

RESTATING OUR POLICY

It was during the uprising of 1984–86 that *Searchlight South Africa* was first mooted. Although there were many articles and theses written or started in the heady days of township revolt and trade union action in South Africa, most were restricted to local activity. Even now, in mid-1992, despite the publication of several collections of articles, there appears to be no history of the revolt on a nation-wide scale.

This failure to analyze the revolt in its totality is not only an academic issue. The revolt was crushed by the drafting of the army and police into the townships and, brave as the township residents were, they did not have the resources to stand up against the state. Calls by the ANC to make the country unmanageable were irresponsible, and carried the false hope that the regime could be overthrown at that time. Even more irresponsible was the encouragement of mindless terror exercised by gangs of undisciplined youth, exemplified by Winnie Mandela's call for the use of necklacing as a step towards freedom.

The crushing of the revolt left the opposition weakened, and this was to affect the subsequent course of events. Although the government was under severe pressure (partly as a result of the revolt), it was still in control of instruments of oppression – the police, the army and the state administration. Concessions would have to be made to meet new international developments, but in the process the government held the whip hand and opposition forces, despite popular support, argued from a position of weakness. Furthermore, instead of making the country ungovernable, the government had it in its power to make the townships unmanageable; instead of the notorious 'necklace' bringing victory, the state could manipulate men with spears, pangas and AK47s to bring terror to township residents and to opposition leaders.

It was time for a magazine with a distinctive approach, able to put events in perspective, unafraid to print articles that nobody else dared to consider, and looking to the future to spell out the course of likely events.

What was envisaged by those who met to launch the journal were a number of positions to which we subscribed:

- 1) We were Marxists and based our demands on the need for a working class movement that could build a socialist South Africa. This would be a movement that would, in the words of Rosa Luxemburg, conduct a dialogue with the working class. It would have a distinctive message, based on an understanding of historical processes, and able to respond to the needs of the working class. Socialists could advance ideas, but could only act in response to the answer that was returned: workers and others would present their ideas, and accept or reject advice as they found most appropriate.

This approach, which has few adherents inside socialist circles anywhere, offers a way forward and is in contrast to the methods used by the Communist Party. We warned against their methods. There was a further and even more urgent reason for opposing the Communists. Although they claimed to be the representatives of the working class (an arrogant claim which must be rejected,) they had surrendered the aim of socialism by being absorbed into the nationalist movement.

- 2) We saw no hope in the continuation of the capitalist system. It was not working on a world scale and it could not solve the most pressing problems of the people of South Africa. To call for a 'free market', a system that does not operate anywhere, but operates on the basis of unemployment, impoverishment, homelessness and human degradation, is absurd. Yet this is what the government insists on, and this is what the nationalist movements and the trade unions accept as the norm.
- 3) We saw a need for a programme that would propose effective steps to stamp out segregation and would tackle the basic problems of the country. This included steps to get the economy functioning, creating new avenues of employment and resolving the land question. Three hundred and fifty years of colonial rule had to be overturned and centuries of pre-capitalist rural production radically transformed. Segregated townships (now further blighted by vast squatter camps) had to go and houses had to be built. All segregation in schools and hospitals had to be removed and full education and health provisions ensured.
- 4) Democratic grass root movements in the factories and the workshops had to be revived or rebuilt, as well as community bodies that could participate in the struggle for better conditions. At the same time the trade unions had to be separated from the nationalist movements and made autonomous to protect workers' rights under any and every government. Such bodies to be maintained after political change to protect the people from the state.
- 5) The police and army had to be culled and cut to size. In the first phase these bodies had to be neutralized to prevent their being used against working class and community organizations. This applied as much to the remnants of Umkhonto we Sizwe and any other para-military organisations as to the existing state forces. Methods would have to be devised to tame this Moloch, with its appetite for blood, until it was no longer the arbiter of events in the country and its use could be dispensed with.

Our central points were directed to events inside South Africa but we had come to our position after giving serious thought to the global situation.

- 6) We rejected the Communist Party, not only because we had observed its activities over sixty years, but also from our reading of events in what was then the Soviet Union or USSR. We did not believe that the USSR was a workers' state and saw no evidence of socialism or communism in that country. We came to the same conclusions about the so-called People's Democracies of eastern Europe. So-called progressive states in the rest of world, commencing with

China and Vietnam and Cambodia and extending to Cuba, Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique, were all oppressive and showed no signs of the Marxism they claimed to represent. We saw only tyrannies, in which millions of people had been killed to fulfil some mad ideological belief (as in Cambodia) or because they had dared to oppose brutal dictatorship. We could not accept as socialist, regimes that seized citizens off the streets to fill slave camps, and tortured or killed citizens in the gold mines of Kolyma (in the USSR), and elsewhere.

