

THE STRIKE THAT FAILED

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EVEN now anti-Nationalists in South Africa wince when they think of General Election week. It appeared then that the lights were going out all over Southern Africa. The protest strike by non-White workers in the Union had collapsed, and the enemies of the African National Congress were already warming up for the death dance; the United Party had suffered a shattering defeat at the hands of the Nationalists, and the Labour and Liberal parties, in turn, had suffered a shattering defeat at the hands of the United Party; and, in Southern Rhodesia, a dismayed Sir Edgar Whitehead was announcing a general election, following his defeat by the apartheid-minded Dominion Party—in spite of a reckless election-eve message to voters that the territory might have to seek its salvation with the Union and not with the Black 'partners' in the north. The previous week, in the Union, the only two candidates in the Coloured elections in the Cape Province standing for full equality of the races (S.A.C.P.O.-backed Piet Beylveld and Piet Vogel) had lost disastrously to United Party candidates standing for 'White leadership'. All down the line, disappointed, angry anti-Nationalists were throwing up their hands in despair for humanity.

The black mood is passing, however. This, after all, is the twentieth century, and Africa, after all, has 180,000,000 Blacks. Life goes on. Necessarily, the 'agonizing reappraisal' goes on, too, within the A.N.C. as well as within the United Party. Who knows, the disaster of election week might mean the salvation of both. However, it is not this article's purpose to pose questions about the future of the United Party, or of the A.N.C., or of any other political group. Its purpose is to sort out some of the facts of election week, a bewildering week, in which the English-language Press in Johannesburg, preoccupied with the fate of the United Party, so far forgot its main function as to consign a revolt in Sophiatown, on its doorstep, to the sub-editor's spike, until the White man's elections had been completed. General Election week was not only a depressing week; it was an extraordinary week.

The protest strike, modestly called a stay-at-home, had been

conceived last year by the Congress movement: the African National Congress, South African Indian Congress, South African Coloured People's Organization, South African Congress of Democrats (Whites) and South African Congress of Trade Unions. It was on S.A.C.T.U.'s initiative, as the only multi-racial federation of trade unions in the country, that a joint committee had organized the National Workers' Conference in Johannesburg on March 16 which took the decision to strike. There was nothing unusual about the nature of the proposed protest: it had long been obvious that the non-White's most effective form of retaliation against White rule was to withhold his labour peacefully.

Apparently, the sponsors of the Conference had not anticipated that White South Africa would unite quite so efficiently against the strike. In fact, it was the most effective display of White unity witnessed in all the 10 years of Nationalist rule. It began with the Leader of the Opposition, Sir de Villiers Graaff, warning the A.N.C. not to strike and actually reproving the Government for not dealing with the situation more firmly; and it ended with the Prime Minister, Mr. Strijdom, promising to use "the full weight and authority of the State" against the demonstrators. Then, with polling day in mind, the politicians got to work. The Nationalists stumped up and down the country repeating monotonously that the United Party and the A.N.C. were allies, although no impartial observer could deny that the United Party was genuinely opposed to the projected demonstration—was, indeed, terrified of it.

Non-White workers soon learnt precisely what forces were ranged against them. Their employers, mostly United Party-supporting business men, called them in, and either appealed to their loyalty and good sense, or threatened them with pay cuts, demotions and even dismissal if they stayed at home. The employers urged their key workers to sleep-in on the Sunday night preceding election week, and a number agreed to do so. Further appeals followed by officials of United Party-controlled municipalities; by the United Party Mayor of Johannesburg; in broadcasts over the Orlando rediffusion service; by Cyprian ka Dinizulu to the Zulus; and, finally, by the South African Trade Union Council and one or two African trade union leaders.

So much for the appeals; then came the threats. The Minister of Justice said that if the demonstrators were hurt,

they should not "squel"; the Minister of Labour promised a "counter-demonstration" which would show the non-Whites what was meant by White supremacy; the Chief of Police, Major-General C. I. Rademeyer, promised stern action by the country's 23,000 police—he cancelled their leave and alerted them for election week duty; an announcement said that the Union Defence Force would be at hand, too; armoured cars made a coincidental appearance in the streets of Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth; several times in two weeks Special Branch detectives raided the offices of the A.N.C., the South African Indian Congress and other organizations in several centres, and seized documents; on the Cabinet's instructions, a special inter-departmental committee, headed by the Secretary of Labour and including the Director of Prisons and the Police, was set up—the presence of the Director of Prisons implying that the 'auxiliary labour force' which the committee was arranging would include convicts; and several persons were arrested for bill-sticking and for alleged incitement to strike—the police concentrating the arrests on Whites and Indians to prove Major-General Rademeyer's point that the Africans were being "misled" by non-Africans.

