

before and around 1917. Though the specific circumstances are very different, the general method used by Marxists in Russia can be illuminating for South Africa.

The Russian Marxists faced a capitalist society; but not just any capitalist society. Russia was under the semi-feudal rule of the Tsar (Emperor) and his nobility and bureaucracy.

Some people thought that the growth of capitalist industry would almost automatically lead to capitalist liberalism overthrowing Tsarism. At some point after that first stage would come a second stage in which the working class overthrew capitalist liberalism.

Lenin and Trotsky rejected that view. While being willing to ally with the liberals for any real struggle, they placed no faith in them at all. The liberals' hostility to Tsarism was much more feeble than their fear of the working class.

So Trotsky (and eventually Lenin)

looked to a working-class revolution to overthrow Tsarism.

But that perspective did not mean neglecting the democratic, 'anti-Tsarist' issues, or dissolving them into a general socialist programme. On the contrary: land to the peasants, a Constituent Assembly, an eight-hour day, were the leading slogans.

Trotsky argued that the working class could and should take the lead on the basis of those democratic slogans. But it would do so according to the tempo and the logic of the class struggle, not of any abstract scheme. Direct class issues would intertwine with the democratic issues at each turn. When the working class triumphed, it could do so only on the basis of its own programme: working class rule, public ownership of industry.

While fighting for this perspective, Trotsky did not deny other possibilities. It was possible that the working class, having smashed the old order, would see its

victory confiscated by the bourgeoisie and turned into a merely 'democratic' revolution. It was conceivable that the ruling class — spurred on by, and attempting to pre-empt, revolt from below — would transform the system from above, albeit in a limited, bureaucratic, way.

Likewise in South Africa. South African capitalism's profits are based on the system which reduces black people to cheap labour devoid of rights. If progress depends on the feeble proposals made every so often by South African big business for some liberalisation, then it will be a very long time indeed coming. South African capital needs the racist system.

But capital does not always get what it needs. The black workers are and must be the driving force of the struggle against white supremacy; they will conduct that struggle by the rhythms and methods appropriate to their own class interests, combining it with their own direct class demands, and fighting for a victory which will merge a democratic and a socialist revolution. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the flexibility of capitalism.

That mistake was already made by many South African leftists in the 1970s, when they underestimated the new non-racial unions or condemned them as 'economistic' and 'reformist' because they thought that the apartheid state could not possibly allow genuine non-racial unions to exist for any time at all.

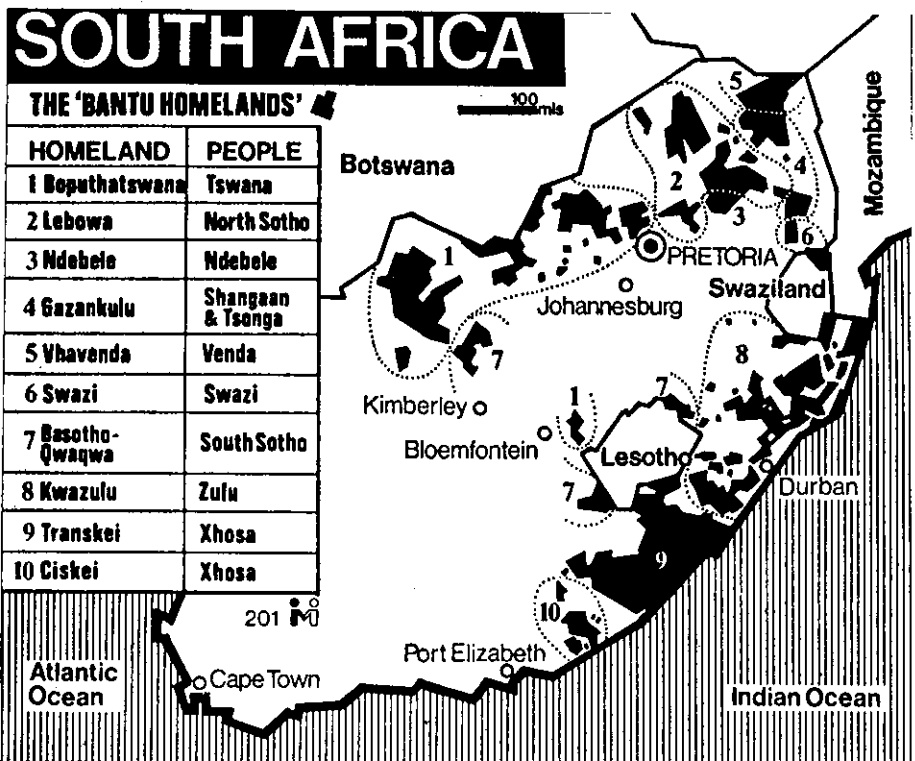
The state did not tolerate the unions out of generosity. But it was forced to let them develop.

