

CONCERNING PEASANTS

By MARUTLE MOKGCHLWA

CONGRESS organisation in South Africa exists mainly in the towns. Sometimes it is forgotten that most of the African people live in the country. They are living in the Reserves, or on trust lands, or as agricultural labourers and labour tenants on farms owned by Europeans. Taken as a whole, the six million Non-Europeans engaged in agriculture are the most poverty-stricken and oppressed people in South Africa. The liberation movement cannot hope for victory without organising these people and winning them as allies. This has become an urgent, practical issue.

Twenty years ago it was not yet practical to think of mass organisation of peasants. Their conditions, on the whole, were better than they are now. There were numbers of peasants who owned herds of cattle, and quite a sizeable plot on which to plough, even on the European farms. Of course the size of cattle herds varied among different individuals, but at least peasants were able to own cattle and many did so.

Even if peasants did at that time join the African National Congress in great numbers, particularly in the Reserves, this was largely through the persuasion of their Chiefs. They contributed to the A.N.C. not shillings but cattle. But they did not yet understand their responsibilities as members of a movement fighting for national emancipation. They regarded their contribution to Congress as one would regard the fee he has paid his lawyer.

This attitude was a direct consequence of the policy of the Congress itself at that time, which was directed mainly, though not wholly, to testing in the Courts the validity of various regulations and laws as a principal means of "struggle." Even the leaders of the A.N.C. saw nothing wrong with the attitude of the peasants, but regarded their material sacrifices as a heroic effort. This was natural; because the need was mainly for money to pay lawyers and to meet organisational expenses. The Congress leaders never emphasised the role of the individual peasant as a soldier who has to pay for his emancipation not only with his cattle, but by his energy and even at the extreme his very soul. Hence, when history began to prove the utter ineffectiveness of legal actions in the Courts as a principal form of Congress activity, the peasants, like most Africans, started to lose confidence in the A.N.C. They began asking: What has happened to our cattle? and wondering whether they had not sacrificed them in vain, since no victory was to be expected. Further it must not be forgotten that the peasants were not individually

convinced of the need for organisation. Their support for the movement was largely through the Chiefs. That is why, when the Government began to attack the Chiefs in the movement, and many Chiefs left the Congress, the peasants likewise fell away from the movement. Easy methods do not pay in the struggle for freedom. It is true that Congress won victories in the Courts. But in the absence of any form of mass struggle by the people such "victories" are short lived. Particularly in the case of people like us Africans who have no legal status or democratic rights it only required Parliament to enact a few amendments to close the "loopholes" in the law and our "victory" was undone. The result was disillusionment and chaos, accompanied by severe setbacks to the movement. The history of the Congress fully bears out the correctness of these statements.

Meanwhile, the conditions of the peasants both in the reserves and on European-owned farms continued to deteriorate. As the farmers' desire grew for more wealth in the form of money, so likewise grew their desire for more cheap labour and their resentment of any African peasant owning his own cattle.

Hence, the farmers began to force their peasants to sell their cattle to them at give-away prices. Peasants who refused were subjected to such terror and persecution that they either quit the farm or accepted even worse terms than those previously offered. To quit the farm is no solution. A peasant who does this also finds himself, in the end, without cattle, as he drifts among hostile farmers with nowhere to go. He finds that he has jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Further, it must be remembered that while it is hard for a worker to wander about looking for a job, carrying his belongings on his shoulders, it is a thousand times harder for a peasant, with his children, wife, cattle, plough and all that he may possess, to wander about looking for a new place to settle.

The opening of the new mines in Rhodesia and the Free State, and the development of local industries in those countries from which large numbers of mine and farm labourers are recruited, have brought about a new and acute shortage of labour. The Government and the farmers are determined to force the peasants into a condition of pauperism, so that they may become helpless slaves of the Chamber of Mines and the rich farmer.

The persistent talk by the Native Affairs Department of cattle culling in the Reserves "as a measure to preserve the soil and improve the peasants' livestock" reflects a determination on the Government to destroy the African peasants' cattle so as to pauperise the peasants. Similarly, a few years ago, the prickly pear trees were destroyed by the European agricultural demonstrator, with the approval of the local Native Commissioner, in the district of Lydenburg (Sekhukhuneland). It was said that during the season the people were eating so many prickly pears that their buying capacity in the local European-owned store did not reach the usual level. Whatever reason was advanced the predominant idea was to get hunger, as the best recruiting agent, to drive these people into the mines and farms.

These and many other acts of persecution, such as the intensification of the pass laws to stop peasants getting jobs in towns and the reduction of the area of ploughing fields on the trust lands, have infuriated the peasants in the reserves and trust lands. There is growing resistance on the part of the peasants against the inhuman robbery of their land and cattle. The peasants are not taking these things lying down. It was not for nothing that Chief Sibasa of Sibasa was deposed and deported a few years ago, that the wife of the late Chief Mokoko of Matlala location in Pietersburg was deported to the Cape Province, or that Chief Mphahlele of Mphahlele location was deposed and deported.

On this question of cattle. Chiefs and people are unanimous. The Government's aim to turn the Chiefs into Government yes-men has not been altogether successful. Like all Africans, Chiefs still cherish the freedom which their forefathers enjoyed.

