

# Black opposition: an historical perspective

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*This is the third part of Mr Lodge's paper delivered to the AGM of the Johannesburg Black Sash in April 1978. Parts 1 and 2 appear in Vol. 20, Nos 3 and 4*

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## Random popular movements

World War II brought with it an expansion of South African industry, a sharp increase in the black urban population, a doubling of food prices and a severe decline in social conditions as locations became more crowded. It also stimulated a revival in African trade union action and the first successful instances of direct action by black workers.

In 1942 the Johannesburg City Council refused to implement a 60 per cent rise in the wages of its unskilled employees. Municipal workers immediately went on strike and the rise was awarded within a day. More dramatic and no less successful were the Alexandra bus boycotts of 1943 and 1944 when thousands of people refused to pay fare increases and walked 18 miles to and from work. In 1943 the bus companies gave in after nine days. In 1944 the boycott endured seven weeks before employers, prompted by the fear of a general strike agreed to subsidise the old fares.

Perhaps the most interesting popular movement of all were the squatters of Orlando who, faced with intolerable living conditions, moved out to occupy municipal ground, building shanties out of wood, sacking and scrap metal. They did more than build shelters — they evolved their own administration, their own social structure. And they refused to move: it was better that they died together than return to the homelessness and desperate overcrowding of the sanctioned African urban areas.

These were not organised activities; they were spontaneous expressions of the popular will. They were symptomatic of the same desperation that underlay the mood of the 1946 miners' strike; a strike that was to help create a synthesis of political and class action.

In 1941 an African Mineworkers' Union was formed with J. B. Marks, an African communist, as its president. It grew to have 25 000 members. After rejecting its demands the government banned gatherings of more than 20 people on mining ground. The AMU was compelled to operate illegally. In the immediate post-war austerity period black mine rations were reduced in quality and quantity. Miners protested and in March 1946 police attacked a group at Modderfontein East,

leaving one dead and 40 wounded. The AMU called a conference which was attended by 2 000 delegates. They formulated a set of demands including a minimum 10 shillings wage increase, provision of family housing, paid leave, repeal of the gathering ban, and recognition of the union. A strike was planned for August 12.

The strike began with 50 000 workers responding to the AMU call, affecting 32 of the Rand's 45 mines and closing down eight. Fighting began when strikers attacked police escorting scabs. The struggle between police and workers lasted for two days. In that time nine miners were killed and 1 248 were hurt. The police succeeded in forcing the men back to work though it took 2 000 of them to do it. The strike was one of the biggest in South African history.

The strike was defeated but it prompted a qualitative change in the nature of African politics. As the Smuts government had refused to intervene, the ANC withdrew its support from the Native Representative Council.

## Convergence of white and black left

The ANC was changing due to the disillusion of the war years combined with a new insistence on African rights inspired by the Atlantic Charter. The younger generation of ANC intellectuals, the members of the Youth League, were thinking of new methods of political struggle — and they were the methods of the mass movement: boycott, strike, civil disobedience and non-cooperation with the authorities.

Another important development in the 1940s was in the attitude of the Communist Party which was shifting towards the nationalist movement. The convergence of the white left and the nationalist was a slow and tortuous affair, and it was far from complete when the CPSA was dissolved in 1950. But it did foreshadow the formation of a formal alliance in 1953 between white radicals in the Congress of Democrats and the African National Congress.

## The stay-at-home

Arising from this conjuncture between the class and national struggle was the adoption of a new tactic: the stay-at-home, inspired by the general strike. It was a weapon more suited to

the expression of political and broad-ranging economic demands than the issues arising out of the work-place. Its use in the early 1950s and later from 1957 in the £1-a-day campaign marked an important development in black labour history: the emergence of a political trade union movement, the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

*The stay-at-home seemed a formidable weapon:* on several occasions during the 1950s the Congress movement was able to organise one-day general stoppages that affected most industrial centres. It was organised, not at the workplace, but rather in the location, where the industrial worker was more easily accessible to the political activist. The stay-at-home involved less risk of victimisation — employees could always claim that they were intimidated into staying away from work.

