

BLACK RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1950-1961:  
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE POLITICAL STRIKE CAMPAIGNS

by

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I

During the 1950s Black resistance to the Apartheid system developed on an unprecedented scale. It created a mood of optimism amongst the resistance leadership - freedom would be won in their lifetime. They were convinced that they had a potent weapon to back their demands - mass action of the numerically superior African population. Mass action would pressure the minority White government to accede to fundamental political change. This paper attempts to assess the potential of the most important form of mass action during the period - the political strike campaigns - in achieving this end.

II

It could be argued that during the 1950s the objective conditions were ripe for the transformation of isolated, sporadic resistance into mass resistance. During the post-war period capital accumulated at an extremely fast, albeit uneven rate. This was spearheaded by the growth of the manufacturing sector and was accompanied by the continued concentration of Africans in the urban areas; renewed efforts by the State to control more effectively the movement of Black labour and surplus population through the establishment of labour bureaux and the tightening of influx control; changes in the labour process and declining real wages. (1) The transformation of resistance does not occur automatically, however: it depends upon political organization and leadership. O'Meara has outlined how the repression of the 1946 mineworkers' strike acted catalytically on the established leadership of the ANC, leading to the effective takeover by the Youth League and the forging of links between Black trade unions, the ANC, the CP and the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses. (2) With the adoption of the Programme of Action in 1949, there was an important shift in strategy from trying to achieve individual participation in the system through constitutional protests to direct action involving the masses. A section of the programme called for a national stoppage of work for one day as a mark of protest against the reactionary policy of the government. (3)

III

The executive committee of the Transvaal ANC, in co-operation with the Johannesburg district CP and the Transvaal Indian Congress, called for a one-day work

stoppage for May 1st, as a protest against the introduction of the Suppression of Communism Act. The organizational build-up was thorough, with the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) playing a vital role. They stressed that a carefully planned programme of organizational work leading up to the event was essential for the mobilization of workers. The build-up consisted of ANC and trade union branch meetings followed by mass township meetings, culminating in a mass rally at Market Square, Johannesburg, a week before the strike. These efforts led to a successful strike, when on May Day the majority of workers in many areas withheld their labour power, despite the large-scale mobilization of police and defence force units, widespread liquor raids and arrests for pass law infringements. Factories were closed, commercial enterprises disrupted and deliveries of milk and other foodstuffs were affected. (4) Later in the day rioting flared up in Benoni, Orlando, Alexandra, Sophiatown and Brakpan townships as police attempted to break up gatherings. Nineteen died and thirty-eight were injured.

Commenting on these events, the ANC year-end report concluded:

... the events showed quite clearly that conditions under which the African people live have become intolerable and that the masses are marching ahead of the leadership. The gravity of this development among the masses is no doubt a serious one to the leadership of the African people. (5)

The central issue is the direction in which the leadership channelled this militancy. Even the most radical elements of the leadership viewed mass action of the proletariat as a means to pressure the Apartheid State into incorporating Blacks into the existing political process, rather than challenging the subjugation of labour to capital. The May Day strike did not lead to reform but to repression, as police carried out massive reprisal raids. (6)

Despite the intimidatory measures, a further strike was planned, this time on a national scale, to coincide with the introduction in parliament of the Unlawful Organizations Bill and to serve "as a day of mourning for all those Africans who lost their lives in the struggle for liberation". (7) On June 26th, reaction to the call was uneven. The strike was most effective in Port Elizabeth, where the harbour was brought to a standstill as only nine of the 1,000 dock workers reported for duty, and amongst the Durban Indian community. Contrary to expectations, the response on the Witwatersrand, except for Evaton and Alexandra townships, was poor. The pattern of the response reveals the role played by political organizations in the campaign, as well as highlighting an important lesson: the need to gauge carefully the barometer of proletarian mood before embarking on political mass action. The response of the Port Elizabeth workers was indicative of the level of Black trade unionism in the city and their linkage with the ANC. In Natal, Black trade unions were at this point poorly organized and the ANC, under the leadership of Champion, was weak and divorced from the working class. In contrast, the solidarity of the Indian community was the product of an active Indian Congress which had only just moved through a period of passive resistance. On the Witwatersrand, workers were exhausted, having involved themselves in a sustained build-up to May Day, then having endured a prolonged period of victimization.

