

## TECHNIQUES OF REVOLT

A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

VOTELESS people have at their disposal limited and well-defined forms of political action. They can ventilate grievances and publicise their policies by means of newspapers, pamphlets and leaflets. Mass meetings and demonstrations can be organised to provide visible evidence of support and to attract more followers. Political strikes, boycotts and defiance of unjust laws are, by comparison and indeed in themselves, advanced forms of struggle: they challenge the authority of the State and bring people into open conflict with police and courts of law.

The extent to which the various forms of political action can be utilised will depend, in the first place, on how much freedom is permitted for organisation and discussion outside the approved electoral system. Another determining factor is the state of mind of the disfranchised and their capacity for organisation. The two conditions are related. As the disfranchised mature politically, so will the State swell its repressive legislation and strengthen its security precautions.

A point may be reached when a politically conscious and active mass of people confronts an apparently unbreakable array of repressive laws, backed by armed force. The entire range of extra-parliamentary, non-violent methods of struggle has been employed without producing appreciable gains. On the contrary, the penalties imposed on those who take part in the struggle become increasingly severe, organisations are driven underground, leaders are jailed, banned and banished, and normal channels for the ventilation of grievances are closed.

At this stage members of the disfranchised population begin to consider seriously the possibilities of violent forms of struggle. That point has now been reached in South Africa. I have heard many people who were disappointed with the results of the stay-home campaign of 29-31 May argue that this type of mass action is not only ineffective but demoralising. Further action of a like nature, they contend, would yield diminishing returns in terms of popular support. They claim that the disfranchised cannot liberate themselves except by methods of individual terrorism, violent sabotage and eventual armed revolt.

People who hold such views agree with the government's claim that the stay-home was a failure. Nothing has been said

by the National Action Council which initiated the campaign to dispute this verdict. The Council's Secretary, Mr. Nelson Mandela, admitted that the strike was not the national success he had hoped for, promised that the shortcomings would be examined, and predicted: "If peaceful protests like these are to be put down by mobilisation of the army and the police, then the people might be forced to use other methods of struggle".

Mr. Mandela's words have been widely interpreted to mean that the time has come for the disfranchised to resort to violence. In a later statement, however, he indicated that what he had in mind was rather a massive 'non-collaboration' campaign, in which refusal to pay taxes would occupy a central place. Nevertheless, the tendency to think that violence is the only effective form of struggle is undoubtedly widespread and must be expected to extend. This being the case, it seems appropriate to consider systematically the value of 'peaceful protests' and, especially, the impact of the stay-home campaign.

Little would be gained by attempting a quantitative estimate of the response. The available evidence comes from partisan sources, is conflicting, and largely unreliable. My own estimate is that the campaign was most successful in Port Elizabeth, where both Africans and Coloured responded well to the strike call. It had a good response, especially on the first day, from Africans in Johannesburg, Indians in Durban, and Coloured in the Western Cape. People who took a great deal of punishment after the Sharpeville-Langa shootings last year did not take part to a notable extent. Only a small proportion of Africans in Durban and the Western Cape withheld their labour. On the other hand, Coloured and Indians, who had not been involved in last year's episode, supported the call in significant numbers.

Support for the campaign was therefore partial and patchy. Must we therefore conclude that the operation failed? Those of us who expected a nearly unanimous response (Mandela spoke of a '100 per cent. stoppage') and a breakdown of the State's organisation are inclined to admit defeat. In my opinion, however, their standard of judgment is wrong, not because they expected too much—optimism being a necessary ingredient of such causes—but because they have a wrong conception of the purpose and functions of mass political action undertaken by a disfranchised and suppressed people.

In the first place, mass campaigns of the stay-home type are launched as a challenge to the legitimacy of the established

political system. They enable the disfranchised to demonstrate in a visible, dramatic and organised manner their utter repudiation of a system of government in which they are unrepresented and over which they have no control. The institution of a Republic provided an admirable occasion for such a demonstration. The disfranchised had not been allowed to vote in the referendum for the Republic; even the Coloured voters of the Cape Province had been excluded. It would have been a grave political error to allow the birth of the Republic to take place without a challenge by the dispossessed.