- 7) We stood for internationalism because we believe that workers cannot achieve socialism if they confine their interests to one country, and are convinced that socialism cannot succeed if it remains isolated inside a capitalist world. This did place us in a difficult position because there was no viable international organization and no real move towards such a movement. The era had been poisoned by the dominance of USSR in the socialist movement and by the pusillanimity of the Social Democrats. Stalinism would have to be exorcised and its evil influence understood before a new movement could arise.
- 8) We despaired of the many tiny groups in the main capitalist countries that claim to sponsor international organizations. The working class everywhere is split nationally and internationally, and no small sect is going to rally the workers until they come together democratically to confront the forces of capitalism. That meant that we would have to wait, but it would not stop us writing, thinking, or supporting campaigns. We did not call for a new socialist movement in South Africa: instead we offered our pages to those who wished to build such a movement to allow for discussion on a programme for the left.
- 9) We recognized at the outset that there was a need to maintain the thread of socialist continuity in South Africa. The records of movements, their members and their struggles, much of it unrecorded, or perverted by Stalinist historians, had to be recovered and preserved. After 1989, when the Berlin wall crumbled and the ideals of socialism came under increasing attack in the western media, this task became increasingly important.

In order to develop this programme we started with the firm assertion that:

- 10) We were not nationalists and could not belong to the ANC, the PAC, Azapo or the Black Consciousness Movement. As a corollary to this we could not give the ANC our support over other nationalist movements. They were all subject to criticism where their actions (or the actions of individual leaders) were contrary to the needs of the working class. However, in the struggle for a new South Africa we defended the right of the black nationalist movements to exist, and could support some of their demands, even though our paths diverged

Those who eventually met to launch the journal had been frustrated in their attempts at get articles published. Their ideas went beyond the bounds set by academics and activist groups alike. This was part of a general malaise. Publication in the journals of left wing groups were usually confined to opinions that fitted with the group's orientation. Furthermore publication in many academic journals

had to wait in a queue, or were rejected for other reasons. Nonetheless, whether articles were accepted or not, there was no socialist journal devoted to what was happening in South Africa, in which we felt there was analysis that got to the heart of events.

We were not overly successful in finding writers who could ensure the existence of a journal over several issues. Our demands might have been too exacting; our ideas too demanding; our circle of acquaintances too small. But we knew what we wanted. The journal should provide a Marxist analysis of contemporary events in South Africa. In proclaiming the primacy of the working class in transforming the country we would not be beholden to the trade unions. These were vehicles for working class organization and mobilization; but they were only one sector of the working class, and their aims were necessarily restricted to shop floor demands. Our aim was to establish the political presence of the working class and this transcended economic demands, in the same way as working class politics went beyond nationalism. This would always be an issue that socialists had to confront because, as we saw it, the working class movement would aim to solve the national question and should always aim to protect the workers from nationalists.

We did not believe that we alone wanted a working class movement. There were already other parties or groups that claimed to represent the working class. Neither did we believe that there was only one party that could claim to represent the workers. Workers would decide at any particular time whom they wished to follow — and would not necessarily be unanimous in their choice. We could only decide on our orientation and present a position to those who might wish to join with us.

Our political sympathies in Europe lay with the editorial board of the journal *Critique*, because in that journal alone we found criticisms of the eastern bloc with which we could agree. Hillel Ticktin, its main contributor, joined with us when we launched the journal. He was not only the most perceptive Marxist writer on the USSR, but also a South African who had worked with some of us before he had left South Africa and then studied in the USSR.

Eventually five people met together and decided to publish a journal. Nothing came easily. We had no money, and none of us could finance the venture. It was only the generosity of some of our friends that gave us the confidence to begin: and this need to go out with a begging bowl has dogged us through our existence. Painfully we learnt how to use the word processor, then desk-top publication, and in our amateurish fashion learnt how to put a magazine together.

The five became four, and then the four narrowed down to three: Paul Trehwela, Baruch Hirson and Hillel Ticktin. Because Ticktin was in Glasgow, the work devolved on two: the typesetting, the finance, the administration and much of the writing. Occasionally we found others to assist with tasks like proofreading, but this did not always happen and on occasion we were embarrassed by the spate of typing errors.

