

Introductory essay:

THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST

Brian Bunting

If the aim of the apartheid regime in banning the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1950 was to put an end to Communist activity and the circulation of Communist ideas, the events of the succeeding years were to prove it wrong. The Communist Party itself was reconstituted in 1953 as the South African Communist Party (SACP) to distinguish itself from its predecessor, and began immediately to reorganise its ranks and to continue the work of propagating communism in the new condition of illegality.

The SACP did not however publicly announce its existence until the state of emergency was declared by the government after the police massacres of Sharpeville and Langa in 1960. The delay had been due to fears amongst some in the SACP leadership that a premature announcement might prejudice work in the liberation movement as a whole. But growing pressure from the rank and file of the SACP for a more structured system of propagating communist policies led to the publication in October 1959 of *The African Communist* in cyclostyled quarto form. Under the heading "This Magazine" the journal stated:

"This magazine, *'The African Communist'*, has been started by a group of Marxist-Leninists in Africa, to defend and spread the inspiring and liberating ideas of Communism in our great Continent, and to apply the brilliant scientific method of Marxism to the solution of its problems. It is being produced in conditions of great difficulty and danger. Nevertheless we mean to go on publishing it, because we know that Africa needs Communist thought, as dry and thirsty soil needs rain."

In its editorial "The New Africa - Capitalist or Socialist?" the journal stated: "We know capitalism in Africa. We have seen it and suffered under it. Under capitalism, the land, the natural resources and the industries, built up by the hands of the workers, belong to private owners and companies. Each owner is producing not for the public good but for his private profit. He pays as little wages as he can and wants to take as much as possible for himself

"Socialism is different. All the means of production - the land, the mines, factories and so on - belong to the people as a whole. Production is planned. The aim is to see that everyone gets food to eat, clothes to wear, houses to live in. The aim of production and of society is to see that people are happy and comfortable, that they are highly educated and cultured... Socialism means the end of exploitation."

The 28 pages of the journal were devoted mostly to themes of Africa and no indication was given that it might have emanated from South Africa. An article "Marxism - The Science of Change", written by Toussaint, coupled South Africa with Algeria as the only two African countries where substantial Marxist parties had developed but was otherwise purely a discussion of dialectical and historical materialism, with quotations from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.

An article "Uganda - a Survey", written by G.M., was followed by an article "Problems of the African Revolution", written by George Maxwell. Whether G.M. was the same as George Maxwell and whether they were both pseudonyms was left to the reader's imagination. Maxwell's article stressed that the bourgeoisie had fulfilled their historic role in the African revolution and could not carry it any further. The time had come for Communist parties to be formed in every country to bring about the hegemony of the working class in the African revolution.

Maxwell's comments raised an issue which is still a source of controversy today. The Editorial Board of *The African Communist* welcomed the article as a thoughtful contribution" with "many true and important passages", but stressed: "Our view is that the principal task of these (Communist) parties in the present historical period is to take part in and strengthen the national united front, together with the peasants, the patriotic intellectuals and the democratic sections of the national bourgeoisie, in order to win and secure political independence, as well as to institute a radical programme of land reform and economic development which will make independence a reality. In a word, to use his (Maxwell's) expressive phrase, to carry through the African revolution."

This view is consistent with the position of the SACP today that the alliance of the SACP with the ANC and COSATU is an essential condition enabling the majority of the population to be mobilised for the achievement of the national democratic revolution and ultimately socialism.

The second issue of *The African Communist* was published in April 1960 in the same guise as the first, but the Third issue in September 1960, in the wake of the announcement of the existence of the Party during the state of emergency, openly proclaimed that "*The African Communist* is published in the interests of African solidarity, and as a forum for Marxist-Leninist thought throughout our Continent, by the South African Communist Party." As the Party was still illegal, the journal stated that all correspondence and subscriptions must be sent to the London agent Mr Ellis Bowles, 52 Palmerston Road, East Sheen, London S.W.13. Copies of the journal would be sent to any part of Africa for is 6d (British postal order) each or 10s a dozen.

For the first time the journal published an article directly related to South Africa entitled "The Agony of South Africa" dealing in detail with the circumstances surrounding the Sharpeville massacre. The article was written by A. Lerumo, later revealed as a pseudonym for Michael Harmel, a leading SACP theoretician and editor of the journal. From that time onwards *The African Communist* has served as the official organ of the SACP, appearing quarterly and circulating not only in South Africa but also as a means of communication with Communist Parties and like-minded organisations and individuals throughout the world. When times were propitious its circulation reached the 20,000 mark.

