



An interview with the South African Communist Party

In the interests of debate and discussion, and because it is a rare occasion when the views of the South African Communist Party (SACP) are made available in South African publications, PHAMBILI reprints an article on the policy and position of the SACP from WORK IN PROGRESS. Glenn Moss of WORK IN PROGRESS submitted the questions while the responses are those of a senior SACP official whose identity was not revealed.

Question. How does the SACP characterise the relationship between classes in the current phase of struggle in South Africa, particularly those classes which are nationally oppressed?

Answer:The present phase of the revolution in our country is one of the whole oppressed people. This does not mean the oppressed 'people' can be regarded as a homogeneous entity. They are made up of diverse classes and strata whose long-term interests do not necessarily coincide, and whose consistency and commitment even to the immediate objectives of the democratic revolution cannot be equated. But it remains true that the democratic revolution expresses the broad objective interests, not only of the working class, but of every class and strata within the nationally-dominated majority. This includes the black bourgeoisie. This reality provides the foundation for a struggle which attempts to mobilise all oppressed classes and strata as part of a national liberation alliance.

But what about the special role of the working class in this alliance?

The working class is an indispensable part of the liberation alliance. Its relations with other classes and strata in the alliance cannot, however, be on the condition that these other classes and strata accept socialist aims. The historic programme which has evolved to express the common aspirations of all the classes which make up the dominated people is the Freedom Charter. But this document is not, in itself, a programme for socialism.

Does the immediate emphasis on the 'democratic revolution' (involving class alliances) imply that the working-class should abandon class struggle in favour of national struggle? And does it involve shelving socialist objectives in a struggle for bourgeois democracy?

The answer to these questions requires a correct grasp of the relationship between class and national struggle. Mechanical tendencies set out these categories as if they were almost mutually exclusive. This leads to inevitable confusion on the role of the working class and its mass and vanguard organisations. Failure to understand the class content of the national struggle and the national content of the class struggle in existing conditions retards both the democratic and socialist transformations which we seek.

The immediate primacy of the struggle against race tyranny flows from the concrete realities of our existing situation. The concept of national domination is

not an ideological mystification to divert us from a class approach. It infects every level of class exploitation, and divides the working class into colour compartments. National domination is underwritten by a state apparatus which in varying degrees protects the economic interests and social privileges of all classes among the white minority. It denies the nationhood of the African people and, in its place, imposes tribalism and ethnicity. These, and a host of related race practices, are the visible daily manifestations of national domination.

The chief victim of national domination is the black working class. Those who dismiss the fight against national domination as the key mobilising factor are living in an unreal world of their own. The link between national domination and class exploitation undoubtedly needs unending stress. It is encouraging to observe the recent spread of an understanding of this link among organised sectors of the working class. But we must not exaggerate the extent and depth of this spread. Nor must we forget that insofar as it has spread, it is due primarily to the heightened experiences of struggle against race domination in the recent period.

What is meant by 'class struggle' in a period in which national liberation is the primary objective?

Class struggle in a period of capitalist hegemony is above all a political struggle aimed against the political dominance of the ruling class and at the ultimate winning of power by the working people.

But the shape of this class struggle does not remain fixed for all time. Its main emphasis and content at every given historical moment is dictated by the concrete situation. We cannot confine the meaning of working-class struggle to the immediate struggle for socialism. Nor can we conclude that participation by workers in inter-class alliances implies a postponement or compromise of their own class struggle. The concept of 'class struggle' cannot be restricted to those rare moments when the immediate winning of socialist power is on the agenda. Nor does it fade into the background when workers forge alliances with other class forces on commonly agreed minimum programmes. The history of all struggles is in fact overwhelmingly dominated by such interim phases. There is no such thing as 'pure' class struggle, and those who seek it can only do so from the isolated comfort of a library arm chair.

Workers in pre-1948 India were not abandoning the class struggle when they concentrated their main energies, in alliance with other class forces, to get Britain out of India. When Hitler unleashed world war, the main content of workers' class struggle correctly became the defeat of fascism. This task necessitated the most 'popular' of fronts, which brought together both pro- and anti-socialist forces.

It is a matter of historical record that the anti-fascist victory made possible the most significant spread of socialist power since the October revolution.

How does the SACP understand the relationship between national and class struggle, and between national liberation and socialism?

When we exhort the working class to devote its main energies, in alliance with other nationally-oppressed classes, to the immediate task of winning national liberation, we are certainly not diluting the class struggle or retreating from it.

On the contrary, we are advancing and reinforcing it in the only manner which is consistent with the historic aspirations of the working class. Nor are we putting off the socialist revolution by an emphasis on the national-democratic tasks of the immediate phase.

