

Close to revolution

South Africa is close to revolution. In August 1984 elections for the powerless new Coloured and Asian assemblies were convincingly boycotted. Despite repression, the meetings and rallies of the boycott campaign became the start of a big mobilisation.

The first big violent clashes were on September 3, during protests against rent rises in black townships. Many of the occasions on which police have opened fire since then have been at funerals of victims of previous repression.

On September 17 black gold miners struck — legally — for the first time. But hundreds of miners were wounded when police attacked strike meetings.

On November 6-7 there was a 48 hour general strike in Transvaal against rises in rents and electricity and water charges. The police followed up by arresting South Africa's leading black trade union leaders.

In March 1985, police opened fire on a peaceful funeral demonstration at Langa. According to official figures they killed 19 blacks, but the unofficial count was around 45 dead.

At the end of April, two gold-mine companies — Anglovaal and Anglo-American — sacked, respectively, 300 and 14,400 black miners for unofficial strikes against victimisation of union activists.

After talks with the union, the companies said they would take some workers back, but the rest were deported to Bantustans or neighbouring countries.

General strike

In May Andries Raditsela, an executive member of one of the main non-racial trade union groups, FOSATU, was injured so severely in police detention that he died one hour after being released. FOSATU called a one-day general strike in protest.

By June some 300 blacks had been shot by police. In July large-scale clashes between police and blacks spread to Soweto, until then relatively quiet.

On July 20 the government declared a state of emergency, and 119 people were immediately arrested. The police were empowered to arrest anyone without a warrant and hold them for 14 days.

Trade unions have played a central part in the struggle. There have been dozens of strikes, on issues ranging from the planned New Zealand rugby tour through civil rights to victimisations and pay.

As we go to press, the biggest black union, the 150,000 strong National Union of Mineworkers, is due to start a strike in the gold mines over pay.

The regime and the capitalist class have been under severe pressure since the dramatic Soweto uprising of 1976. They have tried to combine limited reform with crushing repression.

In 1981 a labour law reform was initiated which extended the legal sphere of operation of black trade unions. Trade unions with African members had been

legally excluded from the official industrial relations system in 1953.

Now the state intended to control and incorporate trade unions by subjecting them to an official framework. But the result of these reforms has been a considerable strengthening of the movement.

Some employers decided to try to come to terms with the unions. The black working class upsurge that started in 1973 showed no sign of ending, and to deal with unions would be better, as one manager put it, than to try "to negotiate with 1500

workers on a football field".

The giant Anglo-American corporation gave the NUM recruiting facilities in its mines.

The employers, like the government, were disappointed. It was the same Anglo-American that sacked 14,400 striking miners this April.

In 1983 the government announced its constitutional reforms. It set up a tripartite parliament, one house for whites, one for Asians and one for Coloureds. Africans were not included on the ground that

There are three main forces in the movement against the white racist state.

The United Democratic Front is a coalition of 645 affiliated groups and claims a membership of over two million.

Taking up the banner of the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela, it is formally a non-racial grouping and has attracted a number of leading liberal figures like Bishop Tutu to its ranks.

It has not managed to win over the bulk of the organised working class, however.

Most of the unions reckon that any independent working class voice would be lost if they became just another few of 600-odd groups in the UDF, with no adequate structure to ensure that their organised strength was not swamped by middle-class groups.

While cooperating with the UDF on particular actions, they have not affiliated, and on occasions they have clashed with the UDF when it seemed to be making ill-considered calls for strike action over the heads of the unions.

The second of the major liberation forces within the country is that centred around Black Consciousness and the National Forum. The main group within this circle is AZAPO.

Within this grouping there is a wide diversity of views, ranging from black separatism on the nationalist side to socialists and Trotskyists on the working class side. There is no ban on whites joining, but anti-whiteness co-mingles with its greater emphasis on socialism.

What links its various threads together is, partly, a common negative opposition to what they term as 'charterism' — emphasis on the ANC's South African Freedom Charter which they tend to think of as contaminated by liberalism; and partly a common commitment to non-cooperation with

or boycott of all state institutions.

This has strained their relations with most of the trade union movement, which naturally work within as well as outside official structures of negotiation.

A flavour of what separates them from the UDF can be gained from their respective handling of the visit by US Senator Edward Kennedy.

The UDF acted as Kennedy's host and expects much from his support for the sanctions campaign in the States. The National Forum boycotted Kennedy and on a number of occasions blocked him from speaking.

There is no love lost between supporters of the UDF and of the National Forum. Several killings and firebombings have been reported.

The third major force inside South Africa is the black workers' trade union movement. This movement is divided partly by political and partly by organisational differences.

Unaligned

Politically, the influence of the UDF and of the National Forum is strong in some unions, but the vast bulk of the movement is unaligned and espouses either trade union "independence" (with a more or less strong syndicalist bent) or allegiance to a working class political movement yet to be formed.

The unions collaborated with the UDF on the stay-at-home in the Transvaal in November, but after that there was considerable criticism from within the ranks of FOSATU (the largest trade union federation) that workers had not been adequately consulted prior to the action — and that the leadership was behaving too much like a middle class nationalist leadership, calling on workers to do this and that but not involving the workers in planning or decision-making.



Photo: International Defence and Aid Fund for South Africa (IDAF)



Squatters evicted

Africans already had their own self government in the Bantustans. At the same time, the government consolidated the power of the state executive and military and put off the next general election until at least 1989.

The elections for the Coloured and Asian assemblies were successfully boycotted in August 1984.

