

Legalised with the ANC on February 2, the communist party has yet to go public. A senior member of the party's internal underground emerges briefly from the shadows to explain why, and to outline the party's thinking for the immediate future.

David Niddrie reports



Out of the black and into the red

Q: The SACP is now legal but has not yet established a public presence. Why not, and how and when does it plan to do so?

A: It is necessary to be clear that the unbanning has not truly created conditions where the party can exist freely.

Technically and legally, there is still a host of laws circumscribing the work of communists. The propagation, the actual work of organising a communist party is still illegal in this country under the Internal Security Act.

And even in its discussions with the African National Congress, the regime tried hard to persuade the ANC to drop a known communist, our general secretary Joe Slovo, from the delegation.

But despite (the many restrictions on us) the party intends to fully

occupy the legal space opened up by the unbanning - possibly by the third quarter of this year.

It is currently engaged in consultation and an examination of how it should occupy that legal space.

The consultation and discussion are focusing on how the party should emerge publicly, what sort of image it should have, how it should structure itself to ensure that it roots itself in the black working class, in the militant youth and among radical intellectuals.

The process may seem slow to an onlooker and to the immense mass base which supports many of the platforms of the communist party. But our party has been illegal for almost 40 years. There is only a handful of comrades with any experience of existence as a legal party.

Generation after generation of communists has been nurtured and has grown to political maturity under conditions of extreme repression. They have developed a style of work which is peculiar to those conditions.

The process of consultation is thus vital. It means that the legal communist party will bring into it the best traditions of underground life - traditions of discipline, dedication and unwavering commitment to the cause of socialism. But there is a whole baggage of experience which will have to be shed ... the style of work that comes with living a totally conspiratorial life.

An open party has to face not only the challenge of legality, but also of the negative experiences of building socialism.

That process was initiated slightly before the formal unbanning of the ANC and SACP and is continuing. It involves consultations with groups and individuals, with contacts visiting the party outside, as well as the networks inside the country.

Q: Do you expect the government to ease the restrictions on your emergence as an open party?

A: Present indications are that the discussions are moving in the right direction. But clearly the Nationalist government is firmly committed to an anti-communist path. It often engages in rhetoric indicating a huge gap that it will have to cross between its current status as an autocratic government to one committed to full democracy. Indications are, though, that at least it stands at a point where it recognises, within itself, the bankruptcy of apartheid.

The signs are good, but the way events unfold depends not only on what De Klerk and his colleagues decide. It depends on the exchange of views in discussions between the government and the ANC - but even more importantly on what our people do and what the international community does.

There is a fluidity in South African politics: yes, De Klerk has moved and it would appear that he has made a firm commitment to the abolition of apartheid. But the reality is that apartheid exists, the security establishment exists, activists and even spontaneous mass activity of resistance still faces the barrage of repression.

The party would very much like to disclose itself fully. Not because it wants to do so with regard to the regime, but because it needs to do so with regard to its constitu-

ency and to the mass of the people.

But it cannot react to current reality on the basis that what is happening is irreversible and that the recognition by the regime that apartheid is untenable means that the regime has committed itself to true democracy.

But we hope that our people can force a condition where the developments become irreversible. And, and as De Klerk and his colleagues move towards a commitment to total democracy and take practical steps to abolish apartheid, the party will present itself fully.

When that is depends on how far developments move. We are all actors, the white community, the black community. The reality of South African politics is that the initiative today rests with the oppressed masses. A further reality is that we are faced with a government which has for the first time in the history of 340 years of white rule in South Africa begun to show a responsiveness to the struggles of the black oppressed.

We are optimistic. The granite of apartheid has cracked. But we have an immense job ahead to ensure that the monument of apartheid is smashed.

Q: You refer to the party rooting itself in various sectors of society and (the SACP journal) Umsebenzi has effectively invited workers, the militant youth and radical intellectuals to join the SACP. This suggests a move towards establishing the SACP as a mass party.

A: This is a matter long debated in the party. But while we were totally illegal, it could not move out of certain parameters. Specifically it related to how communists work in fraternal and mass organisations.

From the initial periods of clandestinity, communists had to learn how to work in the mass organisations without dictating to the mass organisations, or reducing themselves to a conspiratorial group meeting in secrecy and imposing their views on the mass organisations.

One of the most important terrains where communists were able to learn and overcome the tendency of a group imposing its views has been in the alliance of ANC, SACP and Sactu. This has paid off well in equipping communists for the period of legality.

But at the same time one of the key elements of the debates going on with regard to the emergence of the party is to understand the constituency that has grown up behind the banner of the party.

Despite areas of overlap between support for the ANC, for the party or for the armed struggle of Umkhonto, there is a firm (party) constituency within the working class, within the militant youth and within a small but growing radical intelligentsia.

So the question of mass party has, correctly, been raised in Umsebenzi. Discussions so far indicate that by the time the party launches itself the question will have been settled.

We have an immense constituency. But we have to contend with a situation in which the positive developments cannot be allowed to be made reversible. And a key element in ensuring irreversibility is to develop an organised mass formation.

The ANC undoubtedly has the capacity of becoming an organised formation of at least 1-million members, if not more, this year.



The SACP's hammer and sickle: the flag's public, but the party isn't

The party cannot aspire to such ambitious membership. It has more consciously to look at the class formations it draws into its ranks.

That is not to say that anyone who wants to be a communist, who believes in the principles of communism, who supports the programme and strategies of the party will be excluded - or even can be excluded.