The calling of the strike was dictated by events in parliament and not by the mood or the level of preparation of the workers. The ANC year-end report makes no attempt to analyse critically the response or the results of the strike. A major weakness was the failure to analyse the role of the mass strike in the process of political change. The stated aim of the strike was the defeat of the Unlawful Organizations Bill, the assumption being that the government would make concessions when faced with this wide-scale protest. This remained the fundamental tenet of the mass strikes throughout the 1950s, and was the flaw in its conception as a weapon for political change. Instead of concessions, the Security Police, in co-operation with business, again put into effect a campaign of widespread repression. (8)

June 26th became known as "Freedom Day", and was to mark the beginnings of the Defiance Campaign and the historic Congress of the People in 1955. It was also the date on which the next political strike was called. When inspired by the upsurge of militancy in the wake of mass boycott action early in 1957, the Congress Alliance called for a day of protest, prayer and dedication to take place on June 26 1957.

#### IV

The June 1957 strike, announced ambiguously in demonstration terms with religious undertones, failed to materialize in all regions except the Witwatersrand and Port Elizabeth, two areas that had recently been at the centre of mass boycott action. Preparations in these areas were vigorous, and militant posters urged workers to strike for a £1.00 a day and the rejection of passes and permits, in sharp contrast to the other regions' evening prayer meetings offered for the deliverance of South Africa from Nationalist oppression.

In Johannesburg, Vereeniging and Port Elizabeth the strike was estimated to be 70-80% effective, bringing a number of factories to a standstill and affecting essential services. It was most solid in unionized factories where shop stewards had been active. The positive response shows both the relevance of the demands and how past resistance, in this instance the mass boycott, is a stepping stone: the struggle between capital and labour cannot be won with one blow. It is an ongoing process, each stage of which transforms consciousness and strengthens organization. This does not occur mechanistically, but depends upon political leadership. A weakness of the strategy was the failure to follow up the mass strike with further action at the point of production. The Alliance supported industrial strikes when they occurred and intervened in the negotiating process, but did not actively encourage this form of action. Turok argued that workers were easily victimized for participating in such action and that more was achieved through the national strike campaigns which created "a climate which forced the government to give concessions". (9) This is correct in that from 1957 there was a flurry of Wage Board activity and new determinations, reversing the trend of declining real wages after 1957. (10)

There is, however, no automatic transmission from economic to political gains. The interlacing of mass political with industrial strikes could have more effectively achieved this transmission in that each strike enriches the experience and advances the level of consciousness of the proletariat. Each factory strike gives rise to discussions about working conditions and helps workers appraise them. There emerges a sense of unity and a shared recognition of community of purpose. It also prepares and promotes individual workers who emerge as leaders and gives others an example of how to fight successfully with owners. In South Africa it educates politically, for strike action, being illegal, makes war waged against the factory owner simultaneously war against the State. Evidence suggests that victimization in the wake of mass strike action was no less severe than in the case of industrial strikes, the workers' only defence being unity at the work place.

The success of the strike in the two regions generated an overconfidence amongst the leadership, a naive faith that the Black proletariat could be mobilized at will. In April 1958, the workers were called upon to "make themselves heard" as the Whites went to the poll. Luthuli's original call for "a day of mass prayer and dedication to the freedom cause" was radicalized, by an upsurge of worker militancy, into a call for a prolonged national strike.