There are a number of possibilities now other than socialist revolution or total defeat.

Since the 1970s especially a small but real middle class has developed in the black townships.

The overthrow of white supremacy could be followed by the black middle class establishing their rule and suppressing the black workers. Or, under extreme pressure, the white regime might reform itself drastically and manage to stabilise that reformed version by use of repression.

Both the CP theory of 'two stages' and the scholastic theory of socialist revolution or nothing fail to grasp the reality of what is happening now or the range of possible outcomes.



A black republic

In this extract from a letter to South African comrades, Leon Trotsky discussed the 'two-stage' strategy for South Africa, and the slogan of a Black Republic. (From Trotsky's 'Writings', 1934-5).

The South African possessions of Great Britain form a dominion only from the point of view of the white minority. From the point of the black majority, South Africa is a slave colony.

No social upheaval (in the first instance, an agrarian revolution) is thinkable with the retention of British imperialism in the South African dominion. The overthrow of British imperialism in South Africa is just as indispensable for the triumph of socialism in South Africa as it is for Great Britain itself.

If, as it is possible to assume, the revol-

ution will start first in Great Britain, the less support the British bourgeoisie will find in the colonies and dominions, including so important a possession as South Africa, the quicker will be their defeat at home. The struggle for the expulsion of British imperialism, its tools and agents thus enters as an indispensable part of the programme of the South African proletarian party.

The overthrow of the hegemony of British imperialism in South Africa can come about as the result of a military defeat of

Great Britain and the disintegration of the empire. In this case, the South African whites could still, for a certain period — hardly a considerable one — retain their domination over the blacks.

Another possibility, which in practice could be connected with the first, is a revolution in Great Britain and her possessions. Three-quarters of the population of South Africa (almost six million of the almost eight million total) is composed of non-Europeans. 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 Afri-

can 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.

Weapon

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 — with the unavoidable reference to Lenin's formula: "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry".

When the theses say that the slogan of a "black republic" is *equally* harmful for the revolutionary cause as is the slogan of a "South Africa for the whites", then we cannot agree with the form of the statement. Whereas in the latter there is the case of supporting complete oppression, in the former there is the case of taking the first steps toward liberation.

We must accept decisively and without any reservations the complete and unconditional right of the blacks to independence. Only on the basis of a mutual struggle against the domination of the white exploiters can the solidarity of black and white toilers be cultivated and strengthened.

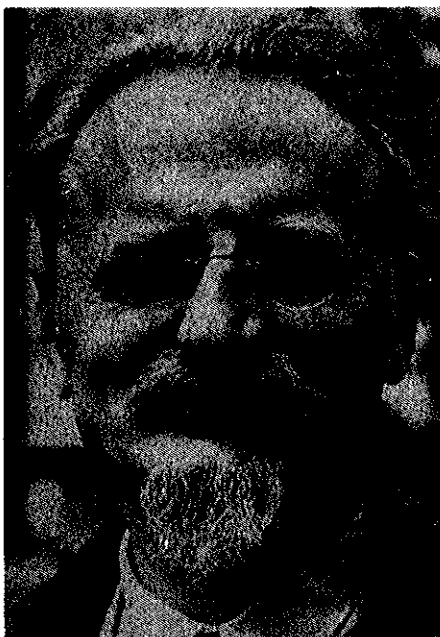
It is possible that *after victory* the blacks will find it unnecessary to form a separate black state in South Africa. Certainly we will not *force them* to establish a separate state. But let them make this decision freely, on the basis of their own experience, and not forced by the *sjambok* (whip) of the white oppressors. The proletarian revolutionaries must never forget the right of the oppressed nationalities to self-determination, including full separation, and the duty of the proletariat of the oppressing nation to defend this right with arms in hand, if necessary.