But we have to bear in mind that the social force that is going to create, and has the uncircumscribed interest in building, a society free of exploitation of man by man is the working class.

The party therefore has to ensure that it is rooted in that class.

Personally I believe there will be difficulties if the party in legality sets rigid rules for selection.

For example, as an illegal party we developed strict rules for probation. Those who wished to join or were approached to join had to provide an exhaustive background and had to serve an extended period of probation.

The rules adopted with the last constitution made it necessary to serve a six-month probation under supervision, both of study and of activity in the struggle. It was after that probation that the potential comrade's performance helped to determine whether he or she was admitted.

It would be difficult to maintain probation. If we want to

take the constituency that has been shaped in struggle and mould it into a meaningful force, we will have to be very careful about how we present ourselves in terms of selectivity.

I feel the question of a mass party is unavoidable, but I don't want to pre-empt decisions emerging from these consultations.

Q: What form are these consultations taking?

A: At the last party congress, held last year under conditions of total clandestinity and when the developments of this year were hardly imaginable, it was decided that the next congress would be held inside South Africa, whether under conditions of clandestinity or not. Since then the party has decided that its next congress will be held in 1991, hopefully to coincide with the anniversary of the party in July.

A special congress now is unlikely. Time is against us. The party has to conserve its resources and yet find a way to engage in extensive consultations.

One of the problems is that discussing the matter within the confines of existing cells does not help the comrades to open out and debate the issue beyond the ranks of the four or five who constitute that cell.

The ideas generated in that debate are confined to the experience of that tightly-knit group, used and accustomed

to conspiratorial life.

The party has been looking for ways to overcome that. It has regional structures within the country which usually grew up to coordinate and provide overall supervision to the cells in each region.

That provides for some cross-cell feeding of ideas, but it is not enough.

But the consultations have even taken the form of the discussions between the party and Cosatu in Harare last month. There Cosatu had about 31 delegates from within the country, including communists. The communist party brought to that meeting 28 members. It was an important forum for sounding out not only how members of the party feel about the form in which the party should emerge, but how others in the working class feel.

We are also consulting trade unionists, people in the broad democratic movement. We believe that out of it all will not only come a better and wider experience, but also a visible demonstration of the democratic character of the party.

Q: What are the implications of a mass party for its relationship with the ANC?

A: A legal ANC will obviously become an area of intense ideological debate.

And there are possible dangers that our close alliance can be driven to a framework of competitiveness. But I do not think, given the history of the alliance, the experience of decades of sharing the trench, where communist and non-communist have learned to treasure each other's lives, the party and the ANC leadership will allow the alliance to become a relationship of rivalry.

There are forces, particularly in white politics and fringe elements in black politics, which would dearly love to see the party and the ANC in competition. But both party and ANC are conscious of that and have reaffirmed, in the current phase, their adherence to the alliance.

But we are in a phase where, for the first time, as we see the prospect emerge of a truly non-racial and democratic country, the contest of ideas over what type of South Africa we want must be embarked on. We will have to feel our way to developing the rules within which the ideological contest takes place. Some of us will have to learn to restrain ourselves, others to be more forthcoming.

My own experience of the alliance suggests there is no way we will be driven into a relationship of rivalry. For the party, the issue is that, as an open party, it must now extend democratic practices within itself and make itself publicly accountable. In doing so, any incipient danger that the two organisations will be driven into a path of rivalry will be overcome.

Q: How do you foresee the relationship developing then? Do you foresee, for example in elections to a constituent assembly, both formations contesting for seats?

A: How we should present ourselves at that moment

is looking pretty far ahead in terms of phases, although it may not be that far ahead in terms of time. But it is early days.

The (Groote Schuur) discussions with the government are only at the first stages of ensuring that the government removes obstacles towards a negotiated resolution of the conflict. And already the removal of those obstacles is pretty stony ground. The regime has certainly decided to move ahead, but it seems to want to engage in this process of removing these obstacles by making it appear that the liberation forces and their positions present obstacles. This is an area of intense contest, where the rules of the game are changing. It is necessary to convince the regime both by the actions of the mass of our people, through intensification of the struggle, and by the debates around the table.

That is where we are today.

The alliance has clearly committed itself to the Harare declaration and there are specific phases if there is to be a negotiated solution.

It is at the point of a constituent assembly that we will be able to say: yes, truly South Africans have decided that the resolution will take place and that the people will participate in that process.

If it is necessary at the time that the party presents itself with an independent face, that it emerges in the constituent assembly as part of the alliance, the mechanics of that will have to be looked at. Not only from the point of view of the party-political interests of these two giants of the liberation struggle, but how to ensure that the ordinary people of our country participate fully in the writing of that constitution.

Q: Can you expand on the announcement after last month's Harare meeting between the party and Cosatu of an alliance between the two?

A: There has been an alliance of the party, the ANC and Sactu. Sactu has since decided to merge (with Cosatu) on the basis that Cosatu is *the* workers' federation.

Already the ANC formations within South Africa have had formal meetings with Cosatu. At those meetings the presence of the general secretary of the party as part of the ANC delegation facilitated that those bi-lateral discussions also took into account the party as a member of the alliance.

It is inevitable that those discussions will have to look at the creation of formal mechanisms of consultation and for developing common platforms and programmes of action.

It is not a question of the party or the ANC going to engage in discussions with Cosatu with ready-made programmes. We are engaged in a process in which we recognise the independence of the formations in that alliance, but also the inter-dependence of those formations.

So the discussions have moved beyond a declaration of intent that we are allies, to now formulating the mechanisms and giving flesh and life to our proclamations. ●