#### V

This militancy was reflected at the SACTU National Workers' Conference (NWC) held in Johannesburg on March 15th. During February numerous regional conferences were organized to stimulate interest and participation in the National event. Workers

were mobilized around the £1.00 a day slogan and the conferences called for mass action at election time in support of this demand. The NWC resolved that in election week there would be "a week of national stay at home protest and demonstration in support of the people's demands". (11) The twin slogans were "Forward to a £1.00 a day victory" and "The Nationalists must go". The former dominated the proceedings, with the connection between poverty wages and influx control being made. Workers were prepared for defiant, illegal action as sections called for the destruction of pass books before election day.

These conferences strained the ANC's class alliance, as sections of the leadership reacted to the prominence given to the working class, arguing that the conferences were purely trade union affairs and therefore did not necessitate their active support. Turok outlines the dynamics that gave rise to these tensions and the effort to ameliorate them:

... the Congress movement gradually became more progressive and more proletarian. As things got more difficult it was those with the least to lose and the least illusions that came to the top. Working class comrades became more involved and people with class ideology came to the fore because they were more militant and more committed, which is not to say that there were no committed petty bourgeoisie. But in the wealth, in the weight of the thing, the pressures of the proletarian elements were stronger and sometimes one in fact had to be careful that this tendency did not become hegemonic. (12)

Preparatory work for the strike was poor, and organizational efforts centred mainly on the distribution of Luthuli's letter of appeal to the White electorate. The leadership, including that of the CP, sought to woo the more liberal sections of the White ruling class, the underlying assumption being that economic growth inevitably produces political reform. At this time Harmel, a leading CP theorist, wrote:

the type of despotism we still endure in the Union in this age ... is a kind of freak, an anachronism which cannot hope much longer to survive. (13)

The inadequate preparation, coupled with the subordination of the £1.00 a day demand, resulted in a poor response, with only a few areas and industries participating. (14) Tambo called off the strike after the first day. The election results revealed increased support for the Nationalists.

Despite its failure, this campaign was an important moment in the resistance struggle, for it led to conclusions vital to the maturing of Black opposition. The ANC year-end conference stated:

The election has shattered the illusion of change through the electoral system ... the Nationalists can be got out of power not by voters but by the voteless masses, by extra-parliamentary means. (15)

The report concluded that the strike had failed because of:

1. insufficient preparation, four weeks being hopelessly inadequate to mobilize on a national scale;
2. the lack of tight organization: Duma Nokwe drew attention to the failure to implement the "M Plan" with its emphasis on slow and tedious house to house work, whereas at present the ANC preferred mass meetings;
3. inattention to political education;

4. disunity within the ANC because of the Africanist opposition and because sections of the ANC failed to involve themselves with the working class.

The leadership failed, however, to discuss the relevance of the strike slogans. Arenstein argues that "Black workers did not identify with the call. The elections were too remote a factor from their daily lives." (16) The role of trade unionism in the strike was ignored and there was no comparative analysis of the participation of organized and unorganized workers. The CP post-mortem, however, concluded that mass action depended upon the form and level of working class organization. This needed to take two forms: one, a renewed drive to establish and develop SACTU unions; two, the launching of factory committees that would not simply be trade union committees but groupings of advanced workers which would combine both industrial and political functions. Walter Sisulu and Ben Turok drew up the document on the role of factory committees, a document that was "absolutely seminal ... a point of departure as far as the trade union and Congress movements were concerned". (17) From early 1959 the ANC and SACTU campaigned for the establishment of factory committees. This raised the work to a new level:

SACTU was no longer quite so office orientated ... more and more people were to work informally from home, going to the factories and setting up factory committees, rather than concentrating solely on the office complaints style of work ... there was a change in orientation towards grass roots work in the factories.

This emphasis on forms of organization more deeply embedded in township and factory was an important advance, but the plans failed to mature. The Africanists' campaign upset the more detailed preparations of the Alliance in 1960, with Sharpeville ushering in not only a new timetable but also a new strategy of resistance.