Our first issue appeared with a mix of current politics and historical essays. Our pride lay in the appearance of topics that had not ever appeared elsewhere: whether of historical or of contemporary interest. This we have maintained through our issues to date. Here was a journal, we hoped, that would make an impact and set a standard in South Africa. In this we had not reckoned with the South African publications board (that is, the censors). Friends on the editorial board of the British journal *Revolutionary History* had given us permission to use their post box. There it stood on our title page, BCM 7646, London WC1N 3XX.

Some clerk, censorious as ever, saw our box number and proclaimed: BCM! Black Consciousness Movement of Azania — and we were banned. In a country which once banned the children's novel *Black Beauty* this was not exceptional. It took us time to catch up with the reason for the banning and this presented us with a poser. We opposed all censorship and a ban on the BCM of Azania was obnoxious, although we did not identify with its political position.

The first three issues were banned for sale in South Africa, and although libraries were exempt, most copies of these and several other issues never made it though the post. The police surveillance was not water tight and we heard of copies reaching some readers, sometimes. The response of subscribers made it seem worthwhile that we continue, even though the sales were badly hit and our finances strained to near exhaustion. Yet even when lawyers who acted on our behalf managed to get the banning withdrawn, over-zealous officials still confiscated copies that were posted in. Dozens, if not hundreds, of copies must be stored somewhere in the vaults of government departments, if they have not been destroyed. Recently we arranged for the journal to be printed and published in South Africa, partly to overcome the illegal confiscation. There was a more pressing reason for moving to South Africa. We could lower the price in the country to meet the extreme poverty of potential readers. We do not yet know whether the shift has paid off: our audience might find it an impossible luxury to buy the journal, even at the low price, and we have still to discover whether all copies sent through the post are delivered to subscribers.

The Demise of the USSR and Change in South Africa

We have remarked in several issues on the enormity of the collapse of the USSR, both as a world power, and as a political and economic entity. We also printed extracts from South African Communist Party (SACP) publications, showing that three months before the collapse this party still heralded that regime as the altar of socialism. It claimed that the USSR had resolved all social and economic problems, and that it was the centre of a world wide socialist emporium. Their report of their conference in Cuba in the SACP journal, the *African Communist* outdid any comic we have ever seen. Delegates had pranced around the conference room singing praise to Oliver

Tambo and Joe Slovo, and the report indicated that not one delegate had objected to the hymns of praise to the USSR.

The sycophantic bowing to Stalin had been replaced over the years as the leaders of the SACP accepted the men who succeeded him: all the way down to Gorbachev who had become the font of wisdom. Despite the panegyrics of the SACP, the collapse of the USSR had been preceded by desperate efforts by Soviet statesmen to extricate themselves from centres of world conflict, including Southern Africa. This had become obvious from many pointed statements coming out of the USSR calling for the end of struggle in South Africa, and the open support that Russian diplomats extended to the South African regime. Despite our criticisms of the USSR and of the SACP's sycophantic admiration, we were caught short by events. We had predicted the collapse of the USSR and the real surprise is that it took so long in coming. Nonetheless, we were taken unaware. The speed of events, starting with the defection of Hungary, then the fall of the Berlin Wall, showed the system to be jerry-built. One institution after another came tumbling down.

There was one further issue of which we had no information. In the past there had been reservations, and even hatred, towards Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communist Party. Since the rift with the USSR the members of the SACP had excommunicated any follower of Mao. It now transpires that this changed in 1983 following an approach to the SACP from the Chinese Communist Party. In an exchange of letters it was agreed that the two parties would stop maligning each other. Consequently the SACP did not join in the condemnation of the massacre at Tienanmen Square. The new friendship with China had no effect on the unfolding world scene but presumably the SACP has been suitably rewarded by its new-found friend. A large Chinese delegation attended the SACP conference in December 1991 and a South African delegation has visited China to discover how to build socialism. Judas was indeed an honourable man when compared with those who will do anything for thirty pieces of silver.

The impact of the Soviet collapse was far reaching. The removal of Soviet influence meant that US hegemony of Southern Africa was assured for the foreseeable future, and that the National Party government would relinquish control of Namibia and also some of the worst aspects of apartheid. The changes in South Africa, that had been brokered before this collapse, were now accelerated. On 2 February 1991 the formerly banned parties were unbanned and Mr Mandela was released, praising Mr de Klerk as an honourable man. Negotiations (informal until then) commenced soon after.

It became necessary to reformulate our ideas. We had called for a Constituent Assembly in our first issue. It was now essential that the calling of an Assembly become part of every socialists' thinking, and that there be serious consideration of how to intervene in the projected negotiations. Socialists could decide for or against participation in the negotiations, and this could be decided as part of an overall strategy — but the negotiations could not be ignored. To do so was to stand

passively by while the nationalists, black and white, decided among themselves what the shape of the future South Africa might be.

