Black thinking falls under the spotlight again

Black political thinking falls under the spotlight again when Azapo holds the long-awaited symposium on black consciousness within a few weeks.

Already there is intense debate on the nature of the ideology and the symposium will go a long way towards clarifying some of the basic tenets of the revolutionary ideology.

Within a short space of time black consciousness virtually changed the entire focus of black politics percolating to all forms of activity — from cultural organisations to trade unions.

So fast was its development that even adherents found it difficult to keep pace with its momentum. No sooner had black consciousness asserted the idea of psychological liberation and pride in one's being when it suddenly changed its emphasis to black workers. And then, the question of re-analysing the ideology took root.

During its early days, slogans like "black is beautiful" and "Power belongs to the black people" soon gave way, in certain circles, to "Power belongs to the black worker"

It was with this change of emphasis that the storm broke within the black consciousness movement. Though the colour question was not rejected, a new stress was placed on blacks within the labour field.

The problem started because some proponents believed that unless the ideology focused on the crucial problem of labour relations and its future re-organisation, black consciousness would not be able to provide any systematic critique of capitalism.

Moreover, this new view of black consciousness enabled blacks to posit, without contradiction, black principles of economic re-organisation and assert the view that the wealth belongs to the workers.

Thus, while maintaining the stress on "colour", the initiators of the new thinking added the dimension of "class" to black consciousness. In so doing, they recognised that all black people were oppressed but went further in their analysis by adding that black workers, particularly, suffered the most acute form of exploitation.

Along with Franz Fanon, the new view took into account that when liberation occurs, the danger of a middle class (whites in black masks) seizing the state apparatus would have been pre-empted. The growing middle class among the oppressed though not constituting any immediate threat to liberation, would simply not be able to entrench itself and maintain the system of capitalism.

The new view seeks to encourage worker leadership based on the principles of black consciousness — worker pride in the fact that he is black, unashamed and therefore deserving respect. And he can get this respect through his collective unity in trade unions, he demands respect also in material terms: better pay, better working conditions, equal facilities and opportunities for development and the like.

From the moment the issue of "class" is introduced, trade union organisation is the logical follow-up.

In trade unions, whites are discounted as allies. Their standard of living make them into what has been called a "labour aristocracy". Whites do not suffer the daily indignities of black workers, they do not live in compounds, they enjoy the right to participation in the political process — all these factors alienate black workers from whites.

In the classical sense of exploitation, white workers because they produce under the system of capitalist relations are economically also exploited. However, their standard of living acts as a cushion against the ill-effects of exploitation.

The Race/class debate

IS the conflict in South Africa a race struggle between black nationalism and white nationalism? Is it a class struggle between owners of capital and the workers, irrespective if race?

Or is it a combination of class and race?

Close on 200 delegates, representing a number of black bodies supporting the black consciousness philosophy, got together at a symposium in April 1981 to give their viewpoint.

The Azapo president, Mr Khehla Mthembu, stressed that black consciousness was not on trial. "We are here to reaffirm black consciousness, to redefine some of our terms, and give direction to the struggle.

"Black consciousness," he added, "is dynamic — we shall adapt and move with the demands of our times."

The symposium set out to show that BC was still a neccessary force in South Africa as it moved from its initial "psychological liberation" stage, through the "activist" phase into its present "ideological" phase.

The first two papers — both on "black consciousness and the class struggle" — set the tone for the symposium. The first was by a former Robben Island prisoner, Mr Eric Molobi, and the other by Mr Quraish Patel, of the Media Workers' Association of South Africa.

Eight commissions discussed questions arising from the papers. Some delegates were still unhappy about the class analysis.

But at the end of the symposium, delegates accepted without dissent the following:
Their commitment to the BC ideology;
The assertion that because the black worker is "the hub of the South African economy and yet the most exploited and oppressed", black worker consciousness be promoted in such a way that the black working class be a vehicle for change in South Africa;
Race is a class determinant in the current South African context;
There is no place for whites in the black consciousness movement.

Acceptance by the delegates of the class analysis did not imply that Azapo had embraced Marxism. On the contrary, Mr Patel pointed out: "Orthodox Marxists look at a doctrine and mould it to reality, whereas black consciousness looks at reality and moulds its doctrine accordingly."

With Azapo's focus on black workers reaffirmed, it was logical that worker organisation be taken a step further.

The Reverend Buti Tlhagale, of the Black Priests' Solidarity Group, delivered a paper in which he warned black trade unionists not to regard concessions in the labour field as ends in themselves.

It now seems clear that apart from battles in the educational, sporting and ideological spheres, the tensions in South African society will become increasingly concentrated in the labour field.

* * * *