The highly-principled fence-sitters of the National Anti-C.A.D. (Anti-Coloured Affairs Department), who did their best to wreck the campaign, denounced it as a 'stunt dressed up as a political strike' in a circular issued three weeks before it was due to commence. Now a stunt is a feat that is striking for the skill or strength required of the performers. Parliamentary parties engage in 'trials of strength' at the polls; a disfranchised people must find other means to challenge government. Neither the Anti-C.A.D. nor other critics have suggested a more effective method than the political strike to show South Africa and the world at large that the voteless reject a constitution in which they have no voice.

Secondly, the object of a mass campaign is to assert the claim of the dispossessed to participate in the system of government. They not only repudiate the established order, but also demand that it be reconstituted so as to give them a full share of political power. On this occasion the positive claim took the form of a demand that the government convene a national convention representative of all South Africans, with 'sovereign powers' to draw up a new non-racial democratic constitution.

Many observers claim that the constitutional issue did not appeal to the 'politically immature' Africans, who are concerned mainly with the removal of specific grievances such as pass laws. The demand for a change in the constitution, it is said, did not grip their imagination. 'Contact', the liberal fortnightly, set out the argument in a sympathetic analysis: "The idea itself was too big to succeed, and a campaign whose stated aim cannot be reached does not inspire as a meaningful limited objective can. . . . The objectives had not the right appeal. The Republic was too abstract an objective, a National Convention too academic".

The demand for the holding of a national convention amounts

to a claim that the vote should be extended to the disfranchised. People who argue that the demand for the vote is untimely must surely be blind to the state of opinion at home, to events in the African continent, and to feelings abroad about policies in South Africa. Our basic source of discontent is disfranchisement; none of our grievances will be removed until our people have the vote. The stay-home campaign was a dramatic attempt to drive home this simple truth.

Parliamentary reform as a slogan is far more mature and exacts a higher level of political understanding than demands for the redress of specific grievances. The one is universal, the other sectional. Coloured and Indians cannot be expected to support whole-heartedly a campaign against pass laws, for these do not affect them directly. They and Africans can unite behind a demand for the vote. It is therefore the correct slogan for a country-wide effort to mobilise all sections of the disfranchised.

A third aim of mass campaigns is to educate people politically, consolidate a following and win new adherents. Propaganda by speakers and writers is not enough to keep the ideal of liberation alive. There must also be political action on the part of the people if they are to remain politically alert and develop immunity to the large-scale attempts of government to demoralise them and inculcate acquiescence in their servile status.

The educative value of a campaign and the amount of support it receives depend largely on the scale of the preparatory work, but this in turn is partly conditioned by the government's counter-measures. In view of the formidable obstacles encountered, such as the banning of all meetings from 19 May, the mass arrests of Africans in urban areas, the jailing of leaders—most of whom spent three months in prison during last year's State of Emergency—it is true to say that the organisers made an extremely good effort. Unprecedented numbers of leaflets were distributed by an exceptionally large body of volunteers, numerous house meetings were held and, a rare feature, lack of funds was not a handicap.

The number of people who stayed away from work is not an accurate measure of the impact made by the campaign on political consciousness. Africans who were intimidated from staying at home were fully aware of the issues and in broad sympathy with the aims of the campaign. Not the least valuable of the lessons they learned was that the Coloured shared their detestation of colour discrimination and were as willing as they

to risk imprisonment and loss of jobs in the cause of liberation. If the campaign achieved nothing else, it scored great gains by drawing the Coloured and in particular members of the Malay community in the Western Cape into active struggle.

In the fourth place, campaigns expose and isolate leaders of the dispossessed who, because of timidity, egotism or a servile disposition, attempt to divide them and hold them back from struggle. As on similar occasions in the past, members of the Anti-C.A.D. took their stand on an anti-strike platform with their sworn enemies in the Coloured Peoples' National Union and the Pan-Africanist Congress. The P.A.C., though a banned organisation, was allowed to distribute masses of leaflets calling on Africans to ignore the stay-home appeal. In the big centres the police are said to have actually distributed leaflets purporting to have been issued by the P.A.C., but the P.A.C. itself has not repudiated the efforts made on its behalf by these strange allies. The treachery of the anti-strike organisations has caused deep cleavages to appear in their ranks and will destroy much of the influence they claim to exercise.

