

Introductory Essay:

The South African Communist Party, 1950-1994

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The South African Communist Party (SACP) ranks as both South Africa's and Africa's oldest communist political organisation. Founded in 1921 by white immigrant workers from Europe and Eastern Europe, the SACP has, for over 85 years, played an integral and crucial role in the history of South African politics. Of its recorded history, the period from 1921 until its formal banning under the National Party-run apartheid state in 1950, has received, by far, the most attention from academics, political writers and researchers as well as from former/existing members of the SACP itself [See, for example: Robert Fine & Dennis Davis (1991) *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press; Sheridan Johns (1995) *Raising the Red Flag: The International Socialist League and the Communist Party of South Africa: 1914-1932*, Belville, Mayibuye Books; and, A. Lerumo (1971) *Fifty Fighting Years: The South African Communist Party 1921-1971*, London, Inkululeko Publications]. Conversely, the history of its forty years of underground existence, from 1950-1990, remains a history that is mostly hidden/unknown, especially in relation to the last three decades of this period. Even while the organisational character and political role of the SACP has received more concentrated scholarly attention and public scrutiny since its return to legality and open political participation in South Africa's post-1990 transition, the SACP remains one of the key enigmas of South African politics.

There is arguably no other political organisation in South Africa, whose history (particularly since 1950) has been marked by more political conjecture and analytical anorexia. To a large extent, this is the result of the almost obsessive (some would argue, necessary) secrecy under which the SACP operated during its 40-years of underground/exile existence as well as the often blurred organisational and political 'lines' between the SACP and its much larger and more moderate liberation movement ally, the African National Congress (ANC). The wide variety of SACP and SACP-related documents identified in this collection go some way to lifting the veil on that history and shining some needed light onto its key leadership figures and on its ideological, organisational and political character and role in both the struggle against apartheid as well as in the immediate post-1990 period leading up to South Africa's first-ever democratic elections in 1994.

Formally banned in 1950 as a direct result of the apartheid state's implementation of *The Suppression of Communism Act*, the previously named Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) went into a brief period of political and organisational hibernation before re-constituting itself as the underground (and now re-named) SACP. Throughout the following decade (1950s), the numerically small but politically influential SACP, effectively merged its political and ideological work with that of a variety of legal 'people's' organisations, formed under the banner of the 'Congress Movement', whilst simultaneously continuing to meet, discuss and plan as a separate, underground, SACP. It was during this period that the SACP's relationship with the ANC was solidified, with key SACP leaders gradually taking on complementary leadership roles in the ANC, Congress Movement organisations (e.g. the Congress of Democrats and the South African Indian Congress), as well as within other allied organisations of the broad liberation movement front, such as the newly formed South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).

Indeed, it was through this dual positioning of the SACP and its leading members, that the organisation was able to play a fundamental role in formulating, debating and influencing the strategy and tactics of the national liberation struggle – a role that was given added impetus by the gradual but systematic repression of resistance by the apartheid state, the subsequent closing down of open political/organisational space and the SACP's own close relationship with the powerful 'communist bloc' of countries whose anti-apartheid and anti-colonial stance had endeared them to the majority of South Africans. Not surprisingly, it was the underground SACP that 'emerged', in the early 1960s – after the banning and effective exiling of all liberation movements - in a position of relative political, ideological and organisational strength vis-à-vis both the strategic turn to armed struggle and the tactical and practical necessities of exile.

In relation to this period, there are many documents included here that speak directly to the various strategic debates and tactical manoeuvring that marked the SACP's decade-long transition from a minor (legal) political party to a leading element of an underground, revolutionary and armed movement for national liberation. Personal correspondences, journalistic articles, trial proceedings and internal reports/discussion documents provide a sound (even if somewhat limited) basis upon which to understand, assess and analyse this crucial period in relation to both the specific

trajectory of the SACP and that of the struggle for liberation more generally.

The period from the early 1960s until the late 1970s was a time during which the SACP's organisational presence and political influence inside South Africa was at its lowest. Documents relating to various trial proceedings of SACP members and sympathisers serve to highlight the downturn on the home front. However, this was not the case when it came to exile politics. The intellectual capacity of the leading cadre within the SACP, combined with the SACP's close relationship with the-then Soviet Union (as well as those Eastern European countries under the direct influence/control of the Soviet Union), placed the SACP in a position of organisational/financial strength and political/ideological influence. Documents identified during this period – particularly, political and military reports, ideological/organisational programmes, journal articles and propaganda materials – clearly reveal the dominant positioning and impact of the SACP's leading cadreship within the various components of the exiled liberation movement as well as within the international anti-colonial and anti-apartheid arena. It is instructive to note that the generalised quiescence of the liberation struggle on the home front during most of this period went hand-in-hand with the SACP's increasingly influential ideological and organisational role on the exile and international fronts.