But the weapon's strength was revealed as illusory. Industrial strikers have a certain immunity: their struggle is centred at the work-place. Employers will often resist violent police efforts to expel them for fear of damaging machinery. In the case of the stay-at-home the police will go from house to house systematically driving the people back to work

### Passive resistance

It was the Indian leader, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who introduced the concept of passive resistance into South African politics at the turn of the century. Gandhi came to South Africa in 1893. In 1906 the Transvaal government made passes compulsory for Indians in the province. Gandhi led the resistance to this measure: Indians met at the Empire theatre and took the *Satyagraha* oath, swearing they would not apply for registration certificates and that they would passively resist all attempts to enforce them.

The response to Gandhi's call was almost universal despite the heavy prison sentences that that were imposed. The government compromised by saying that registration would be voluntary but this failed to satisfy the Indian community who began to burn their passes. The Transvaal government tried to deport Indians to Natal but they immediately returned. By 1913 the government took a harsher line, with the annulment of all non-Christian marriages and the imposition of a £3 poll tax. The Indians continued to resist, women as well as men joining in the protest *marches and submitting to imprisonment*. Indian coalminers went on strike in sympathy.

By this time the passive resistance movement had succeeded in evoking foreign pressure on the Union government. The South Africans gave way, the poll tax was dropped, the legal status of non-Christian marriages restored and the pass laws repealed. Passive resistance had achieved a victory if only because it aroused the concern of powerful external interests.

It is important to understand something of Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* has

various translations, 'soul force' and 'truth firmness' being the two most commonly used. Gandhi saw passive resistance as a means of securing justice through personal suffering. It involved a complex attitude to the law: laws which were unjust did not impose a moral obligation of obedience, but they did require a willingness to undergo the penalty for breaking them. The suffering he or she underwent was supposed to provide the mechanism for change, for it would provoke a change of heart in authority which, through its sense of justice and compassion, would be moved to conversion by witnessing the suffering of its subjects.

*Satyagraha* depended on a degree of cooperation between resisters and oppressor: the police were to be advised and warned in advance of any protest. Bitterness should be avoided, for the conversion of authority should be on a moral level and hence should not require his humiliation. There were elements of *Satyagraha* in African opposition, particularly the emphasis on non-violent, disciplined mass protest.

In 1913 the women of the Orange Free State were ordered to carry passes. The women refused and for seven years they continued to resist the order to the extent that in one town the prison became so full that no more resisters could be imprisoned. When fines were imposed as alternatives to prison sentences the women refused to pay them. Their resistance was so unanimous and so persistent that eventually it was recognised that it was impossible to apply the law and it was withdrawn.

The action coincided with an unsuccessful attempt by Transvaal Africans to fight the pass laws using passive resistance. On March 31, 1919, a deputation marched to the Johannesburg pass office and asked for the repeal of the law. The deputation was unsuccessful whereupon a huge crowd gathered behind the pass office and it was resolved that they should cease to carry passes and strike until the law was repealed. Over and over again the point was made that this was a non-violent protest and sticks and other weapons were taken away from people in the crowd by the meeting organisers.

The meeting then broke up and people fanned out through the townships collecting passes. Police began to arrest the organisers, many of whom were ANC members, and four days later they started to assault the groups of strikers which assembled in the streets. At this point many of the protesters lost their patience and began stoning whites. White civilians took it upon themselves to beat up Africans and fire upon Congress meetings. Altogether 700 Africans were arrested and after a month of tension the movement was smashed.

Futile as this protest was, it was significant as an early attempt to apply some of the principles of passive resistance. It also indicated an essential limitation of *Satyagraha* philosophy in

its pure form. Suffering willingly endured in itself was insufficient to prompt a melting of the authoritarian heart. Civil disobedience, to be successful, had to undermine the workings of the system — as with the women overcrowding the prisons of the Free State. A combination of the martyrdom implicit in *Satyagraha* and the more forceful sanctions imposed on authority by civil disobedience marked the passive resistance campaigns of the 1950s. In 1952 the ANC, in cooperation with the South African Indian Congress, began a campaign for the abolition of six unjust laws: the pass law, the Stock Limitation Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, the Group Areas Act, the Separate Registration of (Coloured) Voters Act and the Bantu Authorities Act.

