

OUT OF THE STRIKE

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Honorary Secretary of the All-In-African National Council in South Africa and a former leader of the banned African National Congress; now organising resistance to the policies of the South African Government from underground.

SOUTH AFRICA is a house divided against itself. In spite of the lofty motto placed on our national coat of arms—*Eendrag maak Magt* or Unity is Strength—South Africa is a country split from top to bottom by fierce racial tensions and strife. The three-day strike at the end of May 1961 starkly emphasised the chronic state of disunity that has existed in the country since Union.

To the Afrikaners the proclamation of a republican form of government represented the final triumph of their rancorous struggles against British dominion. It meant that the final link with the British Crown had at last been broken, that the sovereignty of the 'volk' had at last been realised and could now be enjoyed. But to the 10,000,000 Africans, and to the other non-white sections of the population, the Republic was a form of government based only upon force and fraud. Under it white supremacy, the savage suppression of the rights and aspirations of the non-white peoples, would be practised. To them, such a society was totally unacceptable, and a campaign to give concrete expression to this opposition was immediately started.

It is now common knowledge that on 26 March this year, the Pietermaritzburg All-In-African Conference unanimously demanded that the Government call a national convention—with delegates elected by all adult men and women, black and white—not later than 31 May 1961, to draw up a democratic constitution acceptable to all sections of the population. The Conference resolved that, if the Government ignored this demand, country-wide demonstrations would mark the rejection by South Africa's non-white majority of a white Republic created without their consent. Subsequently, the All-In-African National Action Council, which was established in terms of a resolution of this Conference, announced that the demonstrations would be held on 29, 30 and 31 May.

No political organisation in this country has ever conducted a mass campaign under such dangerous and difficult conditions. The whole operation was mounted outside—even in defiance

of—the law. Because members of the Continuation Committee which organised the Pietermaritzburg Conference had been arrested, the names of the members of the National Action Council were not disclosed, while all Council meetings and activities had to be secret. The Government banned all meetings throughout the country. A special law was rushed through Parliament, empowering the Government to arrest and imprison for twelve days anyone connected with the organisation of the demonstrations. Our organisers and field-workers were closely trailed and hounded by members of the Special Branch and had to work in areas heavily patrolled by municipal and Government police. Homes and offices of known Government opponents were raided, while more than 10,000 Africans were arrested and imprisoned. The army was placed on a war footing, while white civilians, including women, were armed and organised to shoot their fellow South Africans.

In spite of all these obstacles, we succeeded in building up a powerful and effective organisational machine to promote a strike of protest and the demand for a national convention. Support for the strike grew stronger every day, and the demand for a national convention roared and crashed across the country. Political and religious organisations, university professors and students, all joined the cry for a convention.

Until ten days before the strike, the press had provided uncharacteristically fair coverage of the campaign, describing it as “the most intensive and best campaign ever organised by non-whites in this country” and openly predicting unprecedented success. Then, suddenly and simultaneously, all the newspapers switched their line. Heavy publicity was given to statements made by Government leaders and employers’ organisations condemning the strike and threatening reprisals against all who stayed away from work. Statements made by the National Action Council were diluted, deliberately distorted or suppressed.

At seven o’clock in the morning of the first day of the strike, Radio South Africa announced that the strike had failed. The announcer explained that this news was based on information supplied at six o’clock in the morning of the same day by Colonel Spengler, Head of the Witwatersrand Division of the Special Branch. (Monday morning bulletins, incidentally, reported that the labour position was ‘normal’. On Tuesday the bulletins said that ‘the labour position has returned to normal’.

They wanted it both ways!) Similar police reports were the news of the day on repeated radio broadcasts. This meant that long before the factory gates were opened and, in some areas, even before the workers had boarded their buses and trains for work, the police and radio were busy announcing that the strike had collapsed. Late morning newspapers issued special editions which faithfully reproduced the police and radio reports.

Even then, all the facts were not that easily suppressed. The Johannesburg *'Star'* of the same day reported: "Early estimates of absenteeism in Johannesburg ranged from 40% to 75%." The later editions of the same paper dropped even this cautious estimate of the strike's success in the industrial heart of South Africa. Headlines carried the verdict "flop" and "failure", and white South Africa tried to settle back to 'normal'.