What the documents relating to this period also point to, are the myriad personal and political problems of living and struggling in exile, often leading the SACP into an implicitly bureaucratic and tactically static approach to the conduct of the liberation struggle. The predominance of communist propaganda, exaggerated claims of impending crises within the apartheid state and top-heavy dependence on the financial largesse and ideological 'line' of the Soviet Union were all contributing factors in this regard. [See in particular: Joe Slovo (1976), 'South Africa – No Middle Road' in Basil Davidson et al., *Southern Africa: The New Politics of Revolution*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books].

The sparks of struggle and mass resistance to the apartheid state provided by organised workers and students inside South Africa from the mid-1970s provided the ‘shot in the arm’ needed by the exiled SACP and its ANC ally. Besides opening up new opportunities within South Africa for the SACP to recruit new cadres and win over new sections of the broad working class to the ideas of socialism inside South Africa – as well as gain further international anti-apartheid support – the apartheid state’s intensified repression led to a sizeable exodus of young South Africans into exile, filling the ranks of MK. In turn, and as many of the included documents for this period show, this spurred important strategic and tactical debates on armed struggle and working class politics (mostly involving SACP leaders and thinkers) but also created serious new organisational, military and logistical challenges for the SACP and the ANC in exile.

The period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s saw the SACP playing a more central political and ideological role on both the home and international fronts than ever before. Ironically though, the combination of the changing nature of regional and global politics (particularly as applied to the gathering crises within the ‘communist bloc’ of countries), the increasingly independent and influential mass-based political struggles within South Africa, the growing political profile and mass appeal of an ANC now fully intent on entering into a negotiated settlement with a weakened apartheid state were all contributing to both an ideological and organisational crisis for the SACP. The various internal SACP reports/programmes, debates and personal views of SACP members/leaders highlighted in selected documents provide ample evidence. [For further reading in this regard see: Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba (1992), *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and South African Communist Party in Exile*, London, James Currey; and, Dale T. McKinley (1997), *The ANC and the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Political Biography*, London, Pluto Press].

Not long before apartheid President F.W. De Klerk announced the unbanning of all the liberation movement organisations as a prelude to political negotiations, the SACP, having just completed its 7th Congress in Cuba, was continuing its call for the armed struggle to be intensified, issuing strident messages about the ‘seizure of power’ and unveiling a radical, anti-capitalist programme for a post-apartheid South Africa. A few months later, the leaders of the SACP were back in South Africa, sitting around a table with De Klerk and his apartheid Ministers negotiating a

compromise that would eventually see the transfer of political power whilst simultaneously ensuring that the capitalist system remained virtually untouched. Times had changed and so too had the SACP.

Despite heated debate within the ranks of the SACP (as well as within its allied partners) over the strategic and ideological efficacy of such negotiations - which went along with a unilateral suspension of the armed struggle and an undeclared 'low-intensity' war pursued by the ailing apartheid state against SACP/ANC activists on the ground (identified SACP, liberation movement and media documents in this collection speak directly to this) - the next three years saw the SACP gradually, if fitfully, embrace the marginalisation of its radical plans and take on its new role as junior political Alliance partner to the ANC in a legal and thoroughly non-communist transition to a capitalist, bourgeois democracy. While some of the documents reveal the organisational, ideological and political evolution of this chosen path, others reveal the associated costs on each count, alongside the loss of many SACP leaders and rank-and-file cadres. The SACP had survived the difficult and turbulent 44 years since its banning and could legitimately take credit for being central to the formal defeat of apartheid. Whether or not its own ideas, programmes and the communist dreams and hopes of those who sacrificed so much under its banner were any closer to being realised after those 44 years is entirely another matter.

NOTE ON ARCHIVES VISITED

There are five main archives from which the vast majority of identified documents were drawn for this collection. These are:

- Historical Papers & Manuscripts housed at the University of Witwatersrand
- The South Africa History Archives also housed at the University of Witwatersrand
- The Liberation Movement Archives housed at the University of Fort Hare
- The Mayibuye Centre-Robben Island Archives housed the University of the Western Cape
- Historical Papers & Manuscripts housed at the Centre for African Studies – University of Cape Town