In defining our position we had to consider the effect of the defeat of the uprising of 1984-6, and the occupation and control of the townships by the military. Police and army terror had the country in its grips. Forces opposed to the government were not arguing from strength, even if they could command the tacit support of the majority of the population. It was this popular support for the ANC, the SACP and the leaders of the trade union federation Cosatu, that had to be reversed if there was to be any hope for socialism. The failure of the smaller groups to engage in the political situation meant that the possibility of socialism was not on the immediate agenda. It also meant much more. If a Constituent Assembly was summoned it was most likely that the ANC and its allies would have a huge majority. This had to be our starting point. As the majority they would probably have the country in their hands, and although this would have to be conceded, it placed a shadow over the right of independent groups to survive. There was no reason to believe that an ANC controlled government, or one in alliance with the National Party, would tolerate a critical socialist movement. That was not its way with opponents. Socialists would have to find ways of protecting themselves in the coming period and means would have to be found to continue with simple tasks like publishing.

There was another factor that influenced the way we saw the situation. We had given our support to the black nationalist movements against the government, and objected to the many institutions set up by the state to enforce their subjugation. Nonetheless we had heard too many stories about the activities of these movements (or at least their exile wings) to endorse them politically. Consequently, when we were presented by the stories of the prisons in Angola, controlled by the Swapo leadership, we could not keep silent. It was to the credit of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain that it took up the case of those who had been imprisoned in pits in the ground and kept there for years, without formal trial, and with no reason except the internal wranglings of the movement's leaders. We joined the WRP in exposing the conditions in these prison camps in *Searchlight South Africa* and joined the committee of Solidarity with ex-SWAPO Detainees to secure justice for them. To the shame of all other socialist groups we could gain no further support for this committee.

It was while working on this committee that the rumours we had heard about conditions in the ANC armed forces, Umkhonto we Sizwe, were revealed as fact in the *Sunday Correspondent* in Britain in April 1990. The story went beyond what we had heard previously. Five men and two women had arrived in Nairobi, under great difficulty, and told reporters of horrific events in the armed forces in 1984 in Angola. It became obvious that the committee devoted to the former detainees in Swapo had to be extended to take up the cause of the seven in Nairobi, and others who had been involved in a mutiny against a repressive command structure. Not

unexpectedly, many of those in command had been members of the SACP, but men like Oliver Tambo, president of the ANC, were involved in the repression.

Making contact with the Nairobi 7 was not easy and our resources were thin. Individuals spent hundreds of pounds on phone calls and faxes, to journalists, government agencies, non-governmental agencies, and the small isolated group in Nairobi. Our assistance was unsolicited. We did however ask the group to write their account of what had occurred. Their story, printed with few editorial alterations – and restricted to grammatical corrections – appeared in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 5. Besides the WRP no other socialist journal in Britain would carry the story or join the committee, now renamed Justice for Southern Africa. We were in fact we were frequently condemned for printing the story because we dared to print criticisms of the ANC.

We are proud to have published articles that have not, and could not, appear elsewhere. Our articles have been reprinted in journals in South Africa although they have not acknowledged the source or the names of the authors. This is piracy, but we have ignored this because we would rather that our articles be made available. Furthermore, because our journal had such great difficulty in getting into South Africa we were delighted when we heard that some articles, and particularly the piece on the mutiny, had been photocopied again and again, and distributed. We welcomed the fact that people found our articles important, but at the same time regretted the loss of revenue which we need so badly.

For the editorial board the events surrounding our involvement with the former detainees in Swapo and the ex-mutineers in Umkhonto we Sizwe was salutary. We came to realise as the months went by that in the absence of a socialist movement, and in the light of ANC control of the opposition forces in South Africa, it would become increasingly important to warn of future oppression, whether by the National Party, or the ANC-SACP, or both.

Soon after the first mutineers returned home (preceding the Nairobi 7), one of them, Siphon Phungulwa, was ambushed in the Transkei and killed, probably by members of Umkhonto we Sizwe. Other returnees were forced out of townships by thugs who claimed to be 'comrades'. Inevitably, much to our chagrin, and contrary to our advice, a few ex-mutineers accepted help from reactionaries in South Africa: but we condemned principally those on the left who left these people to their fate and allowed them to fall into the hands of state assisted bodies. We repeated the demands these ex-mutineers were making that they be cleared of the accusations that they had been government agents. Our voice seemed to be lost amidst all the noise made by the ANC. But the story had only begun. We heard of discontent among the exiles and we gathered stories of men kept in prison in Tanzania and in Zambia at the behest of the ANC. We printed the stories we got, checking each account, certain that they were truthful. This included narrative accounts, open letters to Nelson Mandela and letters from east Africa.