Meanwhile, the English-language Press was publishing reports of alleged disunity in the ranks of the A.N.C. One A.N.C. 'leader' quoted was Madzunya, a semi-Africanist*, who expressed his alarm over the proposed strike, although the previous week he had supported it at an A.N.C. meeting in Sophiatown. Another A.N.C. 'leader' quoted was Leballo, an even more notorious Africanist, well known for his anti-A.N.C. views. Other 'spokesmen' to whom the Press turned were P. Q. Vundla, who was expelled from the A.N.C. in 1955; Dr. William Nkomo, expelled from the A.N.C. in 1953 and a convert to moral rearmament; the Rev. W. S. Gawe, of the Cape A.N.C., who was misquoted, and later pledged his support for the strike; and the *World* newspaper, which has a Black staff but White owners. In the circumstances, one could sympathize with A.N.C. leaders who protested. "Let the newspapers deplore the strike, if they must; but please don't describe our enemies as our leaders!" Meanwhile, editorials urging the abandonment of the stay-at-home added weight to the views of

* The Africanists constitute the as yet small anti-White element in African politics. Where the A.N.C. seeks inter-racial co-operation in what it considers essentially a struggle for democracy, the Africanists revert to a Black racialism perilously tribal in character and objectives.

the above-mentioned 'spokesmen.'

Confronted by this extravagant propaganda, Chief Albert Lutuli, President-General of the A.N.C., felt obliged to summon a Press conference hastily in Johannesburg on the Saturday before election week, where he stated that the A.N.C., as the most important of the political groups involved, was going ahead with the strike, that there would be no intimidation of workers, and that the entire demonstration would be peaceful. He made it plain, too, that there would not be a nation-wide strike: the strike would be called only in those areas where success was feasible; in all other areas, local conditions would determine the nature of the demonstrations. Where there was no stay-at-home, there would be processions, deputations, etc.—but five days later the Minister of Native Affairs banned all gatherings of more than 10 Africans in most urban centres.

Monday morning arrived, and White South Africa waited anxiously for its non-White labour force to arrive to man the machines, run the errands, drive the lorries, mix the mortar, make the tea. A huge sigh of relief went up when the before-dawn trickle of non-Whites turned into its usual swollen stream. A few hours later, at a Press conference in Johannesburg, the President of the South African Federated Chamber of Industries, Mr. Leslie Lulofs, communicated the good tidings: a 95 per cent. attendance on the Rand; more than 90 per cent. attendance in Port Elizabeth and Durban; a slight drop in attendance at factories in Industria (Johannesburg); normal passenger traffic on the Railways; a slight falling-off in the number of Africans leaving Sophiatown after 7 p.m. ("apparently there was some intimidation"); and "some absenteeism" in the milling industry.

It turned out, however, that this account of the strike was not wholly correct. Congress sources in Durban claimed that the strike was up to 40 per cent. successful in some areas, and Congress sources in Port Elizabeth said the strike there was also up to 40 per cent. successful. Whatever the validity of these claims might have been, they indicated at least that the strike in those two centres had been somewhat more successful than the employers were prepared to admit. In several other parts of the country, smaller groups of non-Whites went on strike. No mention was made of them at the Press conference.

Most of the events in Sophiatown between Monday and Wednesday were concealed from the White electorate. Trouble began in this vibrant township at about 4.30 p.m. on Monday,

when Africans, returning from work, were dropped off at the depot in Toby Street and left to make their way home unescorted through the streets of the township. Adequate police protection had been promised for all workers, but at this critical moment there was not a policeman in sight. As the workers walked home, they were attacked by small gangs of Africans. Some were brutally assaulted. One of these assaults took place a few yards from where I was standing. The unfortunate African was hit on the side of the head with a half-brick and dropped like a log, his blood flowing onto the street. When the police arrived, they seemed more interested in obtaining statements and waiting for the arrival of reinforcements than in providing first-aid for the hurt African, who struggled onto his hands and knees and crouched in this position for some time, until someone brought him a glass of water. A little earlier, following a similar assault, the police had made a baton charge, mainly among innocent bystanders, the culprits having already left the scene. As the evening wore on, tension in Sophiatown increased. In Bertha Street, I saw a White constable lean out of an armoured van and take a swipe with his truncheon at a casual African bystander. He connected. The next night, I saw another White policeman in Sophiatown strike out at two Africans with a sjambok as his van drove past them. He connected, too, and as the van turned the corner one African was stripping off his shirt angrily to show the others the weal. There had been no apparent provocation.

