

SEARCHLIGHT SOUTH AFRICA

THE END OF A SERIES

It is with some regret that I announce that this issue of *Searchlight South Africa*, the twelfth to appear since we commenced publication in September 1988, will be the last. The effort required to produce the journal has proved to be too much for those who were connected with it and there have been 'casualties'.

Nonetheless, in closing the journal formally I have not come to dismiss our work and, contrary to Shakespeare's Mark Anthony, must state openly that I have come to praise it for what we achieved.

From the outset the editorial board set out to discuss developments in Southern Africa and, true to our aims, we confined ourselves largely to discussions of events on the sub-continent. We wrote about events as we they unfolded, we reinvestigated crucial events in the history of labour struggles and we looked at the careers of men and women who had been active in or had written about South Africa. Although many of the historical events and persons had been important in their day, most were unknown to our readers – or so poorly described elsewhere that they were misunderstood. I believe that through our writings we were able to raise new questions and offer answers to place these people in a new context.

The problems we all faced in our presentations arose from the late development of South African radical historical writings – and we could only dent the surface of studies that are in need of reinvestigation. Obviously, we were not the only writers involved in re-examining aspects of South African history and, although different, made no claims to being unique. We rested on a tradition which extends back to the journal of the Workers Party of South Africa, the *Spark* (1935-39), edited by Clare Goodlatte (the 'Red Nun'), Paul Koston and Y Burlak, and the writings of members of the Forum Club in the early 1950s including Kenneth Jordaan of whom more is said below. I believe that our journal contained articles that can claim to be both different and revealing. They have been widely quoted and will be referred to by others for some time to come.

Our progress has not been easy. The journal was banned and could not be freely distributed in South Africa – the excuse, from the censor's office, being that some official had misinterpreted our London box number, which had the initials BCM. This, they said, meant that the journal was produced by the Black Consciousness Movement. If that was the truth it was absurd and it was reprehensible. We were quite

obviously anything but supporters of Black Consciousness. I go further: whatever our criticisms of the BCM (not the box number) there was no reason to ban any of its publications. The ban on our journal was eventually lifted but it did prevent many from reading *Searchlight South Africa* and, besides the loss of money to ourselves, we resented the silencing of the journal in South Africa. Our partial satisfaction came from the news that photocopying machines worked overtime reproducing articles.

I will return to some of the works published below, but must first refer to those articles which set us apart from almost every paper across the world which carried articles on Southern Africa.

In 1989 we were informed by members of the *Workers Press* that former members of the Namibian nationalist movement Swapo (South West African Peoples' Organisation), then visiting Great Britain, had been victims of an arbitrary purge of members by their movement's security department, had been arrested and were then transported to prison camps in Angola. There they had been kept captive for five and more years in pits six foot deep. Interviewed by Paul Trewhela and Roman Eisenstein, they told a harrowing story of false arrest, spurious accusations, imprisonment without trial and degradation at the hands of their captors. This was a story that threw light on the liberation movement that grew out of the then South West Africa, confirming our belief that most such movements, if not all, were not to be trusted politically. A later article in issue No 11 showed further that the treatment of these women and also those in other liberation movements was reprehensible.

It was not hard to anticipate that similar stories would emerge from the ANC and its armed forces, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). Stories had been circulating for many years of the meaningless escapades that led to the loss of lives of the men who had joined MK. Consequently when we heard of the mutiny in Umkhonto in 1984 and of the exposures by five men who had managed to reach Kenya we sought them out for an extended account of their part in the mutiny. In the unravelling of this story Paul Trewhela played an outstanding role, encouraging the writers, arranging for their pleas for assistance to be transmitted to Nelson Mandela (then visiting Great Britain for the first time since his release from prison), and trying to get some of the major British newspapers to print extracts from their article. Trewhela's subsequent articles on ANC activities in exile, with the imprisonment of dissidents in Zambia and elsewhere, will stand as a high-water mark in the exposure of illegal actions by Congress leaders.

Trewhela also wrote about the trial (or mistrial) of Mrs Mandela. In a trenchant article he examined the events surrounding the so-called 'Mandela football club' and provided an analysis that differed radically

from stories that appeared in the left press. Once again we were different – but have been proved correct.

The story we printed helped lift the lid on that event and was widely read in South Africa. One Zulu-language journal *Um Afrika*, translated the article and carried it in full, but elsewhere the account was photocopied and widely circulated. We had also learnt of similar (or even worse) events in the Pan Africanist Congress, but never found first-hand internal accounts of what had happened. The draft chapters of a book, written by a member of their organization but pulped after libel action was threatened, contained too many circumstantial accounts to warrant its reproduction in our journal.

From our first issue, where we referred to events in the first three decades of the century, we made it clear that we were not talking about colour or ethnicity in South Africa but were concentrating on unravelling the relationship between social classes in the country. While we were opposed to every form of oppression in South Africa, our aim was to show the *class* nature of that repression. We started off with accounts of the activities of Ivon Jones (the man who moved socialists towards communism during the First World War) and of Frank Glass, the first person to declare his allegiance to the Left Opposition (or Trotskyism). We followed up by reprinting the 1928 Moscow statement by SP Bunting -- leading communist in South Africa – in his attempt to stop the communist movement's slide into colour politics. Bunting's attack on Bukharin in 1928, when he opposed the move to make the CPSA adopt the 'Black Republic' slogan, is one of the classic statements of communist theory that has been long forgotten.