Given less overwhelming odds, the strike in Johannesburg would have been as complete as the first day's response initially promised. The Coloured in the Cape, notably Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, responded splendidly; this time, in contrast to 1960, the Africans waited to measure the reaction of their newly welcomed allies. Durban registered a moderate response.

Industrial workers in the key centres once again answered the call for political action, and the great gaps in their ranks were for the most part 'tied' labour—the miners in their concrete closed-in compounds; railway workers threatened with sackings, deportations, loss of sick fund benefits; compound labour working for municipalities and also under threat of dismissal and pass endorsement out of the towns; and large industrial enterprises like the Government-controlled Iron and Steel Corporation.

The Indian people stood everywhere firm against threat and violence.

The strike in Port Elizabeth was more widespread by far on the second day than on the first, and this was the one centre where widely publicised verdicts of failure surrendered to popular interpretation and confidence. A survey of the extent and effects of the strike was conducted after the event by the Port Elizabeth Chamber of Industries, but the Chamber took good care NOT to reveal the results of its investigations.

Only after those first tense strike days had passed were more balanced assessments made of the extent of the strike, and reports filtered through that hundreds of thousands of workers had stayed away from work, while the students in schools and

colleges throughout South Africa had adopted the campaign as their own.

On 3 June 1961, *'Post'*, a weekly newspaper that circulates throughout the country, published reports from its team of staff journalists and photographers, who had kept continuous watch in industrial centres and non-white areas, and who had conducted extensive investigations on the effect of the strike. Said the newspaper: "Many thousands of workers registered their protest against the Republic and the Government's refusal to cooperate with non-whites. **THEY DID NOT GO TO WORK.** They disrupted much of South African commerce and industry. Some factories worked with skeleton staffs, others closed, and many other businesses were shut down for the three days." The leading article in *'New Age'* of 8 June acclaimed the strike as the most widespread on a national scale that the country had ever seen.

News from outlying areas, especially country districts, is slow to percolate into the cities, and for days and weeks afterwards, reports continued to seep through of support for the strike on farm and in trading store.

A significant feature of the strike was the wide support it received from students of all races. African students at the University College of Fort Hare, at Lovedale and Healdtown, at Freemantle Boys School near Queenstown and at Endaleni in the district of Richmond, all stayed away from classes. There were equally impressive demonstrations at St. John's College, Umtata, at the Botha Sigcau Secondary School, at Kilnerton and the University of Natal, where less than fifty students attended classes out of five hundred non-white students. In many other schools throughout the country, children boycotted Republic celebrations and refused to accept Government medals to commemorate its inauguration.

This impressive demonstration by students was not confined to Africans. It extended to Coloured and Indian students as well. White students at Rhodes University and at the University of the Witwatersrand came out in support. Sam Sly, writing in the liberal fortnightly *'Contact'* on June 15, observed: "In defiance of that sickening and sterile rule, there were plenty of politics on plenty of campuses. Enough to bring large numbers of armed police to five campuses. There was defiance, leadership and courage amongst the students. There was political awareness, even non-racial solidarity. Before, what had one heard but

minority protests, lost among the sounds of the inter-varsity rugby crowd or the chatter in the students' cafeteria." The rebellion in the schools and colleges is far from over. It has just begun.

The Nationalist Government was severely shaken, particularly by the militancy of African students, because it had trusted that Bantu Education, intended to inculcate a spirit of servility, would permanently stamp out revolt and challenge amongst the African youth. The emphatic rejection by African students of the Republic demonstrates not only the failure of Bantu Education to smother the demands and desires in the bloodstream of every African, but testifies to the vitality, the irrepresible resilience of African nationalism.

For the first time in many years the Coloured people emerged as an organised and powerful political force, to fight alongside their African and Indian colleagues. Nothing could be more disturbing to a Government whose continued existence depends on disunity within the files of the oppressed themselves.