By Tuesday morning, nearly the whole of Sophiatown was staying at home. According to reliable reports, the Putco buses carried *five per cent.* of their normal load. Sophiatown had not responded to the call by the A.N.C. executive on Monday night to admit defeat and call off the strike. It was angry over what it called the 'let-down'. Many of the residents, too, having witnessed the events of the previous evening, were afraid of being assaulted if they went to work. By 1.45 a.m. on Tuesday, Coronation Hospital had admitted seven Africans (one with a bullet wound, the rest with stab wounds) and treated 33 others. One African was dead.

On Tuesday morning, too, the police had raided Sophiatown, arresting Africans for passes, etc. About 40 Africans had been arrested by noon—by Wednesday the figure had risen to more than 200. Sophiatown residents also alleged that, during that early morning raid, the police had burst into their homes,

demanding to know why they were not at work, and assaulting some of them. Throughout Tuesday, tension mounted, and a big police force of White and non-White police waited outside Newlands police station, sited between Sophiatown and Newclare, townships separated only by the Newlands main road.

At 5 p.m. on Tuesday, while waiting outside the Newlands police station, I saw White motorists arrive with smashed windscreens and dented mudguards. They had been stoned by Africans in the Newclare dip. One woman's face had been gashed by flying glass, and another man had been hurt. Nine cars in all had been stoned. The police dashed off in troop carriers and squad cars, with sten guns and batons. In the Newclare dip, a car had smashed into a pavement pillar, the driver apparently blinded by glass from his smashed windscreen. The police patrolled through the streets, while the inhabitants clustered in little knots or melted into the alleys next to their shacks. In this atmosphere of brooding trouble, Sophiatown and Newclare spent the three days of the stay-at-home, a solitary pocket of resistance.

The stay-at-home failed, but it is wrong to say that nothing was achieved. No White voter will ever go to the polls again without feeling the hot breath of the voteless African on his neck. The A.N.C., in fact, attained its objective of 'crashing in' on the White man's elections, even if only in a limited way. Also, the issues on which the demonstration was organized—£1-a-day minimum wage, anti-passes, anti-apartheid—remain as valid as ever in the eyes of the African.

Why did the stay-at-home fail, when the bus boycott and the June 26 protest strike were spectacularly successful? Apparently there was confusion in the average African's mind over the exact nature of the demonstration he was being called upon to make. He had been told that the intention was to dissuade White voters from electing another Nationalist Government; he had been told that the struggle was for £1-a-day; he had also been told that the demonstration was an anti-apartheid one. No doubt he supported each specific issue, but the trilogy of ideas was too complex.

Then there were the recent quarrels over the leadership of the Transvaal A.N.C., which had been hastily patched up, but which had left their imprint. A 'caretaker committee' was still exercising the functions of the Transvaal executive at the time of the strike. Clearly, too, the A.N.C.'s propa-

ganda and other resources were not adequate to cope with the White man's armoury of promises, threats and pressure. Further, it appeared that some of the more militant members of the A.N.C. had been carried away by the success of the bus boycott and the June 26 demonstration, and had over-estimated the readiness of the African people to embark on a more ambitious and complicated struggle. Finally—and this probably is the most important reason of all—the stay-at-home lacked the organizational preparation necessary for such an extensive project. The employers said frankly that they were able to handle the situation because they had had plenty of advance warning. Only a thoroughly organized demonstration, therefore, could have surged across the barriers erected by the employers and the authorities. This thorough organization was lacking.

The A.N.C. is busy now with its 'agonizing reappraisal'. One of its tasks is to meet the accusations of the Sophiatown group, who (to quote a foreign correspondent) "stuck it out with a desperate and at times angry sense of having been abandoned to carry on alone a demonstration of protest which was to have been nation-wide."

An even more important task facing the A.N.C. is to decide how it is going to oppose apartheid now that the Nationalists are back in office, more powerful and arrogant than ever.

Meanwhile, many Whites—among them, some so-called 'friends' of the A.N.C.—are declaring sorrowfully (?) that the A.N.C. is dead, or has been set back many years in its struggle. These Whites should consider whether the destruction of the A.N.C., or its leadership, is really what they desire. If the A.N.C. is destroyed, something else will take its place, and present indications are that the something else would be the Africanists, with their implacable anti-Whiteism. Then, in exchange for the present A.N.C. policy of non-violent progress towards a multi-racial society, South Africa would be confronted with a group whose policy would be violent progress towards Black *baasskap*.

White South Africa might not like the A.N.C.'s demand for race equality, but it should think twice before it sets about so eagerly trying to destroy it. The time might easily come when Whites will lament the good old days when Lutuli was the leader of African opposition and multi-racialism was its policy.