Many of our articles sought to further a tradition of viewing the problems of South Africa in class terms and it was for this reason that we criticised the Communist Party's thesis that the issue in the country was 'internal colonialism' – a term that has no meaning in the Marxist lexicon and was only a thin veil to justify that party's uncritical support for the ANC. This did not mean that we ignored the country's repressive legislation any more than we could ignore tribal tensions in the country. It was the need to stress what we believed were basic issues underlying the situation in the country. It was in this light that we drew attention to the writings of Kenneth Jordaan, who towered above his peers in the 1950s in his presentation of historical events in South Africa. His articles appeared in journals of limited circulation and the sharp break in organization after Sharpeville, when the ANC, the PAC and the SACP were banned, led to a collective memory lapse in the re-emergent left.

There were also large gaps in our knowledge of significant people and movements in South Africa. I tried to fill some of the gaps, hoping thereby to stimulate interest in Clare Goodlatte and in Ruth Schechter Alexander – a radical commentator who inherited the mantle of Olive

Schreiner. I wrote an extended article on the Trotskyist movement in South Africa, which was also published in the journal *Revolutionary History*, and I contributed articles by (or based on the writings of) David Ivon Jones and Frank Glass, two of the more important early communists in South Africa. I continue such studies with a long article on the Non-European Unity Movement in this issue and hope at some stage to have them reprinted and included in a volume on the growth of resistance in South Africa.

From the outset we knew that there were international dimensions to what we uncovered. It would have been easy to digress: to write about events across the world. Most left journals span the universe and carry articles about trouble spots almost anywhere. We decided to concentrate on Southern Africa and to direct attention to other countries only when they impinged directly on the southern end of the African continent. In rare cases where there was specialist knowledge we diverged from that policy – and it was by virtue of such knowledge that we printed Ticktin's article on Gorbachev. Even that fell within our primary aim because theoreticians of the SACP like Joe Slovo discovered the 'greatness' of Gorbachev when the USSR went into ignominious decline and collapsed. It became necessary to criticise Slovo's pamphlet *Has Socialism Failed?* and show that in praising Gorbachev he had failed to understand the very nature of the corruption of Marxism in the USSR. This critique of Slovo is taken one step further in an article in this issue.

It was the interconnection between George Padmore and CLR James and events in the USSR as well as their writings on Africa that led to our carrying articles on them and it was the cancellation of Salman Rushdie invitation to a Congress of Writers conference in South Africa that led to Trehwela's article on the *Satanic Verses*.

Events outside South Africa proved to be one factor that led to the collapse of National Party control. The demise of the USSR had been signalled in a series of foreign policy changes both towards eastern European states like Rumania and Hungary, to Poland on its western flank and towards former colonial countries. This accelerated and led to the dramatic changes in 1989 when the Berlin wall was demolished, eastern Germany was incorporated into greater Germany, the regimes in eastern Europe, once mis-called communist, were overthrown and the 'cold-war' was formally ended. In Southern Africa this ended the role of the USSR as a force and the establishment of US hegemony in the region. The road to change in Southern Africa was opened in Mozambique, in Angola, South West Africa/Namibia and ultimately in South Africa. Even more importantly for South Africa, Soviet experts called for changes in ANC and SACP strategy and there were drastic cuts in the supply of money and arms to these movements. As indicated in the

article on Slovo this led to a U-turn in ANC/SACP rhetoric and their participation in negotiations with the National Party government.

Putting the emphasis on world political changes does not belittle the impact of the struggle inside South Africa which can be traced back to the phenomenal rise of a black trade union movement, the youth revolt – starting in Soweto – in 1976, the rent revolt of the 1980s, and the emergence of the United Democratic Front to co-ordinate the struggle. In all this the guerilla army of the ANC played little role, but it was inevitable that when change appeared imminent, it was this armed force and the parent bodies, the ANC and the SACP, that made the running in opening negotiations with the government.

We were not always right. Predictions can go notoriously wrong and we had our fair share of error. But we were convinced then, as we are now, that the removal of colour restrictions, important as they are, provided no answer to the basic class exploitation on which South Africa was (and is) built. I stressed this in issue No 6 when I wrote about the misapplication of socialist energy to what is called ‘third worldism’. This is an issue that is becoming more obvious to many now that discrimination solely on colour lines has been removed in South Africa. With the removal of legislation based solely on ethnicity, discrimination on the basis of class is all the more obvious. That problem is highlighted in the contents of this issue and is also pointed to in an examination of the failure of the Non-European Unity Movement which occupies so many of the pages below.

Searchlight South Africa depended largely on the writings of Paul Trehwela and myself. We hoped to secure contributions from South Africa and although there were occasional articles and letters – all gratefully received – the onus rested on the two of us to fill the remaining pages of the journal. The burden proved to be too great and the cycle was broken when I required extended hospital treatment and Paul’s personal life led to his withdrawal. Consequently, except for an article by Paul (held over from No 11), and a letter from Joe Rassool, I have had to write much of this issue. I must apologise to those of our readers who might feel that I have stretched their patience to a limit.

Baruch Hirson

In the compilation of this issue the following journals and newspapers were consulted

Guardian, *Independent*, *New Nation*, *New Statesman and Society*, *Observer*, *SA Times* (London), *Southern Africa Report* (both the Canadian journal and the South African newsletter), *Star*, *Work in Progress*.