The theses quite correctly underline the fact that the solution to the national question in Russia was brought about by the October Revolution. National democratic movements by themselves were powerless to cope with the national oppression of

czarism. Only because of the fact that the movement of the oppressed nationalities, as well as the agrarian movement of the peasantry, gave the proletariat the possibility of seizing power and establishing its dictatorship did the national question as well as the agrarian find a bold and decisive solution.

But the very conjuncture of the national movements with the struggle of the proletariat for power was made politically possible only thanks to the fact that the Bolsheviks during the whole of their history carried on an irreconcilable struggle with the Great Russian oppressors, supporting always and without reservations the right of the oppressed nations to self-determination, including separation from Russia.

The policy of Lenin in regard to the oppressed nations did not, however, have anything in common with the policy of the pigones. The Bolshevik Party defended the right of the oppressed nations to self-determination *with the methods of proletarian class struggle*, entirely rejecting the charlatan "anti-imperialist" blocs with the numerous petty-bourgeois "national"



Leon Trotsky

parties of czarist Russia (the Polish Socialist Party [PPS — the party of Pilsudski in czarist Poland], Dashnaki in Armenia, the Ukrainian nationalists, the Jewish Zionists, etc., etc.).

The Bolsheviks have always mercilessly unmasked these parties, as well as the Russian Social Revolutionaries, their vacillations and adventurism, but especially their ideological lie of being above the class struggle. Lenin did not stop his intransigent criticism even when circumstances forced upon him this or that episodic, strictly practical, agreement with them.

There could be no question of any permanent alliance with them under the banner of "anti-czarism". Only thanks to this *irreconcilable* class policy was Bolshevism able to succeed in the time of the revolution to throw aside the Mensheviks, the Social Revolutionaries, the national petty-bourgeois parties and gather around the proletariat the masses of the peasantry and the oppressed nationalities.

"We must not," say the theses, "compete with the African National Congress in nationalist slogans in order to win the

native masses". The idea is in itself correct, but it requires concrete amplification. Being insufficiently acquainted with the activities of the National Congress, I can only outline our policy concerning it on the basis of analogies, stating beforehand my readiness to supplement my recommendations with all the necessary modifications.

1. The Bolshevik Leninists put themselves in defence of the Congress, as it is, in all cases when it is being attacked by the white oppressors and their chauvinistic agents in the ranks of the workers' organisations.

2. The Bolshevik-Leninists place the progressive over the reactionary tendencies in the programme of the Congress.

3. The Bolshevik-Leninists unmask before the native masses the inability of the Congress to achieve the realisation of even its own demands, because of its superficial, conciliatory policy. In contradistinction to the Congress, the Bolshevik-Leninists develop a programme of revolutionary class struggle.

4. Separate episodic agreements with the Congress, if they are forced by circumstances, are permissible only within the framework of strictly defined practical tasks, with the retention of full and complete independence of our own organisation and freedom of political criticism.

The these bring out as the main political slogan not a "national democratic state" but a South African "October". The theses prove, and prove convincingly:

a. that the national and agrarian questions in South Africa coincide in their bases;

b. that both these questions can be solved only in a revolutionary way;

c. that the revolutionary solution of these questions leads inevitably to the dictatorship of the proletariat, which guides the native peasant masses; and,

d. that the dictatorship of the proletariat will open an era of a soviet regime and socialist reconstruction. This conclusion is the cornerstone of the whole structure of the programme. Here we are in complete agreement.

Slogans

But the masses must be brought to this general "strategic" formula through the medium of a series of tactical slogans. It is possible to work out these slogans, at every given stage, only on the basis of an analysis of the concrete circumstances of the life and struggle of the proletariat and the peasantry and the whole internal and international situation.

The proletariat of the country consists of backward black pariahs and a privileged, arrogant caste of whites. In this lies the greatest difficulty of the whole situation. As the theses correctly state, the economic convulsions of rotting capitalism must strongly shake the old barriers and facilitate the work of revolutionary coalescence.

In any case, the worst crime on the part of the revolutionaries would be to give the smallest concessions to the privileges and prejudices of the whites. Whoever gives his little finger to the devil of chauvinism is lost.

The revolutionary party must put before every white worker the following alternative: either with British imperialism and with the white bourgeoisie of South Africa or with the black workers and peasants against the white feudalists and slave owners and their agents in the ranks of the working class.