## VI

The Transvaal Africanists maintained that the failure of the 1958 strike proved that the ANC was out of touch with "mass sentiment", a criticism which led to the expulsion of leading Africanists, generating deep division within the November 1958 Transvaal Provincial Congress and resulting finally in the formal establishment of the PAC in April 1959. The ANC was accused of "de-fusing" latent nationalist sentiments and of creating an ideological void by neglecting the nation-building principles of the 1949 Programme of Action. The PAC was soon organizing a "do or die" struggle against the pass laws, founded on the optimistic belief that the masses had taken the message of Nationalism to heart and that what was needed was bold leadership which could inspire the masses with heroic examples of self sacrifice in a "no bail, no defence, no fine campaign". (18)

The PAC leadership had acknowledged from the outset that efficient organization was fundamental to any campaign, yet their tough, optimistic talk led them to pay scant regard to their serious organizational shortcomings, thus replicating the mistakes that the ANC had made in 1958. Sobukwe announced that members of the PAC would surrender themselves for arrest on March 21st. Contrary to the leadership's expectations, the response to the call was negligible in all regions except the Vereeniging industrial complex, where the PAC organized without competition from the ANC. At Sharpeville police opened fire on the protesters, killing 67 and injuring 186. It was a watershed event, one of immense political significance, that altered the course of Black resistance in South Africa; it played a part in the Alliance's turn to armed struggle as a means of achieving their goals. SACTU organizer Khanyile reflected:

The Sharpeville incident made me think it's high time now that we did something new. It had a big impact on me and I believed that if we continued trying to mobilize ourselves as before we wouldn't have a chance. (19)

More immediately, Sharpeville and associated events at Langa created a crisis when the initial political action on the passes was transformed and extended into other industrial centres. Rosa Luxemburg, theorizing on the mass strike, highlights not only how pure economic, partial trade union conflicts run through stages into mass political demonstrations but also how political mass action can break up into a mass of economic strikes:

After every foaming wave of political action a fructifying deposit remains behind from which a thousand stalks of economic struggle shoot forth ... the political struggle is the permanent fertilization of the soil of economic struggle. Cause and effect continually change places ... The worker, suddenly aroused to activity by the electric shock of political action, immediately seizes the weapon lying nearest his hand for the fight against his condition of economic slavery: the stormy gesture of the political struggle causes him to feel with unexpected intensity the weight and the pressure of his economic chains. (20)

This was the dynamic set in motion by the shootings. Chief Luthuli had appealed to all Africans to observe a day of mourning on Monday the 28th by staying away from work. He combined the call for a "top level meeting of African leaders with the leaders of all political parties" with the radical action of publicly burning his pass book, saying: "I have no intention of ever carrying a reference book again, and I hope that all other Africans will voluntarily follow my example." (21) A day after Luthuli's statement and pass burning, the State retreated and the head of police issued instructions: "No Bantu, male or female, is to be asked for his or her reference book or any other documents. No Bantu will be taken into custody because he is not in possession of his reference book." (22) But repression was simultaneously intensified as Justice Minister Erasmus extended the public meeting ban to 49 additional magisterial districts. Luthuli was a leader of influence amongst Black workers and peasants, but he never developed a worker ideology. Thus, at the moment when the state retreated on the pass laws, instead of escalating the struggle by calling for a prolonged general strike, he called for a day of mourning. The upsurge of militancy was not channelled along a more revolutionary path and so the leadership failed to take advantage of the shifts in the balance of class forces realized by the crippling, week-long strike. Turok admitted:

1960 was a testing time ... the militancy was growing outside but we were so preoccupied with the legal processes. We didn't have the right conception of revolution as opposed to pressure. We didn't make the right break.

