



Umkhonto We Sizwe fighters

The ANC and its strategy

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.

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, Afrikaner 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 Afrikaner 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. JB 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.

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".

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 "stope by stope, 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.

Subordination

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 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 Afrikaners. 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 Durban docks), mass action 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 were 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



ANC exiles in Mozambique

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 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.

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 repres-

sion... 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.

Necessary

In the conditions of South Africa, guerilla and armed struggle may be a necessary front of revolutionary action. The creation of armed detachments may be 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 soon 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 changes 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 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 1969, the organised sections of the black working class numbered only some 16,000 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.

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.

Despite this the ANC and the South African CP unquestionably remain major forces in the liberation movement. In the recent period their politics and strategy have been carried forward by the UDF.

The ANC called a conference, its first since 1969, on June 16-23 1985, and declared a change of gear in its campaign.

In the 1960s the ANC and the SACP argued that South Africa was in a revolutionary situation, or at least that a revolutionary situation could rapidly be provoked by the guerilla struggle. Over time they gradually shifted into a longer-term perspective of guerilla harassment and international boycott to wear down the regime.

The June conference declared that the situation is again revolutionary and "the end of apartheid is near".

"We should step up our all-round political and military offensive sharply and without delay", said the conference communiqué. "The masses of our people have been and are engaged in a struggle of historic importance directed at making apartheid unworkable and the country

ungovernable. They are creating conditions for the escalation of our attack leading towards the situation where it will be possible for us to overthrow the apartheid regime."

The ANC called for a full-scale armed uprising, and urged black police and soldiers to turn their guns against their masters.

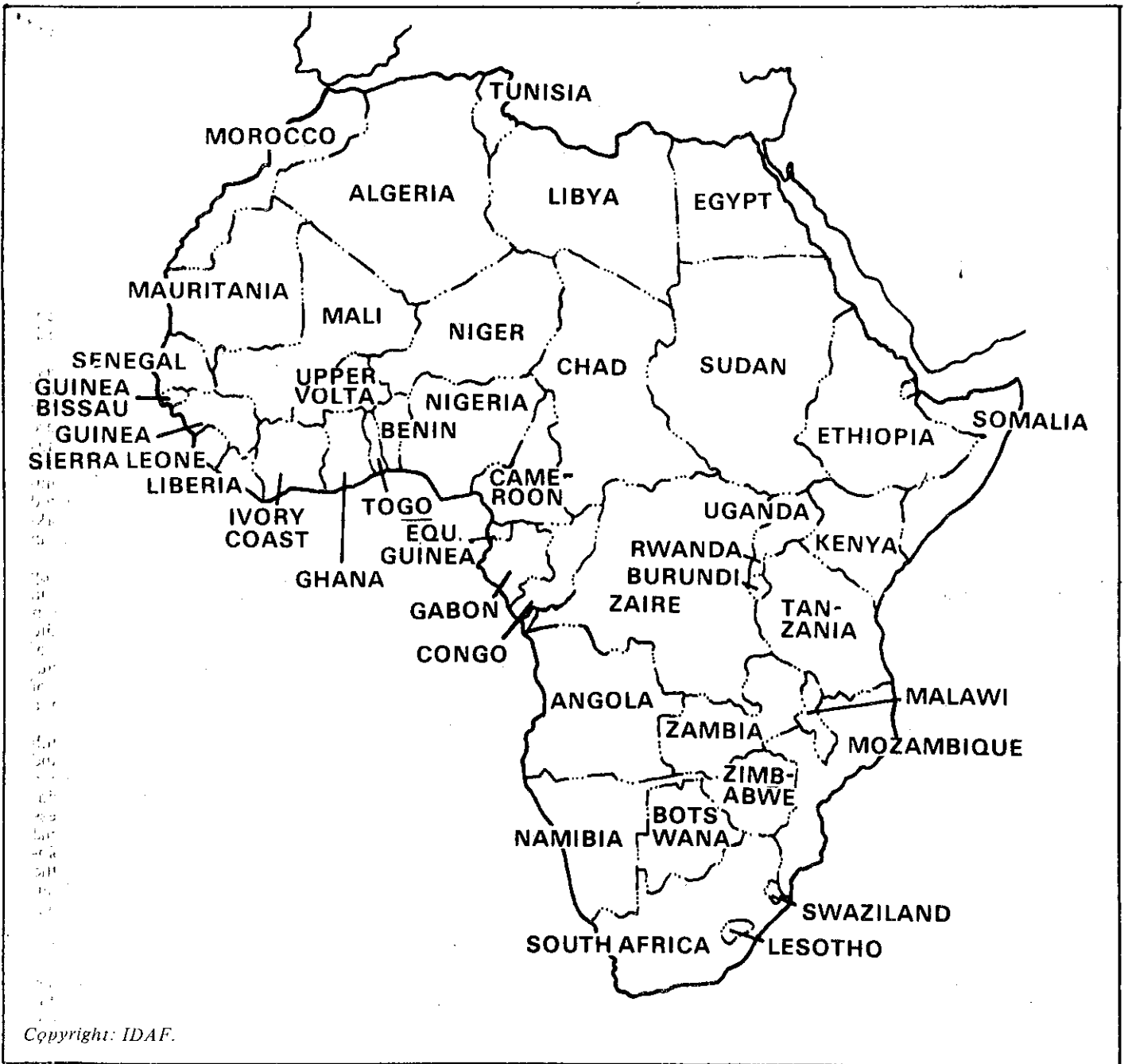
Boycott

It appears, however, that the ANC is not yet strong enough to organise a full-scale armed uprising. In fact its tactics concentrate on such things as a boycott of black township councils, to try to make South Africa ungovernable.

Such a stance has dangers. Repeated calls for revolution when the revolutionary forces are not able to put them into practice can demoralise the working class while alienating undecided middle-class people. A tragic historic example of this is the experience of the Italian Socialist Party after World War 1.

The country was in turmoil. The Socialist Party called repeatedly for revolution but was unable to do much about it. Towards the major struggles actually going on — the factory occupations in Turin — it was cool, regarding them as 'syndicalist' or 'economistic'. The result was that the factory occupations were isolated and eventually defeated; the working class became demoralised; and the alarmed middle-class soon put Mussolini into power.

As Rosa Luxemburg argued in relation to the Russian Revolution of 1905 (see pages 9-10), and as the experience in South Africa today shows, a period of revolution does not exclude the struggle for reforms and economic concessions, but boosts it. The ANC's current strategy therefore has a danger of cutting across the real logic of the class struggle, imposing instead an abstract confrontation between democracy and apartheid. It is both ultimatum in its relation to workers' immediate struggles, and limiting in relation to the objectives of a full workers' mobilisation.



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