The demands did not include any extension of direct political representation or full democratic rights. At a meeting in Durban the crowd was informed of the need for racial cooperation '... though the non-Europeans have all the Bible and the Europeans have all the land... we will not take it by force'. On the other hand some of the younger ANC leaders were more pragmatic: Mandela, for example, saw the campaign as a means to choke the system and make it inoperable: a kind of political 'work to rule'.

The campaign was intended to develop into a mass movement. Hence the laws chosen were carefully selected to appeal to different segments of the population — the 'coloured' community, blacks in rural areas, urban Africans, Indians. Between June and November 1952 more than 8 000 people marched into the white sections of post offices, deliberately infringed pass regulations, sat in 'European' station waiting rooms and surrendered themselves for arrest. Efforts were made to ensure that the process did not arouse tensions: where white facilities were occupied it was normally done in locations where whites rarely used them. Police were kept informed of any demonstrations in advance.

Most of the volunteers served prison sentences though magistrates would sometimes thwart their intentions by imposing fines or releasing them on technicalities. The ANC was quite emphatic that any violent reprisals against police action were to be avoided. However, riots did break out in East London and Port Elizabeth partly as a result of the police breaking up meetings by shooting at them. But the failure of the campaign to achieve its proclaimed ends should not be attributed to these outbreaks of violence but rather to the enormity of the task it had set itself.

What the campaign did achieve was the transformation of the ANC from a minority pressure group to a mass organisation. Moreover it also strengthened ties between Indian and African organisations and for the first time white South Africans participated in an African nationalist campaign. Liberals and left-wingers, including a Governor General's son, defied laws in Germis-

ton and Cape Town serving short prison sentences as a consequence. But there was no evidence of a change of heart by the rulers, only an increased determination to suppress any expression of African dissent.

The Pan Africanist Congress 1960 campaign against the pass laws, though similar in form, rested on a different strategic conception. Though attention was focussed on just one law the campaign was to be only the first of a 'never-ending stream' culminating in the establishment of an African government in 1963. The pass laws were seen as an important component of the core structure of apartheid. The refusal of blacks to carry passes and the voluntary submission to arrest were to be accompanied by a general stay-at-home strike which would compel employers to exert pressure on government to abolish the laws. However, the PAC did stress the necessity of cooperation with the police and non-violence.

The remarkable thing about the PAC campaign was its degree of success in terms of popular mobilisation. Though the Johannesburg townships remained relatively quiet, Robert Sobukwe and his comrades walked to the police station without their passes, and there was an unprecedented scale of opposition in the Cape. Undaunted by the killing by police of more than 80 people at Sharpeville the strikers in Cape Town (who included most of the black work force) held out for over two weeks. For here the PAC had created a significant following among the section of the black community most cruelly affected by the pass laws — the migrant workers.

March 30 was to witness a huge demonstration of between 15 000 and 30 000 men who marched to central Cape Town from Langa and Nyanga. The events in Cape Town were to cause a temporary suspension of the pass laws. But the Cape PAC men were firm in their commitment to a peaceful strategy: the marchers were turned back and the Cape leaders were promised that they would be able to speak with the Minister of Justice. The townships were surrounded and policemen went from house to house forcing the Africans onto the streets and back to work.

Because the PAC lacked significant support in centres other than Cape Town and the Vaal triangle the Government was able to devote its attention to smashing the Cape resistance no less ruthlessly than (though admittedly not as bloodily as) at Sharpeville.

A successful passive resistance movement depends on several factors. First, the Government must be restrained by certain pressures: a sense of moral outrage, the power of foreign opinion, economic considerations, the inherent decency of its rulers. After the First World War there was little evidence that such factors were strong enough to moderate the behaviour of authority. Ideology gave a moral gloss to coercive measures that arguably served the needs of an expanding capitalist economy.