Events at this juncture revealed that the working class were prepared to move beyond the leadership. They extended the one-day stay at home call into a prolonged strike, mass marches, and rioting. It was a peak of resistance that was not again to occur until the Soweto uprising 16 years later. On the day of mourning an estimated 50,000 Blacks attended a funeral in Langa, where PAC orators called for the strike to go on until Black demands were met. The Cape Town strike lasted until April 4th, crippling commerce and industry. In Durban there was a near total response from the Cato Manor and Lamontville workers. The Government's response was to declare a state of emergency and ban the ANC and PAC. Widespread arrests followed and the resistance was eventually broken. The strike action ended, and defiant pass burning was replaced by long queues of workers at Government offices waiting for new reference books. Exhaustion and demoralization replaced militancy. The ANC underground called for a week-long strike beginning on April 19th, but it received no popular support.

The situation led to the SACP issuing a pamphlet, What next?, which speculated on the future form of the struggle in the light of the massive state repression. The question was analysed in terms of violence or non-violence. At the CP annual conference, December 1960, the Party decided that the new form of struggle should be one of economic sabotage as a first stage to guerrilla warfare. The new strategy was accepted by the ANC leadership, and so the foundation was laid for future struggles.

Arenstein is extremely critical of this decision, as this lengthy quote shows:

This was a very, very grave mistake which had terrible effects on the growth of the mass movement in South Africa. To my mind certain of the leaders were always dissatisfied with taking things over a long term. They were keen to try to get things settled as quickly as possible. Of course one must take into account the feeling of frustration from Black leaders. Taking into account their frustration one can understand why a number of them do so, but when one considers that the actual drive for this sort of activity came from the SACP, then one realizes that it goes deeper. Generally Marxists have been against this type of activity - economic terrorism - because it isolates the movement from the masses. There was no necessity for the SACP to launch this activity. They obviously misread the situation completely. There were two reasons for the decision: one was the success of Castro in Cuba and the other was the Pondo uprising which made a number of the SACP leaders feel that the time was now ripe for the violent overthrow of the Government ... It was a false analogy. As far as the Pondo uprising was concerned, by the time they took the decision the Pondos themselves had decided to take the question of violence no further and were looking forward to other methods of struggle. It was a complete misunderstanding of the situation and a completely wrong analysis of the forces at work.

Turok admitted that this decision had consequences for the development of the mass movement:

a huge gap developed between the leading force and the mass. The mass didn't know what to do.

The sabotage campaign led to more extreme repression by the State. The 90 Day Act resulted in a new phase of detentions and the introduction of torture which provided the State with invaluable information on resistance plans and hence the arrest of the most experienced SACTU and ANC leaders. This was a long-term set-back to the development of the workers' movement, leaving a vacuum throughout the 1960s.

Before the Alliance embarked on this new campaign of sabotage, efforts were renewed during the first months of 1961 to pressure the Government into calling a National Convention of all political leaders to work out an alternative to a "Whites only" Republic. The protest strike was to be the means. Drawing on the lessons of 1958, the organizational preparations for the strike were meticulous, revealing an ironic maturity in the context of the decision to turn away from organized mass resistance.

## VII

A National Action Council was elected at an "All-in Africa Conference" representing a wide variety of African organizations. The NAC saw as its prime objective "the full explanation to the entire population of the true meaning and significance of the campaign for a National convention". It was linked to grievances over rentals, passes, Bantu Authorities, Group areas and education. An effort was to be made to reach out to all - urban and rural workers, reserve peasants, and workers housed in compounds of mines, municipalities, docks and railways. The country was zoned into regions with full-time organizers appointed in each. In all these tasks SACTU played a vital role.

A meeting on April 14th decided unanimously that, in view of the Government and Opposition parties' negative response, a three-day strike and demonstration would be called to coincide with the proclamation of a Republic. (23) The State's response to the preparations was predictable: police, army and citizen force units appeared on a scale more extensive than for any of the earlier strikes. Ten thousand Blacks were arrested during the course of intensive raids and a new law entitling the Government to detain a person for 12 days without bail was passed.