The first few issues of *The African Communist* were produced and distributed by the Editorial Board operating from Johannesburg, but circumstances changed when the leadership of the Party were forced to translocate first to London and then to Lusaka following the Rivonia arrests and the imprisonment of so many of their personnel. The material for publication throughout the period of exile remained in the hands of the Editorial Board, subject of course to the overview of the Party leadership, but support on the practical side was now available from many quarters, particularly the socialist countries. The German Democratic Republic, for example, arranged for the printing and worldwide circulation of the journal after receiving the master copy of each issue which had been printed and proof-read in London.

The office of *The African Communist* in London was the only open centre of Communist Party activity anywhere in the world, and was besieged by visitors from all quarters wishing to make contact with the Party or to undertake discussions. The role of the Party in the liberation process was the subject of intense interest both from friends and enemies, and the apartheid agents who had succeeded in bombing the ANC office in London also had plans to bomb the office of the AC, but for some reason did not carry them through. Documents captured by the British police investigating a separate issue revealed the existence of a death list headed by Oliver Tambo and Joe Slovo on which the names of myself and my wife Sonia, who managed the AC office, also figured. From that time onwards our office was under the protection of Scotland Yard, but Sonia said all policemen looked the same and she never knew which of the personnel she spotted in the street outside the office were friends or foes.

From the time that I arrived in London in exile in 1963 I served on the AC Editorial Board, writing articles from time to time under various aliases, the most common of which were Peter Mackintosh and Z. Nkosi. After the death of Michael Harmel I was appointed editor of the AC in 1972 and remained in that position until 1990 when the ban on the Party was lifted and all operations were transferred to South Africa, where they rightly belonged. My wife and I remained in London for some months to clear up political and personal business and returned to Cape Town to carry on our political work in 1991.

As editor of "*The African Communist*", I was assisted by an editorial board whose membership varied from time to time but comprised some of the leading figures in the South African Communist Party. Among those I can remember are, in addition to myself, my wife Sonia who managed the journal's London office (in fact the only office of the SACP anywhere in the world), Rusty Bernstein, Alan Brooks, Mzala, Francis Meli, Ronnie Kasrils, Joe Slovo, Essop Pahad. Party members passing through London would sit in on the committee from time to time. The committee would meet regularly to discuss the political situation and the need to commission articles and also the suitability of articles submitted for publication, as well as the reaction to issues of the journal from the readership.

Much to my regret, there is no list of pseudonyms, most of which after all these years I have forgotten. We should of course have recorded them as we went along, but, not thinking of history or posterity, we just didn't. Among those I do remember are Ray Simons - R.E. Braverman and R.S. Nyameko; Essop Pahad - Ahmed Azad; Ronnie Kasrils - A.N.C.Kumalo; Rusty Bernstein - Toussaint; Jack Simons - Terence Africanus; John Hoffman - Dialego; Joe Slovo - Sol Dubula; Alex La Guma - Gala; Michael Harmel, A. Lerumo; Brian Bunting, inter alia Z. Nkosi and Peter Mackintosh. Thabo Mbeki was also a contributor though I have forgotten his pseudonym. There are a number of others whose pseudonyms call up certain pictures in my mind but of whose true identity I cannot be certain. And of course I wrote the vast majority of the editorial notes.

I regarded as my primary duty as editor the need to present and, if necessary, defend the policy of the South African Communist Party. At times I have been called a hard liner, but my response to that is that we operated in the atmosphere of the cold war and particularly in the West were subjected to a continuous barrage of criticism, hostility and downright misrepresentation. Nor was the policy of "*The African Communist*" my personal property but the outcome of intensive discussion not only on the editorial board but amongst as wide a section of party members as it was possible to engage at any time. Within those limits I never published anything in which I did not believe. I never published a lie, although at times we, and not merely I, could have been mistaken and indeed sometimes ignorant of the truth.

I aimed as editor to address myself to the membership of the Party as a whole and to make the journal as accessible as possible. I tried to ensure that the language was as simple and straightforward as possible, and that the journal was capable of being as widely read and appreciated as possible. I was always conscious of the scrutiny of the members of Umkhonto we Sizwe in the bush as well as the intellectual in his study and hoped that every issue would have something to please everybody. Our circulation figures prove, I think, that on the whole we succeeded.

The editor of *The African Communist* since 1991 has been the Deputy Secretary General of the SACP, Jeremy Cronin.