system could be used to halt police repression... The foundation for the transfer from non-violence to armed struggle was being laid".

However, from the point of view of the working class, this marked the end of its forward movement, and the beginning of a period of weakness and defeat, not to be broken for a decade or more.

The CP took the initiative, calling for a sabotage campaign that was taken up by the ANC. Their conception was one of an escalating programme of sabotage which, through the force of its example, would draw the support of the masses, culminating finally in the general strike. The Pondo uprising, a violent rural movement, nourished the hope that something like the Cuban or Vietnamese 'model' could be applied in South Africa.

In the conditions of South Africa, guerilla and armed struggle is a necessary front of revolutionary action. The creation of armed detachments is vital if the regime is to be prevented from prevailing simply through monopoly of armed force. But the ANC's turn to armed struggle was counterposed to, not linked with and subordinated to, the struggle of the black industrial workers. In typical Stalinist bureaucratic fashion, armed struggle was proclaimed as the only valid form of struggle.

The actual effect was to isolate the vanguard from the masses, to foster a passive, waiting attitude on the part of the working class. The power of sabotage to penetrate the state's fast-growing armoury of repression was vastly overestimated: the 90-day act led to a new wave of detentions, and the use of torture provided the state with information on resistance plans which led to the arrest of most of the experienced SACTU and ANC leaders.

By 1964, Umkhonto We Sizwe, the military arm of the ANC, had been routed by the political police. They had committed 193 acts of sabotage in this period, causing damage estimated at under £100,000. Since then, armed actions have continued in a very limited and sporadic way. The brave fighters of Umkhonto We Sizwe deserve our solidarity in their battles against the apartheid state, whatever our criticisms of their leaders. But the ANC's armed struggle

"A victorious revolution is unthinkable without the awakening of the native masses. In its turn, that will give them what they are so lacking today — confidence in their strength, a heightened personal consciousness, a cultural 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 the whites or brotherly relations between the two races — depending mainly on 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.

Insofar as a victorious revolution will radically change the relation not only between the classes but also between the races and will assure to the blacks that place in the state that corresponds to their numbers, thus far will the social revolution in South Africa also have a national character.

We have not the slightest reason to close our eyes to this side of the question or to diminish its significance. On the contrary, the proletarian party should in words and in deeds openly and boldly take the solution of the national [racial] problem in its hands.

Nevertheless, the proletarian party can and must solve the national problem by its own methods.

The historical weapon of national liberation can be only the class struggle. The Comintern, beginning in 1924, transformed the programme of national liberation of colonial people into an empty democratic abstraction that is elevated above the reality of class relations. In the struggle against national oppression, different classes liberate themselves [temporarily] from material interests and become simple 'anti-imperialist' forces.

In order that these spiritual 'forces' bravely fulfill the task assigned to them by the Comintern, they are promised, as a reward, a spiritual 'national-democratic' state..."

LEON TROTSKY,
On the South African Theses, 1935.

now obviously made no sense according to its original rationale: to rapidly provoke a revolutionary crisis. It made sense only as an effort to show, for the benefit of the ANC's diplomatic connections, that the ANC has a viable armed apparatus.

Since the 1960s, with the rise of independent black African states and the increasing isolation in Africa of South Africa, it has become possible for the ANC to see the road to success in terms of maintaining a political and military apparatus (often through great heroism on the part of its militants), establishing diplomatic links, and trying to bring about the collapse of the apartheid state through international pressure. Whatever the chances of success for this strategy in its own terms, it clearly leaves no room for the leading role of black working-class self-mobilisation and self-organisation.

After 1961, the turn to armed struggle hived off the best worker militants. Instead of organising workers at the point of production, they were sent away from the factories for external military training. They ended up either in exile or, on their return to South Africa, in the hands of the police — and the workers ended up destitute of leadership or organisation.

It was SACTU's specific role to act as a feeder for this operation. This was the substance of the politics with which it sought to link its economic and trade union demands, and this was the tragedy behind the heroism of its militants.