In the words of Lenin, answering critics of Bolshevik policy on the earlier primacy of the democratic revolution, 'we are not putting (the socialist revolution) off but we are taking the first steps towards it in the only possible way, along the only correct path, namely the path of a democratic republic'.

The immediate emphasis on the struggle for democracy and 'people's power' is, in our present situation, an essential pre-requisite for the longer-term advance towards a socialist transformation. But it is also a short-term class imperative.

Race tyranny weighs more heavily on South Africa's doubly-exploited working class than on any other class. Its destruction by the shortest route possible is, in itself, in the deepest class interests of our proletariat, who stand to gain more from the ending of national domination than any other class or strata among the oppressed. This reality helps define the main form and content of the workers' class struggle at the present historical conjuncture, and the kind of alliances necessary to advance working-class struggle.

It is sometimes argued that the current emphasis on national liberation and struggle precludes the possibility of building socialism in a subsequent phase of struggle. It has also been suggested that one way of establishing the primacy of working-class interests in the future is to build and strengthen independent working-class structures in the current period. How does the SACP view these issues?

The need to concentrate on the present does not imply an abandonment or disregard of the future. Participation by the working class in the democratic revolution, involving alliances, minimum programmes, etc, does not imply a dilution of its independent class positions.

On the contrary, the strengthening of workers' independent mass and vanguard structures is even more imperative in periods demanding organised relations with other class forces. Nor does it follow that the spread of socialist awareness among the working people should be less during the phase emphasising democratic transformation.

During this period it is even more vital to maintain and deepen working-class understanding of the interdependence between national liberation and social emancipation. This task cannot be postponed until after the ANC flag flies over Pretoria.

The participation of the working class and its political vanguard in the liberation alliance is, therefore, both a long-term and a short-term class necessity. The SACP's participation in this alliance is not, as our right-wing detractors would have it, an opportunistic ploy to camouflage our so-called 'hidden agenda', and to use the ANC as a stepping stone to socialism. We have never made a secret of our belief that the shortest route to socialism is via a democratic republic.

The SACP takes part in the liberation alliance, as one of its fundamental pillars, because we believe the elimination of national domination, which is the prime objective of the alliance, is the most immediate and vital concern of South Africa's proletariat.

The SACP has often been accused of creating a rigid distinction between national-democratic and socialist transformation. This 'two-stage' theory has sometimes been used to justify the suppression of socialist

Ideas and practices within organisations struggling for national liberation. What is the SACP's formulation of the 'two-stage' question?

What vulgar marxists do not understand is that there is both a distinction and a continuity between the national-democratic and socialist revolutions. Although the SACP correctly talks of 'stages', we do not believe there is a Chinese wall between such stages.

But we can concede that our own formulations have sometimes been too imprecise, laying ourselves open to charges of treating stages as compartments, as 'things in themselves'. The concept 'stage' implies a destination. Hence it is part of a whole. The question is how to reach a 'stage' without blocking the route towards the destination of which the 'stage' constitutes a dialectical and chronological segment. This depends, perhaps mainly, on revolutionary practice. On balance, the SACP's practice has not departed from the 'continuity' concept of stages.

The dominant ingredients of the later stage must already have begun to mature in the earlier stage. Discussing an analogous question which faced the Bolsheviks, Lenin wrote: 'We all categorise bourgeois revolution and socialist revolution, we all insist on the absolute necessity of strictly distinguishing between the two; however, can it be denied that, in the course of history, individual particular elements of the two revolutions become interwoven?'

Lenin's formulations have even greater relevance to our situation, in which, despite a few areas of similarity, we cannot really equate the national-democratic revolution to the classical bourgeois-democratic revolution. In contrast to 1905 and February 1917 in Russia, it is South Africa's bourgeoisie, and not a feudally-based autocracy, which wields power as the ruling class. Its accumulated economic riches have been built precisely by means of the very denial of bourgeois-democratic rights to the overwhelming majority.

And, with the exception of the tiny and weak black bourgeoisie, our capitalist ruling class remains opposed to the universal extension of bourgeois democracy to the majority. This reality is not negated by the radical-sounding rhetoric of some tycoons who are stimulated by a liberal conscience and, more importantly, by an understanding that certain aspects of race domination no longer suit their pockets.

In stressing the limitations of this group, we do not intend to belittle the very important task of helping by all means, including dialogue, to weaken cohesion and unity of the ruling class, and to isolate and weaken its most racist and politically reactionary sector.