Nevertheless the centre of the social and political life of the rural Africans is more and more moving away from the Chieftainship and other tribal institutions. The same relentless pressure that drives more and more men and women to the towns for temporary periods of industrial or domestic labour, brings them at the same time under the enlightening influence of the urban working class. Moreover, the more the Native Affairs Department forces the Chiefs into the position of being its agents, the more the people lose confidence in them.

A new type of peasant is emerging in the countryside: able to understand the need for organisation and ready to fight and sacrifice for his land, his cattle and his rights. The pioneer of the kind of organisation the new peasant will build appeared in the 'forties—the Zoutpansberg Balemi Association which became a powerful body and waged many successful struggles until its leader, Alpheus Maliba, was deported from the Zoutpansberg.

In 1952 peasants in the trust land in the district of Nebo, Eastern Transvaal, met and collected money among themselves to send a deputation to the African National Congress. This deputation met the then acting provincial secretary Mr. Sello, in Johannesburg. (He has since been exposed as one of the so-called Bafabegiya and expelled.) They gave him £12 to send a Congress representative to the district. He decided to go himself, but lost his way and returned to Johannesburg without seeing these people. When the Nebo peasants heard what had happened they collected another £12 for his trainfare. This time, accompanied by Miss Mntwana, he did arrive and found a great gathering of men and women. Over two hundred joined Congress that day: there were not sufficient membership cards to enroll more. Moreover, they responded enthusiastically to a call to take part in the defiance campaign, which was then starting. Unfortunately Congress failed to keep up contact with these people.

Nevertheless, later the same year an unknown number of Nabo peasants defied the unjust law by ploughing more morgen than they were allowed. One man who twice defied thus was sentenced to four months prison at Middelburg, and was in addition forbidden to reap his mealies. So the year 1953 passed without food for his children.

Recently, when I was at home in Pokwani, I was told of a meeting which took place there: a meeting organised by ordinary people without even the approval of the Chief. At this meeting the peasants took the decision to fight against the cattle culling and against interference by the local Native Commissioner in the domestic affairs and marriage customs of the people. They demanded the abolition of influx control so as to allow them to go to any town to seek a job. Finally, they demanded land.

What impressed me deeply was not only the nature of their demands but, above all, the initiative shown by the ordinary peasants. On matters of great importance in their lives, no longer do they wait for a decision from their Chief. They press for a decision and even determine to go ahead without the Chief's approval.

This marks a very important change in the attitude of the South African peasants. History has proved to them that if they want the return of their land they cannot depend on their Chiefs but only upon themselves.

New peasants are growing up in our countryside: peasants who took part in the mine workers strike of 1946, May Day of 1950 and other struggles in the towns. Peasants like these are passing on their knowledge among their brothers, and they are a thorn in the flesh of the powers that be.

With such material as this, the time is long overdue for the building of a mighty peasants' movement in our country. It will prove to be not only a worthy partner in the liberation struggle, but an indispensable one. For it must not be forgotten that if, in the present struggle for national emancipation, Non-European workers and petty bourgeoisie are the head, the peasants are the backbone, without which no victory is conceivable.

Some people have asked: Since we have a Congress, why a peasants' organisation? The same people do not ask: If there is Congress, why trade unions? why teachers' organisations? Peasants, like workers, are a specific section of our community with specific demands and problems. Some of their immediate demands are:

- More land for peasants in the Reserves;*
- More morgen for ploughing in the trust lands;*
- No cattle culling in the Reserves and trust lands;*
- Better pay and legal protection for agricultural labour;*
- The right to seek work anywhere, without restrictions.*

These are some of the demands which peasants are ready to fight for. With the memory of Witzieshoek fresh in our minds, who can doubt that, properly organised, and supported by the democratic movement in the towns, our people in the countryside are ready to resist oppression and stand up for their right to live?

Urban Africans have close links with the countryside. Surely there is not one of us who does not long to see the unbearable burden of suffering lifted from our parents and our brothers and sisters in the platteland. Effective organisation of the peasantry into a genuine peasants' movement will not only serve to improve their lot, but will also raise to a higher level the entire struggle for national liberation and true democracy in our country.

Of course, difficulties stand in the road of the formation of a peasants' organisation. These are not only material difficulties and difficulties placed in the way by the Government and the Native Commissioners, but also the shortage of experienced personnel to guide and assist the peasants in organising themselves. At a time when repressive State action has imposed a critical shortage of experienced and tried leaders on our movements in the towns, this is a serious problem.

The solution of this difficulty does not lie in a policy of "wait and see," but in a bold determination to go to the people. The people, as in the past, will produce many leaders who are hidden among them. No solution is easy to get. All are, like our struggle, difficult. But, have we any alternative? The best allies of the workers and intellectuals in the towns are the peasants, but we must go to them and win them. Otherwise it will be found to our bitter regret that they have been misled and won over to the enemies of freedom.

The forthcoming Congress of the People provides the occasion for the building of firm ties between town and country; ties that can if consciously directed, lay a firm foundation for the mass organisation of peasants and the joint struggle of the millions of toilers of field and factory for land and bread, peace and freedom.