Fifthly, the object of a mass campaign is to harass the government, put it on the defensive, hamper its normal operations and undermine confidence in its stability. In these respects the stay-home achieved a magnificent success. As one observer remarked, the organisers "have given South Africa the worst case of the jitters since the emergency last year—and all without a single demonstration or incident". A brief account of the chief measures adopted by government and police to intimidate the people and wreck the campaign will indicate the extent to which the authorities were rattled.

In the country's biggest call-up since the war, scores of Citizen Force and Commando units were mobilised in the big towns. Camps were established at strategic points; heavy army vehicles carrying equipment and supplies moved in a steady stream along the Reef; helicopters hovered over African residential areas and trained searchlights on houses, yards, lanes and unlit areas. Hundreds of white civilians were sworn in as special constables; hundreds of white women spent week-ends in shooting at targets; gun shops sold out their stocks of revolvers and ammunition. All police leave was cancelled throughout the country; armed guards were posted to protect power stations and other sources of essential services; Saracens and troop carriers patrolled townships; police vans patrolled areas and

broadcast statements that Africans who struck work would be sacked and endorsed out of the towns.

The General Laws Amendment Act, gazetted on 19 May, authorised the arrest of people and their imprisonment without bail for 12 days on any charge. On the same day the Minister of Justice imposed a ban on all gatherings throughout South and South West Africa from 19 May to 26 June. With a few specified exceptions, anybody organising a gathering without a magistrate's written permit ran the risk of a fine of £200 or a year's imprisonment. The blanket ban had the ludicrous consequence of a magistrate's permit being obtained to validate the induction ceremony of the State President in Pretoria on 31 May.

Police raided African areas, arrested persons without passes, the unemployed and 'suspects'; set up road blocks at entrances to the big towns and stopped cars; stopped buses carrying Africans, searched and questioned passengers. Security police raided homes of members of banned organisations and of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, Coloured Peoples' Congress, Liberal Party and Congress of Democrats. Documents were seized, and persons active in the stay-home campaign were arrested.

The enormous display of armed force, the suspension of civil liberties, threats by government and employers to dismiss workers who stayed at home, the whole armoury of intimidation and coercion, undoubtedly deterred great numbers of people from taking part in the strike. But it was a pyrrhic victory. The demonstration of strength high-lighted the drastic nature of the oppression which the rulers require to keep the subjugated population under control. It exposed for all the world to see the despotic structure of power that had given birth to the Republic. It deepened the disgust of democrats everywhere for the South African way of life. It undoubtedly contributed greatly to the flight of capital from South Africa and hastened the country's decline into economic stagnation and deflation.

In the sixth place, the campaign, by undermining confidence in the government, helped to detach support from it and to sharpen the demand also among whites for parliamentary reform. So far from a national convention's being a temporary slogan with a limited appeal, the cry has been taken up by important leaders of the white population. Hundreds of members of the staffs of Natal, Cape Town and Rhodes Universities have endorsed the appeal for a national convention; it has received

support from prominent businessmen; and it has been taken up by leaders of the parliamentary opposition.

Critics who complain that a national convention is too "big" or "academic" an idea for Africans to understand not only underestimate their political acumen but also fail to grasp the significance of the impact it had made on sections of the white population. A demand put forward by the disfranchised has become, for the first time in our history, a basis for common action by South Africans of all racial groups. Only groups like the Anti-C.A.D. and P.A.C., which write off all whites as oppressors, members of the 'Herrenvolk', and utterly beyond political redemption, can belittle this achievement. And they belittle it because they reject in fact, if not in words, the possibility of building a democratic, non-racial society in which whites will also have a place.

So far, therefore, from having been a "failure", the stay-home campaign accomplished many important results. The people who denounce such forms of mass action, and who by implication if not in words advocate recourse to terrorism and violence, cannot show that more will be gained by these means. Mass protests and the political strike have proved to be effective weapons of sabotage and harassment, valuable agencies of political education and organisation, and unrivalled methods of detaching white support from the government and its apartheid policies. These are the aims of political warfare on which a disfranchised people must rely against an implacable and deeply entrenched ruling class. No matter what penalties may be imposed or casualties suffered, the voteless will use the weapon of non-violent sabotage in repeated efforts to liberate themselves from racial oppression and exploitation.