While it is true that the state can only be overthrown by armed struggle, this struggle cannot be successfully conducted in isolation from the mass of the people; and the arming of the people in heavily-proletarianised South Africa requires the organisation of the working class. And for success in the armed struggle, the forces of reaction must be in disarray; that can only be achieved through the organisation of the working class and its mobilisation for industrial action and particularly for fighting mass strikes.

But after a few years of armed struggle, many of the most capable and militant activists of the ANC, the CP and SACTU were in exile, in prison, or dead. The political work of the ANC inside the country was virtually destroyed, after it had devoted its energies to gathering financial support for Umkhonto We Sizwe; and the trade union organisations sank to their lowest ebb for years. By 1968 the organised sections of the black working class numbered only about 8,000, the lowest figure for 40 years, and only 56 strikes were officially reported. Meanwhile South African capitalism enjoyed a period of tremendous expansion and foreign support.

The extent to which the CP failed to recognise or to attempt to rectify this situation can be seen from the major planks of its political programme in this period. It continued to believe, against all the evidence, that a "revolutionary situation" was present in South Africa in the '60s. It founded this belief on two assertions: the disillusionment of the masses with constitutional forms of struggle, and their readiness to respond to a call for violent struggle.

The evidence actually pointed to the contrary: demoralisation, disorganisation, disillusion with the armed struggle and scant eagerness to respond to the calls made by their leadership (witness, for instance, the failure of the call for mass protest made by the ANC in 1961 in favour of a 'National Convention' — a completely irrelevant demand — and then the failure of their call for a three-day strike in favour of a 'democratic' change of government).

The CP solved the discrepancy between their position and reality by the idea that *the armed struggle itself could actually create a revolutionary situation*, where none previously existed. The ANC stated, in 1969:

"Does this mean that before an actual beginning can be made by the armed challenge we have to wait for the evolvement of a deep crisis in the enemy camp...? Certainly not! We believe that... the actual beginning of armed struggle or guerilla warfare can be made and having begun can steadily develop conditions for the future all-out war which will eventually lead to the conquest of power".

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In the politics of protest dominant in the '50s, the working class was seen not as a vanguard, but as a mass resource used by the leadership to mount pressure for political concessions. In the period of armed struggle, the working class was basically left to fend for itself, as its leadership moved into exile or isolation. The tasks of building up working-class organisation, and of mobilising for fighting strikes, were put in the background.

This bureaucratic strategy has been responsible for the decline of SACTU's base among the African workers of South Africa. By its own admission, SACTU now possesses — with one or two exceptions — almost no organisational base inside South Africa. Even the African Food and Canning union, with its long history of CP leadership, appears to be drawing closer to FOSATU and formulating joint policies with it.

SACTU operates largely as an exile organisation, located in London, where it produces the paper *Workers' Unity*. Its lack of entrenchment in South Africa is shown clearly by the abstract character of the paper's articles.

SACTU was driven underground under the weight of extremely severe repression, but, in spite of courageous work by individual militants, there is little evidence to suggest that its underground network has much bodily existence, and it appears to have played very little part in the growth of trade union organisation since 1973.

Its main impact has been a propagandist one through the newspaper: but its formally correct policy of combining economic and political struggles has stayed at an abstract level, avoiding the question of the *substance* of the politics.

SACTU's position has an obvious and immediate attraction for militants who wish to avoid the reformist pitfalls of non-political, economistic trade unionism; it has indeed won over in the last few years the best elements of the solidarity movement here, and it has led many to a non-committal or even hostile stance towards the 'overground' unions, as inherently reformist and incapable of leading African workers forward in the overall struggle against apartheid. But the course of the class struggle and the increasing marginality of SACTU to it have sharply demonstrated that the actual content of SACTU's politics, subordinated predominantly to the CP, has not offered an independent way forward for the South African working class. Quite the contrary: it has subordinated the interests of the workers to those of the petty bourgeoisie. A *failure to organise* workers at the point of production around specifically working class issues, and *subordination* of the immediate struggles of workers to the national campaigns of the ANC and the CP, have contributed to SACTU's decline, as they contributed to the decline of workers' movements in the 1960s.

Militant African workers in the current struggles are beginning to grasp the lessons. So must activists in this country engaged in solidarity work.