But the very fact that South Africa's ruling capitalist class is, and can be expected to remain, in the opposing camp, provides a special proletarian stamp to our national-democratic revolution. It cannot be said of South Africa's immediate situation, as Lenin was able to say of pre-October Russia, that the 'revolution expresses the interests of the entire bourgeoisie as well'. This difference gives a special social content to the stage of our national democratic revolution.

When compared to analagous historical phases, certain of the key elements of our democratic revolution are, therefore, even more closely interwoven with the longer-term socialist transformation.

Among the most important of these elements is the preponderant role of the working class in all phases of the revolutionary process and, more immediately, in the democratic alliance which makes up the liberation front.

What does it mean to talk of the 'dominant' or 'leadership' role of the working class in a phase in which the primary struggle is for national-democratic transformation?

The working class is everywhere the most consistent and unconditional fighter for democracy. But there are also special features of the South African situation which objectively reinforce its dominant role and enable the working class to put its imprint on all phases of the revolutionary process.

As already noted, the main constituent of the bourgeoisie by its very nature distances itself from the democratic revolution and has less prospect of influencing its course than in analogous situations. The black bourgeoisie is abysmally small and weak. The small peasantry which traditionally provides the main impetus for the petty bourgeoisie has been virtually decimated as a class. The black middle strata can find few, if any, alliances with its privileged counterparts across the colour line.

In general, the immediate aspirations of all classes and strata among the

oppressed people can only be effectively advanced through the organised strength and leadership of the working class. But this leadership, which has an objective basis in the actual correlation of class forces in the present situation, has to be worked for on the ground. It will not come as a gift from heaven. And the working class cannot carry out its historic role merely by leading itself.

Our youth, women, intellectuals, small traders, peasants, the rural poor and even the racially-dominated black bourgeoisie are a necessary part of a broad front of struggle which must also seek to win over those whites who are prepared to shed racism. The working class must not only act independently to advance its interests as a class, but must also play a key role in this front as a champion of the democratic aspirations of all racially-oppressed groups. The philosophy and practice of PAC's armed wing Poqo - 'we alone' - means working-class surrender of its leading role in the democratic revolution. The result of such isolation would be to dilute the content of this revolution, to hand over its direction to other class forces and to endanger future socialist advance.

Organisationally, how can the working class both advance its own interests, and play a leading role in alliance with other classes?

In general, workers must be active wherever people come together in struggle, whether at national, regional or local levels. The UDF, youth organisations, women's organisations, civics, street committees, students, church-goers, etc, must all feel the influence of workers' militancy and dedication. But the role of workers as a class and the way this class relates to other classes rests on three main organised sectors of our struggle: the national movement, the trade union movement and, not least, the political party of the working class.

The national movement and the working class: As head of the liberation alliance and prime representative of all the oppressed, the ANC welcomes within its ranks all, from whatever class they come, who support and are ready to fight for the aims of the Freedom Charter. The ANC is a revolutionary nationalist organisation whose popular roots, however, must not be confused with 'populism'. The ANC's strategy and tactics bear witness to an approach which recognises the significance of the different class formations which make up 'the people'. To be truly representative of a people whose overwhelming majority are

workers, the ANC recognises the need to show a strong bias towards the working class both in its composition and policies.

It does not apologise for the fact that it considers it both proper and necessary for socialist ideology to be discussed and understood in its ranks. But it would clearly weaken the necessary multi-class character of the ANC if it adopted socialist objectives as part of its programme. Although the ANC is not, and should not become, a workers' political vanguard, worker participation in its ranks is one of the most important ways in which the working class can assert its role in relation to other classes in the democratic revolution.

Trade unions and the working class: Trade unions are the prime mass legal organisations of the working class. To fulfil their purpose, they must be as broad as possible and must fight to maintain their legal public status. Unions must unite, on an industrial basis, all workers - at whatever level of political consciousness, the most backward and the most advanced - who understand the elementary need to come together to defend and advance their economic interests.

But a trade union cannot live without politics. The capitalist state everywhere acts in defence of the bosses. It uses all its instruments of power - the police, army, courts, etc - against workers and their trade unions. It does everything to defend the capitalist system. It makes and enforces laws to help increase workers' exploitation. This reality has taught workers in every part of the world that it is impossible for their trade unions to ignore broader political conflict.

In South Africa, where racism and capitalism are two sides of the same coin, it is even clearer that a trade union cannot stand aside from the liberation struggle. But the very fact that conditions demand that workers engaged in economic struggle must also involve themselves with broader political questions has helped to blur the line between trade unionism and political leadership of the working class as a whole.