The Pan-Africanist Congress blundered right from the very beginning. After supporting the resolution calling for All-In African talks and for a multi-racial National Convention, and after serving for some time on the Continuation Committee which planned the Pietermaritzburg Conference, they took refuge in assiduous sniping at the campaign. Early in February, they called for mass demonstrations on 21 March this year, the anniversary of Sharpeville. No one responded to the desperate distraction, however, and, four days afterwards, 1,400 delegates from all over South Africa reacted to the call of the Continuation Committee by voting unanimously in favour of a National Convention and for mass demonstrations. The P.A.C. took an even more disastrous step by issuing pamphlets which attacked the demonstrations and so helped the Government to break the strike. Almost all Africans, some of whom had previously supported the P.A.C., were deeply shocked by a rivalry which extended even to sabotage of the popular struggle. The three-year-old breakaway from the African National Congress will find further survival very difficult if it persists in wrecking what it cannot build.

Without doubt, this campaign remained an impressive demonstration of the strength of our organisation, of the high level of political consciousness attained by our people, and of their readiness to struggle against the most intimidating odds. On

the other hand, we charge fair-weather groups—those opposed to the Verwoerd Government for the havoc it is bringing to our national life and economic security, and yet fearful of the only force which can really dislodge this Government, the African people and their fighting allies—with having seized with relief on the weak spots of the strike and having blacked out or underwritten its great gains.

Our achievements, however, we know full well, must not be used as an excuse for exaggerating our success or for ignoring errors committed and weaknesses that require urgent attention. To do so would seriously hamper us in developing any successful campaigns in the future.

We appealed to our people to conduct themselves in a peaceful and non-violent manner. We judged it necessary to warn them not to place themselves in situations where they might be targets for the trigger-happy police. We gave assurances that there would be no intimidation whatsoever and that those people who wanted to go to work on the three days of strike were free to do so. For we are confident that, *given a free choice*, our people will react as one man to calls for actions in pursuit of their rights.

This Government, however, the whole system of white supremacy in a police state, gives our people no freedom of choice whatsoever, not even the freedom to withdraw their labour, to sit quietly in their townships or to walk in disciplined procession through the streets. In South Africa it is always the Government, its army and police, that must be warned to refrain from violence, for they are the source.

At the first announcement of a new African campaign, our enemies—and several friends—offer African political organisations gratuitous advice about the dangers of violence. Let those who would protect us—and no one is more solicitous of the care of our people than we, whose families face the mouth of the gun and the bullets—take action to disarm not the people but the Government, which arms and wages unremitting war upon us. Appeals to our people for non-violent demonstrations could easily have been interpreted as instructions against picketing. Political and trade union organisations everywhere recognise picketing as a legitimate form of action. As Alan Doyle wrote in *'Fighting Talk'*: "The Government has rushed through draconic anti-strike legislation to stop picketing, or even the giving of a scornful word or look to a scab. Nevertheless,

the workers have their own ways of making those who go against a majority struggle feel the weight of their displeasure. Even the warmest of supporters will hesitate to 'go it alone' when he sees others streaming to work; for the strike situation depends essentially on solidarity, as every trade unionist knows. That explains why in a number of areas the early morning trains were empty; but some workers changed their minds and went to work later in the morning—because they saw others doing so. A strike, even a political strike, can never be a purely individual matter. . . . It is only natural that all but the most advanced and conscious worker will, however convinced they may be themselves, look anxiously to see what the other fellow is doing. A small minority of scabs can destroy any movement, industrial or political, unless means are found, as they have been found all over the world, to expose them and render them harmless."

Here was a national political strike, facing an armed force like none other on the African continent, organising a strike without picket lines. Here, too, was a national strike organised from underground. The Government told the country it would not declare a State of Emergency, for it had not yet recovered from the disastrous effects of the 1960 one. The latter half of May 1961 might not have been called an Emergency, but it was one nevertheless.

Every known political figure, local or national, understood he would be a catch for the police dragnet and, in order to remain an effective organiser, went underground. Key organising continued right up to the moment of the strike. But lack of experience in working under illegal conditions—the African National Congress had only been banned for fourteen months—created dislocation in certain areas, and leaders and organisers were not readily available on the spot to attend to the problems that arose as the anti-strike barrage reached its climax during the fourteen days before the strike.