The government also extended its scheme for black local councils, which include Africans. These too were boycotted and collaborating black councillors have been a major target for demonstrators during recent unrest.

By late July five councillors had been killed and 147 had resigned. Only two councils out of 38 were functioning.

The first group of 120 black 'peace officers' graduated in Soweto in May to serve under and protect the councillors. Considerable financial and patronage incentives have been put in the way of black councillors as inducements to volunteer. But the government is not finding it easy to find candidates.

More recently the Mixed Marriages and Immorality Acts, which banned marriage and sex between individuals of different 'races' have been repealed. The pass laws have been relaxed, to allow for easier movement for qualified blacks within the white urban areas, and to allow for easier access for blacks to the black urban townships.

Halt

A right to hold freehold tenure in urban areas has been conceded to Africans. There has been a temporary halt to all forced removals of black people from zones designated as 'white' and a permanent halt to forced removals for about 700,000 potentially threatened blacks.

South African citizenship is to be granted to Africans living in the Bantustans. The law banning representatives of one 'racial' group from interfering in the political affairs of another (which for example, meant that Asian representatives were not permitted to discuss white

affairs, etc.), has been repealed.

Neither these reforms, nor the bloody repression, have yet achieved their aims. On the contrary: the reforms have increased blacks' self-confidence, the repression has increased their active anger.

The regime still has substantial strength. Despite some (mostly diehard ultra-racist) dissent, it has fairly solid support among whites, about 16% of the population.

It has a huge machinery of repression. Between 1961 and 1981 South Africa increased expenditure on its armed forces 40-fold. The paramilitary South African Police was increased from a strength of

27,000 to 77,000; the South African Defence Force, from 79,000 to 515,000.

Compulsory conscription for adult white males was introduced in 1967. Call-up periods were extended in 1977 and 1982.

South African governments have long sought to foster divisions not only between black and white but also between different black groups — between Africans, Coloureds (mixed-race), and Indians, and between different language-groups of Africans. Since the early 1950s they have tried to develop, through the Bantustans, a group of black stooges to help them police the African population.

Their success has been limited. Most of the new black-based trade unions define themselves as non-racial. The United Democratic Front is multi-racial. The other main component of the mobilisation against the regime, the black consciousness movement, defines 'black' to include African, Coloured, and Indian without distinction.

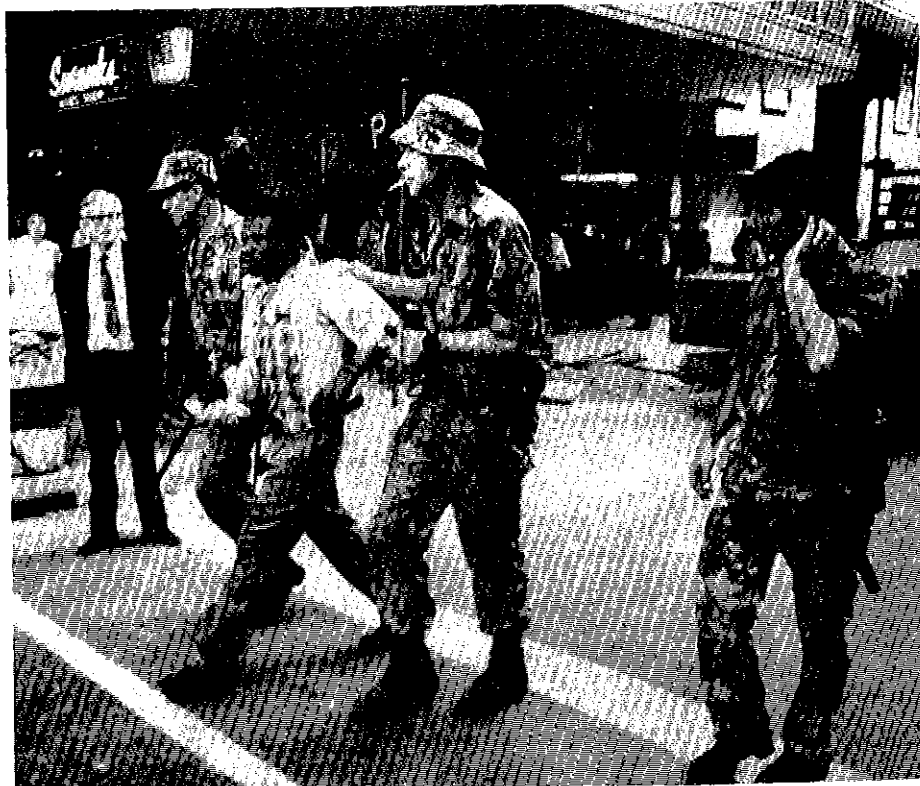
But there are divisions and problems. In Natal, Chief Buthelezi, chief minister of the KwaZulu homeland, leads the Inkatha movement with some support among Zulus. In early August this movement played a role in riots in Durban where numbers of Indians were killed by Africans.

In Port Elizabeth some militant black youth have been known to attack black trade unionists, considering them to be 'collaborators'.

Coherent

Five per cent of the South African Defence Force strength (as of 1981) is black, but over 20% of operationally deployed forces. Almost 50% of regular South African Police (excluding reserves) are black. These black soldiers and police could be an Achilles heel for the regime.

But the vast, sprawling black revolt needs a coherent leadership and strategy. Otherwise it could splutter out in heroic but uncoordinated rebellions, or even turn in on itself in recriminations.



Arrest in downtown Johannesburg



Photo: IDAF