On the second day of the protest strike, Mandela told the workers to return as the strike was "not the national success I had hoped for. This closes a chapter in our methods of political action." (24) The daily press claimed that the strike had failed. A week later, New Age concluded that this was the biggest national strike on a political issue ever staged in the history of South Africa. (25) It is possible to move beyond these conflicting generalizations because this is the one national strike that has been surveyed. (26) The survey draws the conclusion that seemed evident in the earlier strikes but which could only be speculated upon because of the lack of evidence:

Workers who are organized into trade unions are more responsive to a political call than unorganized workers. Their trade union activity has given them heightened political consciousness and they also respond more readily when the appeal is made on a factory basis as opposed to a residential basis as they feel that there is less chance of dismissal if the whole factory is involved.

Despite detailed plans for a second phase in the campaign for a national convention, based on the concept of widespread non-cooperation rooted in a strengthened industrial organization, it was never launched. The most experienced organizers were by now fully engaged in the sabotage campaign and had not the time to follow the plans through. The nature of their work isolated them from the working class. It is one of the ironies of history that this should occur at a moment when, as the evidence of 1961 suggests, the Black labour movement was developing, and further that this was crucial to effective resistance.

## VIII

The above analysis has tried to show that mass action, in the form of political strikes, failed for reasons more complex than repressive State action. These relate to the role of leadership and organization in the process of change. What emerges quite clearly is the leadership's conception of the proletariat as a vehicle to be used in pressure politics. This was contradictory, because at various points the proletariat broke through the limits imposed by the leadership. This paper has stressed the critical need of a strong trade union base, linked to class conscious leadership, as the essential prerequisite for political change in South Africa. The alternative is a mindless militarism.

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## Notes

1. For details on wages, see W. F. Steenkamp, "Bantu Wages in South Africa", SAJE, June 1962. SAIRR Surveys, 1949-50, p. 70, and 1956-7, pp. 166-171, reveal that the majority of Africans were living below the poverty datum line. Unpublished work of the Warwick Southern Africa project details changes in the labour process.

- (2) "The 1946 African Mine Workers' strike and the political economy of South Africa", Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1975.
- (3) See Karis & Carter, From Protest to Challenge, Vol. 2, p. 452. Draft report of the NEC of the ANC, December 15-17 1950.
- (4) Official estimates of the extent of the response were contradictory. For example, between 40,000 and 50,000 workers out of a total of 160,000 in the South Western Townships were said to have stayed at home, that is approximately 30%. Yet trains arriving from these townships carried only 30% of the usual number of passengers.
- (5) Karis & Carter, op. cit., p. 452.
- (6) For example, James Phillips, executive member of CNETU, lost his job.
- (7) Karis & Carter, op. cit., p. 444.
- (8) Natal Indians suffered most. There was a massive switch over from Indian to African workers, dramatically increasing Indian unemployment.
- (9) Interview, December 1977.
- (10) New determinations were drafted for the laundry trade in all principal towns, the bread industry on the Witwatersrand and Pietermaritzburg, stevedoring in the four main ports, clothing in the Transvaal, and the meat trade in the principal centres.
- (11) 13th February 1958.
- (12) Interview, December 1977.
- (13) Africa South, Vol. 3, No. 2, January-March 1959.
- (14) In Johannesburg, the majority of laundry workers came out, as did the Durban dockworkers. The main response came from Sophiatown and Newclare townships in Johannesburg and New Brighton in Port Elizabeth.
- (15) Karis & Carter, Vol. 3, p. 441.
- (16) Interview, May-June 1977.
- (17) Interview with Turok, December 1977.
- (18) Turok claims that the ANC had already planned a similar campaign and that secret documents had been stolen.
- (19) Interview, September 1977.
- (20) M. A. Waters, Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, pp. 185-7.
- (21) Natal Mercury, 28 March 1960.
- (22) Ibid.
- (23) Minutes of NCC, 14 April 1961.
- (24) Natal Mercury, 30 May 1961.
- (25) 8th June 1961.
- (26) The survey is based on organizers' reports.