As editors, we printed the stories as they were written, making few corrections, and confining these to grammatical slips. Yet, so superior were these accounts to

anything that appeared in official ANC or SACP journals that at a later date it was suggested that we had ghosted the stories. This was not the case and we still have the handwritten originals to prove that they were written by those who put their names to the several documents.

Our journal had changed out of all recognition. What had commenced as a mix of historical articles and commentaries on events in South Africa had taken on a campaigning form. Yet, in this we still did not go far enough. The men and women who were tortured, imprisoned, even mutilated in the camps of Swapo and the ANC (and we believe in the camps of the PAC) must not only be exonerated, but must also be compensated for what they have undergone. They must have the resources to begin a new life, and they must get the education they were denied because they were ensconced in army camps.

This raises an even greater set of injustices needing redress. Thousands of people were holed up in the prisons of South Africa because they opposed apartheid and were prepared to fight for their beliefs. Other thousands were killed or maimed by the police and the army for the same reason. They or their families need to be compensated for the misery inflicted on them, and although money does not bring back lost lives or wasted years, that must become part of the demands for a settlement of the country's future. Justice demands that at least this be done for those who were maltreated or imprisoned by a state which operated a monstrous political system.

What of the Future?

Our aim in presenting this short account is not nostalgic. We are interested in presenting this record only because it points to events today and in the future. Our articles in the first two volumes, an index of which appears at the end of this issue, were designed to take our readers through the complex events in South Africa. In the process we also learnt much about people and events. Our reading extended into areas we had not previously anticipated: from the novels of Rushdie through to the war in the Gulf; from Lenin's writings on national independence to Comintern decrees on South African political activities; from the impact of thinkers of the Carribean (C L R James and George Padmore) to the many socialists in South Africa who have never had their life's work appraised. And we have learnt humility before the heroism of those who stood up against tyranny in South Africa in the ranks of the nationalist movements, and others who fell in the fight against oppressors elsewhere in the world.

Those involved in producing *Searchlight South Africa* have spent a large part of their lives as revolutionary socialists. Some of us spent years in Pretoria Local prison for offences against the state. We were considered by the authorities to be dangerous because, despite our different political affiliations, our objective was to overturn the state and the capitalist system. We have no cause to alter our basic

objective. The current world depression is one further symptom of the decline of capitalism. It can only offer further misery for the vast majority of the world's population. The collapse of the regimes of eastern Europe have only increased the measure of human degradation as national and ethnic enmity tears countries apart. This is the price that people everywhere are paying for the crimes of the 20th century, which include the control of world finance by a handful of corporations; the domination of the former colonies by their one-time imperial masters; the emergence of theocratic tyrannies; and the derailing of the socialist movement by time-servers and rogues.

It is our belief that the reconstruction of the socialist movement requires a reevaluation of our conception of human rights inside the socialist society we wish to build. Socialism without basic human rights and civil freedom can have no meaning. It is in this belief that we welcome the contribution in this issue by Bob Fine on the conception of civil society. The search for ideas to meet the requirements of the 21st century, in South Africa and across the world, must be incorporated into socialist thinking. We will continue our work in this spirit in the months to come.

In concluding this editorial we would be remiss if we did not pause to comment on the massacres in June 1992 which left whole communities in a state of shock and distress.

We have no doubt that the government, or sections of its security forces, are implicated in the massacres. Yet the malaise goes much deeper. Sections of the ANC, as well as the Inkatha movement, are involved in killings and provocations to maim or kill. The social factors that have led people to this point of anarchy are obvious, but that is no excuse for this barbaric blood-letting. The intervention of police (or their deliberate absence from the battle-fields) has been made possible by the blood feuds in the townships, by struggles that have even turned people inside the ANC alliance against each other. We are sickened by the stories of ANC men attacking and killing trade unionists; of the reappearance of the necklace killings, taking us ever nearer to lynch law; of the ganging together of Winnie Mandela and Harry Gwala; of the use of squatter women to occupy ANC offices. These events might seem small when compared with armed men killing women and children indiscriminately, but they are the other side of the same coin: organised destruction that destabilises the society and allows the existing de Klerk government to impose its will on the country.

The call for the immediate convention of a Constituent Assembly has become ever more urgent and this is a task that the liberation movements, the trade unions and the community organizations must undertake on their own initiative. The need to reshape the country is now a matter of life and death.