The trade union movement is the most important mass contingent of the working class. Its organised involvement in struggle will help reinforce the dominant role of workers as a class. But the basic character of a trade union means it cannot act as a working-class political vanguard. If it attempted to do so, it would risk committing organisational suicide as a mass force.

What about the debate on whether to incorporate socialist objectives into

the trade union movement, and the related question of union adoption of the Freedom Charter and/or a workers' charter?

We must guard against premature attempts to formally incorporate socialist objectives into programmes of trade unions and the federations to which they belong. Individual membership, or the affiliation of unions to a federation, cannot be made conditional on the acceptance of such a high level of political consciousness. To attempt to do so is to confuse a trade union with a political vanguard.

It is true that trade unions and workers' experience of struggle in unions provide the most fertile field in which to school masses of workers in socialist understanding and political consciousness. But this is not achieved by proclaiming 'aims' which are not yet understood by the mass of membership. Such an approach would narrow the mass character of the trade union movement and, in addition, give the enemy the very excuse it needs to deal with one of its most formidable foes.

The possibilities of spreading socialist consciousness within trade unions should not be sacrificed through short cuts which will, in fact, slow down its advances. The adoption by some unions of the Freedom Charter correctly reflects the mass popular mood. It is a pointer to a more realistic linkage between the economic and political struggle in the present phase.

The debate around the Freedom Charter versus a workers' charter is posed in an exclusivist way, and this leads to confusion. There is no reason why both the Freedom Charter and a workers' charter cannot stand side by side. In practice the debate, as posed by the 'workerist' tendency, has emphasised an incorrect 'either-or' approach.

What about the independent political organisation of the working class?

Victory in the democratic revolution must find a working class already equipped organisationally and ideologically to assert its role. A strong trade union movement and a workers' political vanguard are, we believe, essential preconditions for such an outcome. There is both a harmony and a distinction in the character and roles of these two vital sectors, and the failure to understand

this distinction will inevitably weaken the cause of working-class leadership.

Workers' political leadership must represent the workers not just in economic struggle against the bosses, but in relation to all classes of society, and to the state as an organised force. A trade union cannot carry out this role. Only a political vanguard of the working class, made up of professional revolutionaries coming mainly from the ranks of advanced working-class cadres with a capacity to combine both legal and illegal activity, can do so. We believe the SACP is such a party, and that its history, with all its ups and downs, has equipped it to play such a role.

The SACP's characterisation of South Africa as a colonial situation of a special type is very controversial. Some have argued that the thesis of internal colonialism is only a descriptive metaphor, with no theoretical or explanatory status. Can internal colonialism as a concept really adequately interpret South African reality, with its developed class structures and cleavages based on a mode of production, distribution and circulation which is dominantly capitalist?

The term 'internal colonialism', or 'colonialism of a special type', is both analytically correct and politically useful in describing South African reality. The reality it describes is that the colonial condition and status of the black majority has persisted despite the juridical, constitutional and economic changes which followed the Act of Union in 1910. From the point of view of the dominated majority the form has changed, but the substance of their colonial status has not altered.

The onus is on those who contest this proposition to describe the point or the stage in the post-1910 period when blacks were freed from their special colonial constraints, which continued to apply to all of them whatever class they belonged to. For example, can the proposition be disputed that the black worker is exploited

both as a worker and as a black worker?

We deliberately do not equate internal colonialism with the classic colonialism which describes geographical separation between the colonial power and the colonised people. That is why we call it colonialism of a special type. It is an innovative concept which should be judged in its unique context. It is a concept which was not there in previous marxist learning, and we have entered it into the communist book in our elaboration of the indigenous theory of the South African revolution.

We believe the concept of internal colonialism provides a valid and rigorous theoretical foundation for the emphasis we give to the present phase of the national liberation struggle, particularly its main content in the period of the national-democratic revolution. It provides a starting point for grappling with the complex question of the relationship between national and class struggle. It helps us to understand the specific character of South Africa's dominant capitalist mode of production and the way in which this specificity mediates and influences virtually every level of conflict within it.

The most persistent critique of our thesis relates to a charge that it nurtures a form of populism, allegedly conjuring up a struggle between 'peoples' rather than 'classes'. Of relevance here is what has already been said about the way we understand the relationship between class and national struggle and how we apply our understanding in revolutionary practice. If there have been departures on this score, then they must be specifically assessed and debated, and not mechanically attributed to the basic internal colonialist thesis.

It is in any case difficult to understand why our detractors should conclude that the thesis leads to a dilution of our understanding of class divisions both within the dominant and subject peoples, and why it should divert us from the correct application of class criteria in the social conflicts. This does not follow, even in the case of colonialism of the more classical variety such as Britain and pre-1948 India.
