

STICKER ART

"Trust Us"

(How the SADF loves our people to death)

An extract from a letter from Cradock

Last week the SADF, police and railway police cordoned off Cradock. They searched every home. A helicopter circled the township with a loud speaker denouncing the Cradock Residents Association and the United Democratic Front as a communist plot. They handed out little yellow stickers, the now common little yellow stickers that say: We are your friends. Trust Us.

Against this, let us look at the stickers put out by the liberation movement. The typical "bourgeois art" response is — they are also propaganda, only they take a different political perspective than the SADF stickers. As a start, they are dismissed out of hand. Propaganda, these people tell us, and Art do not mix.

We reject this analysis totally. Not simply because "our politics are correct and theirs are not". But the demands of our politics and our approach force us into a completely different attitude to the aesthetics and production of graphic work such as stickers.

Look for a moment at what the regime tries to do with its stickers, compared with what we are trying to do with ours. The regime's stickers come at the tail-end of a massive operation against the people, as part of a co-ordinated structure of lies and deception. Their purpose is only to confuse and mislead. The stickers can be read to mean the "defence" force is saying: "Residents, you must trust us, we are your friends". Despite the evidence of Casspirs patrolling the streets, of armed men with submachine guns breaking down doors. Or the stickers, meant to be worn by

residents already searched, could be seen as an ironic note to the occupying forces: "You can trust the resident wearing this, since he has already been searched and declared clean." Either way, such efforts to distort the realistics of the SADF invasion of the townships could never become a valuable addition to any culture; it could never become "Art", you might say. The person putting such a sticker together instinctively recognises this fact by giving them no more than mere technical competence, if that, to putting the lying words on paper.

But look now at our stic-

and women disapprove, the stickers land in the gutter. Therefore our images must reflect the people's understanding, must talk to them. A May Day sticker shows a Congress wheel, interlocking with a gear, in green, gold and black, with a red star: the interrelation of the workers struggle and the political struggle. Another depicts hands holding a spanner, a hammer, and a red flag, moving forward. Yet another shows a man and a woman worker striding confidently carrying their tools: the workers advance! And depicting such truths, we argue, must lie at the base of real culture.



kers.

The purpose of progressive political art is not to mislead, but to expose, to lay clear the roots of the situation, and to outline the direction of growth. True, we aim at the same audience as the SADF: the townships. But to be worthwhile our art must be taken to the people. Students or workers or women put our stickers up, not occupying forces. If the students and workers



From this base we can look for aesthetics within our sticker design. The demands of size and use require extreme simplicity and clarity. The artist who supports the status quo looks for obscurantism and mysticism as "truth", because he does not dare say, simply, this is how life is. At best he will strive to find a personal private truth. The progressive cultural worker wants a bright and shining understanding: this is how life is, truly. A personal understanding of the wider social truth.

It is not a question of abstraction versus realism either. As long as the abstractions are instantly recognisable, such as the symbol of the wheel, they can be used. Indeed, part of the cultural workers task is to find and develop such symbolism. We must search through our personal and political experiences for those unifying factors, in our own, our people's consciousness. The clenched fist is

indeed part of our reality.

More than that, we must bring our images together to enrich, to deepen understanding. It is not merely that workers hold a flag, a hammer, a flower: they hold them with strength of purpose, grace and even direction — forward! It is not merely that two workers stride towards the future. It is the texture of their clothes, the starkness of their forms. We are not just telling people something. We are bringing them a new image that should sharpen perception. The question of technique gains urgency.

And we can fail, too, sometimes. The image can be too simple, it can inspire only an insipid "oh yes, but we know that already! This is the cliché." The work can be incompetent unclear for technical reasons. We do see ineffective and downright bad progressive art on occasion.

So we say: our stickers are not so easily dismissed as "only propaganda". Like all serious cultural work, they search for a sharper understanding, a clearer perception, and they follow an aesthetic demanded by that search, within the restrictions of the medium.

We could of course make these points about posters and backdrops, about any progressive graphics. The same logic applies: the role of graphic work within the people's struggle is to find clear and vivid imagery to improve our understanding of the situation and the need to change it. But stickers are such an unacknowledged form of cultural work, summarily dismissed as propaganda. Rather this seemingly insignificant form must also be seen as a part of our flowering culture, the one we are building now, today, for our own tomorrow. We cannot neglect or dismiss any part of this as "merely propaganda". These images become our truth.

Our Army.

In the middle of the night
They woke us
To move us
As the enemy was expected.

Outside in the darkness
I stumbled,
Almost fell.

A comrade steadied me,
Took the sleeping baby
from my arms,
and handed me his AK.

Marius Schoon.
Lubango, Angola.
January, 1984.