The strike itself was witness to the great political maturity of those struggling for their rights in South Africa. Here was a national strike organised not for immediate wage demands by an industrial working-class, nor a strike around an intensely emotional issue like the police shooting at Sharpeville. This was an overt political strike, to back a demand for a new National Convention, a new constitution-making body, a demand for the full franchise, for the right to legislate, the right to

chart a new path for South Africa. It was a strike for fundamental rather than immediate peripheral demands, a strike for the right, for the power, to solve our bread-and-butter, or mealie meal problems ourselves (though it has been said critically, and I concede the point has merit, that the day-to-day demands of the people could have been more closely linked and more brightly highlighted in the propaganda material for the strike.)

The African people have a mature and developed understanding of the issue I outlined in my open letter (written on the eve of the strike) to the Leader of the Opposition United Party. To Sir de Villiers Graaff I wrote:

“The country is becoming an armed camp, the Government is preparing for civil war; none of us can draw any satisfaction from this developing crisis. We for our part have put forward, in the name of the African people, a majority of South Africans, serious proposals for a way out of the crisis. We have called on the Government to convene an elected National Convention of representatives of all races without delay, and to charge that Convention with drawing up a new constitution for this country which would be acceptable to all race groups. We can see no workable alternative to this proposal, except that the Nationalist Government proceeds to enforce a minority decision on all of us, with the certain consequence of still deeper crisis, and a continued period of strife and disaster ahead. The alternatives seem to be, to state them bluntly: talk it out, or shoot it out.”

At the time I wrote to the Leader of the Opposition, I believed that the call for a National Convention could be the turning point in our country's history. It would unite the overwhelming majority of our people, African, Indian, Coloured and white, for a single purpose—round-table talks over a new constitution. It would isolate the Nationalist Government, clinging desperately to power against the popular will, and compel a submission to sanity.

The official Opposition remained silent. There was, however, a widespread response to the call from Progressives and Liberals, churchmen, university professors, students, intellectuals, some sectors of business and industry and, of course, the Congress Alliance. Since our call for the Convention there have been talks across the colour line, proposals for consultation among leaders of the different sections of the population.

I welcome consultations, non-colour bar conferences, and have taken part in many. Multi-race assemblies spread under-

standing, forge the unity of anti-Nationalist forces, thrash out common methods and a common approach. But the African people are not interested in mere talking for talking's sake. Their own agony grows ever more acute. Our Pietermaritzburg resolution stipulated—and we took much trouble over its formulation—that a National Convention must have sovereign powers to draft a new constitution, and we believe that no such Convention will ever take place without mass pressure, without popular struggle.

The May strike and the demand for a National Convention, all our demands indeed, are inextricably linked with our decision to launch a campaign of non-cooperation against the Government. The strike must be seen in this light.

There were those who cried: "The strike has failed. It was against the Saracen Republic. It did not bring it down." The strike was directed at all that is most hated in the policy of apartheid, to stake the claim of all our people to a share in government and in determining the shape of our country. It was never imagined—and our written and spoken word on the strike never implied—that this *one* action, in *isolation*, could defeat the Nationalists. Only the most naive and impatient can believe that a single campaign will create a wholly different South Africa.

We see the position differently. South Africa is now in a state of perpetual crisis. The Government's show of force, its reliance on the tank, the bullet and the uniform, are a show not of strength but of weakness, revealing its basic incapacity to face the challenge of a seething South Africa, a changing Africa, a world in revolution.

The crisis will inevitably grow more acute. The people's movements will continue, in city and country district alike, despite ban and intimidation, learning new ways to struggle, new ways to survive. The May strike was one fighting episode. From it, the people emerged more confident, unshaken by prognoses that they had failed, that strikes could 'no longer work'. In the centres where the strike met with popular response, the people themselves learnt that they could not trust any verdict on their struggle but their own. They have accordingly come out of the strike better steeled for the struggles ahead. Their own organisations are not weaker but stronger, more resilient. Future struggles lie ahead. . . .