Second, passive resistance must involve a large

enough section of the community to make the laws impossible to implement: in South Africa the repressive machinery is so sophisticated that the degree of organisation needed to confront it was beyond the resources of African political organisations.

Third, it can be contended that the basis of the South African social system rests on injustice. Even the more moderate demands of African politicians would require an overall restructuring of society, a process no white government would undertake willingly.

The harsh reality is that while blacks limited themselves to constitutional protest, to isolated industrial struggles, to civil disobedience, they did not manage to present a serious challenge

to the *status quo*. They did not present to white South Africans the most urgent and compulsive reason for social reform — that of self-interest.

#### Note on sources and further reading:

Much of the material on which these articles are based was drawn from the two major studies of black South African political movements: Edward Roux's *Time Longer than Rope* and Peter Walshe's *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa*. The following readings might interest those who would like to follow up in greater detail some of the events discussed above. An excellent biographical essay on Sol T. Plaatje by Tim Couzens is to be found in the Heinemann (1978) edition of Plaatje's novel *Mhudi*. Philip Bonner's article on 'The ICU, a case of self-destruction' in *South African Labour History* (edited by Eddie Webster) is perceptive. Dan O'Meara's treatment of the 1946 African Mine Workers' strike (*South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol I, no 10). The standard account by Leo Kuper of *Passive Resistance in South Africa* has not been superseded by anything better: unfortunately it is banned. One of the major stay-at-homes is discussed in my article on 'The Cape Town Troubles' in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (April 1978).

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# Dear Sirs

## re: The Advocate-General Bill

Jill Wentzel

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*This letter to the chairman of the Select Committee on the Advocate-General Bill was written on behalf of the Black Sash. The subsequent legislation withdrew the most controversial clause in the Bill. However the Act still provides for serious restrictions on the freedom of the Press to report on matters of corruption or maladministration to be investigated by the Advocate General.*

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WE ask the Select Committee to recommend that the Government scraps the Advocate-General Bill and the basic thinking that goes with it.

The Bill, in itself dangerous to democratic stability, is unfortunately part of an undemocratic process now well advanced in South African political life: the process which leads public representatives to consider themselves above public criticism. In a proper democracy public office-bearers do not forget that they are public servants and by the very nature of their office subject to public scrutiny. Public representatives should not seek to prevent 'rumour-mongering': rather to protect the public's right to investigate whether or not this should result in rumour-mongering. It is for Cabinet Ministers to respect the public and its Press: not vice versa.

The Advocate-General Bill would have a debilitating effect on public life on two levels:

1 The Advocate-General Bill seeks to protect officials from public scrutiny and criticism and seeks to restrict Press freedom.

The Black Sash submits that the public have the right to be as sceptical of the Advocate General of any other public official. History has taught that unless the Press is free to investigate whatever aspect of public life it sees fit, abuses will not only occur but will proliferate.

The logical result of legislation such as the Advocate-General Bill (read with the Police Bill) is the recent incident in Maputo when a Brazilian economist, who uncovered corruption among top government officials, was ordered by the authorities to blame minor officials and was imprisoned, interrogated and accused of spying when he refused to do so.

2 The Advocate-General Bill would further generate an atmosphere in which the public feels remote from the process of government and comes to accept this remoteness. In such an atmosphere it is easy for any type of totalitarian ideology to take root. Fearing the 'communist onslaught' as it does, the Nationalist Government should beware of adopting the undemocratic attitudes of that ideology.

In this regard we urgently recommend that legislators avoid the use of phrases such as 'the safety of the State', and 'in the interests of State security': for this was the language of facism in Germany and Italy and is now the language of the Eastern bloc.

We therefore ask not only that the Advocate-General Bill be dropped but that the Government commit itself to a drastic rethink whereby it decides to promote and bolster the habits of democracy rather than destroy them.